Racial Reconciliation

Can Religion Work Where Politics Has Failed?

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The author argues that religious groups may offer the best hope for improving race relations in this country. The author contends that evangelical approaches to racial reconciliation have important advantages over secular approaches such as multiculturalism or conflict resolution theory. Importantly, the possibility of collective apology among religious groups, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the Promise Keepers, surpasses that of secular groups, particularly government, as the controversy surrounding President Clinton's proposed national apology to the Black community demonstrates.

The first signs of a thaw in our long decade of discontent about race in America came last June with President Clinton's announcement of a new White House initiative on racial reconciliation. With the bitter memories of the Rodney King incident, the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and the O. J. Simpson verdict finally beginning to fade, the president evidently gauged the nation ready to revisit the subject of race in a calmer vein. The new initiative is modest by any measure. The president offered a few edifying words on the need for racial harmony, called for a yearlong national "conversation on race," and pledged to establish an advisory board to study and encourage the grassroots efforts on racial reconciliation that are already under way. It is emblematic of the diminished role of federal government in setting the national agenda that Mr. Clinton would not, or could not, contemplate doing more.

But in truth, the real action on race relations in the 1990s has been unfolding at the grassroots level. The most important development has been the emergence of a major racial reconciliation movement among White and Black Evangelical Christians. From rather modest beginnings in the early 1990s, the movement is rapidly growing into a national force. Several Evangelical organizations, including the Southern Baptist Convention and the National Association of Evangelicals, have launched fresh initiatives on race during the decade. But the backbone of the new reconciliation effort is the Promise Keepers organization—American Evangelism's new fast-expanding, all-male crusade—which has made racial reconciliation a major theme of its revival. Founded in 1990 by former Colorado

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University football coach Bill McCartney and targeted at Protestant men, the movement has by now drawn more than 2 million to its revival rallies, typically held in major sports stadiums around the country.[1] By the time this article appears, the organization will have staged its own million-man march on Washington in October 1997, with racial reconciliation as a prominent theme.

Religiously based and largely confined to the Protestant community, the Evangelical racial reconciliation effort has so far played to a somewhat limited constituency. But, its influence on national life is growing. Moreover, in both its theory and practice, the movement is pointing the way toward some fundamentally new and potentially promising approaches to the challenge of achieving racial harmony. In particular, the religiously oriented tactics of the Evangelicals often show a capacity for transcending many of the problems that have typically sabotaged our national political conversation on race in recent years.

THE CAPACITY FOR COLLECTIVE APOLOGY

Few controversies could have better exemplified the awkwardness of our current national dialogue on race—or the need for a fresh reconciliation discussion—than the brief but heated quarrel over Congressman Tony Hall's proposal for a national apology to Black Americans for slavery. The controversy exploded when the president, following his June speech, indicated he might support the idea. Hall's well-meaning suggestion managed to draw angry criticism from both White and Black commentators and add steadily to the national sense of racial irritation before falling by the political wayside two months after it was introduced.

What was wrong with the idea of an apology? Even many who lashed out at the proposal acknowledged that slavery was a terrible evil with disastrous consequences persisting to our own day. The question was, who should apologize to whom? The original perpetrators and victims, it was pointed out, were long dead. Moreover, the majority of America's contemporary White population could hardly be reckoned as descendants of slaveholders. As columnist Richard Cohen wrote,

> Why should I, as some in Congress propose, apologize for slavery? After all, during that era my ancestors were all in Europe, living with very few civil rights themselves. The ones who remained all perished in the Holocaust, and the ones who emigrated to America all arrived poor and went to work in sweatshops.[2]

A number of Black commentators, including Jesse Jackson, took the position that the apology was essentially a meaningless gesture, at least in the absence of more serious efforts at restitution to Blacks for the harmful effects suffered as a result of slavery and discrimination.[3] Yet, opinion polls registered a troubling—although by now familiar—racial split on the issue: Although roughly two thirds

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of White respondents opposed the apology, two thirds of Blacks said they favored it.

It is precisely such nettlesome issues—collective and historical guilt, restitution—and the often confused emotions accompanying them that complicate reconciliation efforts, whether one is talking about Whites and Blacks in the United States, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, or Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in the former Yugoslavia. How does one cope with major injustices of lasting impact whose perpetrators are long gone? At what point does one declare an amnesty on old grievances? Which is the more important focus for reconciliation efforts: historical grievances or present wrongs?

Typically, in such situations, each group has fallen into the habit of viewing the other as collectively responsible for the wrongdoing of its members. But, reasonably enough, no individual is willing to assume responsibility for the sins of his or her entire ethnic group or race, dating back to who knows when. All this tends to pose almost insuperable problems for politicians seeking to encourage calm discussion and rational resolution of such disputes, whether in an international or a domestic setting.

Yet, many problems that seem insurmountable in a political context diminish greatly when one shifts to a religious or, perhaps we should say, a spiritual venue. Evangelical religious leaders have had much better luck with the apology approach than have the politicians. In 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention was widely praised for its resolution apologizing for past support of slavery and racism.[4] The Southern Baptists were not alone. In the same year, the president of the National Association of Evangelicals publicly confessed and repented of past racism by White Evangelicals in an emotional meeting between White and Black Evangelicals that culminated with a laying on of hands by Black ministers and a breaking-of-bread ceremony.[5] A few months earlier, White and Black Pentecostals engaged in mutual reconciliation at a meeting that evoked powerful emotions and climaxed in a foot-washing ritual.[6] In February 1996, the Promise Keepers organization sponsored a major gathering in Atlanta's Georgia Dome of more than 39,000 male pastors of diverse racial, ethnic, and denominational backgrounds, under the theme Breaking Down the Walls. At the end of the rally, wrote *Christianity Today*, "Pentecostals and Baptists prayed together; Anglos and men of color embraced. Suspicions had given way to respect, even love, for fellow believers with different beliefs."[7]

No one would claim that such gestures or ritual moments constitute an instant cure for the problem of racial tension, even within the Evangelical community itself. (Evangelical activists themselves continually stress the need to translate such momentary sentiments into concrete, day-to-day action.) Nonetheless, there has been a greater willingness among observers, including many African Americans, to accept such acts of repentance as sincere, and a greater capacity of such religious gestures to evoke genuine emotion and a sense of hope and change. This may be in part because apologies on the part of church organizations involve a damaging admission of guilt: For a church to own up to serious sin is a humbling gesture indeed. (This may be one reason why Pope John Paul

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II has generally earned high marks with commentators for his numerous recent apologies, whether for past church support of slavery and racism, for the injustices done to Galileo, or, most recently, for the sixteenth-century massacre of Protestants by Catholics in France. There was a time when it was thought that being the pope meant never having to say you're sorry.)

But there is also a general recognition that the religious or spiritual motivation is by nature fundamentally different from, and usually purer than, the political one. "It is one thing for the Southern Baptists to repent for their racism, as they did in 1995; repentance is part of their religion. Congress will inevitably find it quite awkward," wrote Deborah Sontag of *The New York Times*.[8]

All this raises a further question. Although reconciliation—and domestic peace between factions—seems a political necessity, is political action alone sufficient to achieve it? Political leaders who have engaged in the politics of reconciliation, from Nelson Mandela to Mikhail Gorbachev, often made implicit appeals to religious values. The Evangelical movement makes this appeal explicit. In effect, the Evangelical activists accept as their working premise that only a miracle will bring true reconciliation between the races, and they then proceed to try to bring this miracle about—an unusual approach that may help explain their comparative success to date.

GUIDANCE FROM GOD AND FROM INTERRACIAL CONGREGATIONS

The activities of the reconcilers take various forms. The public apologies have constituted only a small part of the movement's efforts, albeit the most widely publicized ones. At the core of the movement is a small group of grassroots activists who have actually been involved in building and sustaining experimental interracial congregations in inner-city areas, in some cases going back as far as the 1970s.

The 1992 Los Angeles riots provoked soul-searching about race relations in the nation in general and in the Evangelical community in particular. Partly in response to heightened concern about the lack of racial harmony in the country, each of two Black-White interracial ministry teams—Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice from Jackson, Mississippi, and Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein from Chicago—published books describing their experiences.[9] The books, which were very similar in theme, exhorted fellow Evangelicals to pursue better relations with believers of different races and outlined theories and techniques to guide the reconciliation process. The books received wide notice in the Evangelical press, and articles on race-related issues multiplied in *Christianity Today* and other Evangelical publications.[10] It was probably this newly race-sensitized climate, marked by a certain measure of guilt among Evangelicals for having neglected the race issue, that prompted the public apologies from the Southern Baptists, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals in the mid-1990s.

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At around the same time, McCartney's Promise Keepers movement was picking up steam. A veteran of one of the nation's most integrated venues—the locker room—McCartney was already committed to the racial reconciliation idea. He had already included a promise to overcome racial and denominational differences in the seven promises that members of Promise Keepers make. He actively embraced the themes of the new Evangelical reconciliation literature of the early 1990s, folding ever more reconciliation-related content into the Promise Keepers' increasingly well-attended rallies.[11] Eventually he hired Washington, a Black former Army colonel turned Evangelical minister and reconciliation activist, as vice president for reconciliation and invested considerable sums building a staff to work on disseminating the reconciliation message through local church communities.

Three features distinguish the Evangelicals' approach to racial reconciliation from secular-based approaches such as conflict-resolution theory or multiculturalism: (1) an explicitly religious or spiritual motivation; (2) a sense of sin; and (3) a belief in the efficacy of ritual and in the reality of divine intervention in human relationships and human affairs. All three factors give the Evangelicals certain advantages vis-à-vis more conventional secular approaches.

Religious motivation. Evangelicals understand the biblical prescription for human relationships as going well beyond such secular criteria as reasonableness, fairness, or even justice. Gospel values, they repeatedly emphasize, are different from and more demanding than those of the secular world. "*Civil rights* is a political concept," explains Perkins; "the *brotherhood* spoken of by biblical and contemporary prophets is a much higher calling."[12] Evangelical reconciliation activists speak frequently of having a special mission or calling to pursue racial healing, which they argue is shared to different degrees by all Christians.

This means that reconciliation activists can insist on a higher standard of conduct than the political realm normally demands of us. The criterion is no longer simply justice, but rather love your neighbor as yourself and bless those who persecute you. Equally important, in the context of the religious setting, the emphasis is no longer on the justice one gets, but rather on the mercy one gives. The reconciliation activists emphasize the obligation of the Christian to leave his or her "comfort zone," in the words of Washington and Kehrein, and go out of the way to encounter and be kind to the person of a different skin color.[13]

The reconciliation activists argue that such a shift in perspective from the political to the spiritual is essential if aggrieved races and other groups are to achieve a "more perfect union." Political dialogue, premised on mere justice or rights and responsibilities, is insufficient, they argue, as experience has shown. Indeed, they explicitly contrast their premises with those of the secular-based politics and social engineering of the Great Society era.

It is precisely the failure of the secularly oriented Great Society, a number of them argue, that points to the need for a new, explicitly religious or faith-based approach to racial divisions. "The humanistic optimism of 1965 is totally discredited," writes White Evangelical reconciler John Dawson. "The politician,

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educator, and scientists have failed," leaving the task to the Church.[14] "Someone forgot to tell us along the way that you can't legislate people's attitudes," claim Perkins and Rice.[15] "Changing laws will not change hearts. The civil rights movement has run its course, and we've gotten just about all you can expect to get from a political movement." And according to Washington and Kehrein,

> The Los Angeles riots are a reminder of how integration efforts have not brought an end to the prejudice in people's hearts. Neither Congress nor the president can apply a remedy to cure our country's ills. . . . We . . . say that Christ is the answer.[16]

Evangelicals say that in the absence of the spiritual imperative, it is simply impossible to find the motivation necessary to endure the difficulties of the reconciliation process. Writes Perkins, an African American and son of perhaps the most famous Black Evangelical, John Perkins: "To be honest, if I were a White non-Christian, I don't know if I'd have any motivation to care. But I am a Christian, and claiming that distinction carries responsibilities."[17] By the same token, like many Evangelicals, Perkins sees the reconciliation effort as a means to vindicate Christianity in the eyes of secular society. Christianity can demonstrate its validity by succeeding where secular techniques have failed.

> Together we are changing the way we do Christianity, making it visibly distinguishable from the world by our ability to embrace brothers and sisters from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. As our world becomes more multicultural, this unique trait will become even more crucial to our witness, providing credibility for a gospel competing among the many voices in the new global village.[18]

Sense of sin. Secular thinkers have long looked askance at the powerful sense of sin that pervades the Calvinist worldview of the Evangelical Christian. But whatever its possible drawbacks, the Evangelical's strong sense of human sinfulness, matched with a belief in the possibility of divine forgiveness, tends to facilitate the reconciliation dialogue.

In a certain sense, it is precisely the problem of sin that tends to limit the effectiveness of the major alternatives to the religious-based reconciliation techniques of conflict-resolution theory and the multiculturalist paradigm. In its emphasis on the need to find common ground, conflict-resolution theory tends to insist that parties to a dispute overlook grievances and avoid the issue of blame. That is perhaps one reason why conflict-resolution techniques often break down if wounds are deeply felt and the conflict is highly emotional in nature. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, is far more attuned to the historical and emotional dimensions of conflict; it is also focused on the issue of blame. But it tends to perpetuate the cycle of grievance by transforming oppressor into victim and vice versa. It also assesses blame on a collective basis, which is itself a form of injustice.

Yet, if one is in the habit of admitting that one is a sinner and acknowledging the general sinfulness of the human race, it is in a sense easier to confess one's sins and admit wrongdoing publicly. There is always shame in wrongdoing, but

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less so if one is part of a community that acknowledges that wrongdoing is not an exceptional phenomenon in human life and that confessing wrongdoing is the necessary prelude to receiving divine forgiveness.

The acknowledgment of common guilt even makes possible what Evangelical reconciler John Dawson calls "identificational repentance." It is possible and also not inappropriate, Dawson argues, to express regret for the wrongs that have been perpetrated by the collectivities to which one belongs—one's nation, one's city, one's race, one's tribe. Citing a number of biblical precedents for such gestures, Dawson writes:

> Repentance, reconciliation, and healing could take place if Christians from the Black and White community joined together in identification with the sins and grief of our forebears. . . . The new resident of the city might think, "That's not my problem. I just moved here last year." However, when God puts you in a city you become part of the Church there and you inherit its legacy, good and bad. The unfinished business of the Church is now your responsibility, too.

Behind all this lies a simple psychological truth: Imputing blame normally aggravates conflict, whereas accepting blame tends to diffuse it. By putting the onus on the believer to acknowledge and confess his or her own sin, the Evangelical reconcilers create a psychological setting more conducive to mutual support than mutual recrimination.

Ritual and divine action. Yet, the whole process depends in the final analysis on the belief in God's ability to provide healing and forgiveness where it would be impossible to arrive at such a resolution through human means alone. Whether or not one shares the theological beliefs of the Evangelicals who engage in reconciliation efforts and ceremonies, one can easily see how the mere belief in the possibility of divine forgiveness and in divine aid at arriving at reconciliation could provide a strong psychological impetus for positive group interaction, as well as a sanction for the release of powerful emotions. Faith provides a sense of safety that permits people to express and release strong emotions constructively and in a way that they may not be inclined to do in ordinary social settings, even or especially political ones.

THE ULTIMATE GOALS

Of course, in many ways the toughest question, and certainly the one that most nags at the reconciliation activists themselves, concerns how speeches, prayers, and ritual acts of forgiveness aimed at racial reconciliation translate into change in people's day-to-day lives. Promise Keepers is investing considerable effort in spurring ongoing reconciliation activities at the local church level. Moreover, Promise Keepers materials encourage members to go out of their way to engage with those of different races and ethnic groups for purposes of

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advancing reconciliation. There are already a number of reports of successful local efforts under way—organizations in which men of different races have come together for purposes of promoting reconciliation in their communities. But only time will tell how extensive or how lasting the effects of this movement will be.

Politics strives to transform people by altering the structure of society; religion strives to change society by transforming individuals. In this respect, the racial reconciliation movement of the 1990s differs importantly from the racial equality movements of the past. In those earlier movements, the main goal of religious activists, including Evangelical William Wilberforce, who led England's antislavery movement; the Quakers of American Abolitionism; or Dr. Martin Luther King, was to spur politicians to action. But in postmodern societies where the greatest challenges we face are increasingly less purely political in nature than behavioral and attitudinal, or even moral and spiritual, social change can be expected to come increasingly from grassroots community and religious activists like the Evangelical reconcilers, who strive to change the nature of society one community, and one soul, at a time.

NOTES

1. Information on the Promise Keepers organization is available at http://www/promisekeepers.org

2. Richard Cohen, "The trouble with apologizing for slavery," *Washington Post*, 19 June 1997, A21.

3. Quoted in Paul Leavitt and Robert Silvers, "Poll: Congress shouldn't make apology for slavery," *USA Today*, 2 July 1997, 5A.

4. Joe Maxwell, "Black Southern Baptists: The SBC's valiant efforts to overcome its racist past," *Christianity Today*, 15 May 1995, 26-31.

5. "First stride in a long walk," *Christianity Today*, 6 February 1995, 48.

6. "Pentecostals renounce racism," *Christianity Today*, 12 December 1994, 58.

7. "Clergy conference stirs historic show of unity," *Christianity Today*, 8 April 1996, 88.

8. Deborah Sontag, "Too busy apologizing to be sorry," *The New York Times*, 29 June 1997, sec. 4, p. 3.

9. Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice, *More than equals: Racial healing for the sake of the gospel* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993); Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein, *Breaking down walls: A model for reconciliation in an age of racial strife* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993).

10. See, for example, Andrés Tapia, "The myth of racial progress," *Christianity Today*, 12 December 1994; "Racial Reconciliation Tops NAE's Agenda," *Christianity Today*, 3 April 1995.

11. "McCartney preaches reconciliation," *Christianity Today*, 16 June 1995; Edward Gilbreath, "Manhood's great awakening," *Christianity Today*, 6 February 1995.

12. Perkins and Rice, *More than equals*, 17.

13. Washington and Kehrein, *Breaking down walls*.

14. John Dawson, *Healing America's wounds* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994), 23.

15. Perkins and Rice, *More than equals*, p. 25.

16. Washington and Kehrein, *Breaking down walls*, 12-13.

17. Perkins and Rice, *More than equals*, 93.

18. Spencer Perkins, "A small digression: Fly away home," Race and Reconciliation On-line, originally available at http://www.netdoor.com/com/rronline

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