



RACISM IN AMERICA: A Theological Problem

By John Tamilio III, Ph.D.

There is a problem in America. It is ugly and it is evil. It has grown exponentially since the first slaves were brought to Virginia from Africa in 1619. We have seen it flourish over the last decade. The problem is racism.

Racism is a pandemic, more widespread than COVID-19, that exists in individuals and at institutional levels. We must ask ourselves why black people are “six times more likely to be sentenced to prison than white people who commit the same crime”?¹ Why is it that “one in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison”?² Is it because they are more apt to commit crimes, as the white supremacist claims, or is something else happening?

These are some of the questions I pondered this summer when a resolution from the Cadman Memorial Congregational Church came before the 66th Annual Meeting and Conference of the NACCC, which took place virtually over Zoom. Noting that Congregationalism has a history of advocating for social justice, the resolution calls for this publication (*The Congregationalist*) to “have an article on racism [in the next twelve issues] to awaken the consciousness of all member churches” about racial injustice in the United States. The resolution encourages churches and regional associations to “submit articles denoting how they have been led to

support the movement of social justice and equity in our society and culture.” It came as no surprise that one-third of attendees voted against the resolution and five delegates abstained.

I am not suggesting that those who opposed the resolution are racists. Their objections had more to do with a hallmark of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches: i.e. we do not take stands on sociopolitical issues nor does the National Office dictate policy to local churches. Local churches can engage in social justice issues if they wish, but the wider body that is the NACCC does not make such blanket proclamations.

In the above referenced article, Zakiya N. Jackson claims that the war against “black bodies” is the result of a narrative that began with the slave trade. The narrative is that black people are inferior — they are “less-than” their white counterparts in every way, be it intelligence or worth. Such stereotypes persist today, becoming part of an often unspoken national subconscious.

Another way of thinking about racism is that it perpetuates untruths. In the introduction to his book *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*, Jim Wallis writes, “Untruths that we believe are able to control us, dominate us, and set us on the wrong path. Untruths are burdens to bear and can even be idols that hold us captive — not allowing us to be free people who understand ourselves and the world truthfully.”³ Satan works with untruths. Jesus, on the other hand, uses the truth to set us free.⁴

By refusing to address this issue as a national body of churches, we perpetuate this narrative. It is not enough to hide behind our bylaws and claim that this is a sociopolitical issue and that we, as the NACCC, do not get involved in such things. With all due respect to those who subscribe to this view, such thinking is erroneous. There is *certainly* a sociopolitical dimension to racism, but, as the people of God, we are irresponsible if we fail to see it as a theological issue as well. In fact, racism is a theological issue, which means that it is also a moral issue.

The Bible makes it clear: humankind is made in the image of God (the *Imago Dei*). There was a time when people claimed (and some still claim) that men are created in the image of God whereas women are created in the image of men. This is also bad theology. Genesis reads, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (1:27 NIV). Being created in the image of God is not about gender. It isn't about race, either. All human beings, regardless of race and ethnicity, are intricately sculpted in the *Imago Dei*.

If you open the New Testament and turn to Galatians 3:28, you read those familiar words from the Apostle Paul: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In other words, there is no distinction between us based on religion, economic status, or gender. One could also add race, ethnicity, or ability to the list. God, who is love,

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loves us all unconditionally. We are all children of the same Father in heaven.

The problem is that the above distinctions (and others) have been used by us to construct barriers that make us feel safe from those who are different. But the Church is the one institution that needs to topple those barriers, or at least challenge them. Paul was telling the believers in Galatia that “when [they] were baptized, they were incorporated into Christ in a way that transcends all human distinctions.”⁵ The same is true for contemporary believers. Having been baptized into Christ, we are a new community: one in which the distinctions created by race, whatever they may be, are overcome.

Religions have had to deal with racism in the recent past. One need only think of Wade Page who opened fire in a Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, (home of the National Offices of the NACCC) on August 5, 2012, killing four parishioners and wounding six others. Page, a member of the neo-Nazi group Hammerskins, was fueled by anti-Muslim rhetoric. Three years later, on June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof entered the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, killing nine Bible study attendees and injuring one other. Roof, a neo-Nazi and white supremacist, developed his views in the wake of the Trayvon Martin shooting. Both men, and their crimes, are featured in the 2018 Netflix documentary *Alt-Right: Age of Rage*.

That same documentary highlights organizations such as American

Renaissance, the online white supremacy magazine founded by Jarod Taylor, and the rhetoric of Richard Spencer, the anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist who was one of the neo-Nazis who spoke at the infamous Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017. Both Taylor and Spencer give an air of respectability to the movement: they are educated, clean-cut, well-dressed, articulate men whom one could see lecturing in a university classroom or prosecuting a hate crime in court.

Taylor and Spencer show us that it was once easy for us to dismiss racists as mere good ol’ boys wearing white hoods and spewing intolerant diatribes from the back of an old, beat-up Ford pick-up truck. Racism is fashionable in many circles. It has been institutionalized at all levels of society and has been embraced by many in the corridors of power. It has trickled down to the masses and is justified by the media’s insatiable focus on crimes committed by young black men. One of America’s earliest blockbusters, D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915), had the same objective.

Racism is embedded deeply into our psyche: as individuals and as a nation. Its tentacles have reached into time-honored institutions: the church is one of them. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that the most segregated hour in America is 11:00 am on Sunday. Sadly, this is still the case in many congregations. Zenitha Prince writes, “About eight-in-10 American congregants still attend services at a place where a single racial or ethnic

group comprises at least 80 percent of the congregation, according to findings from the most recent (2012) National Congregations Study, as cited by the Pew Research Center.”⁶

Granted, this is due to many reasons, one being self-segregation, but such division does not reflect the *shalom*, the wholeness that God willed for creation. It is not enough to worship God in our comfortable sanctuaries justifying the way the world is. The Gospel, at its heart, is countercultural and calls us to use our prophetic voices, especially when culture runs contrary to the Gospel.

The Gospel also establishes an ethic to which followers of Christ subscribe: we are to love one another as we love ourselves and treat others as we wish to be treated. Jesus did not posit a caveat: this doesn’t apply to race. Neither should we.

If the NACCC and her member churches want to remain relevant and true to our roots, we need to fight the good fight against racial injustice.

¹ Zakiya N. Jackson, “Responding to the War on Black Bodies,” from *Leaven* 24:3 (2016): 138.

² *Ibid.*

³ Jim Wallis, *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), xix.

⁴ See John 8:32.

⁵ Russell Pregeant, *Engaging the New Testament: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 350.

⁶ Zenitha Prince, “Eleven O’clock on Sundays is Still the Most Segregated Hour in America,” from *The Louisiana Weekly* (online), June 15, 2016.

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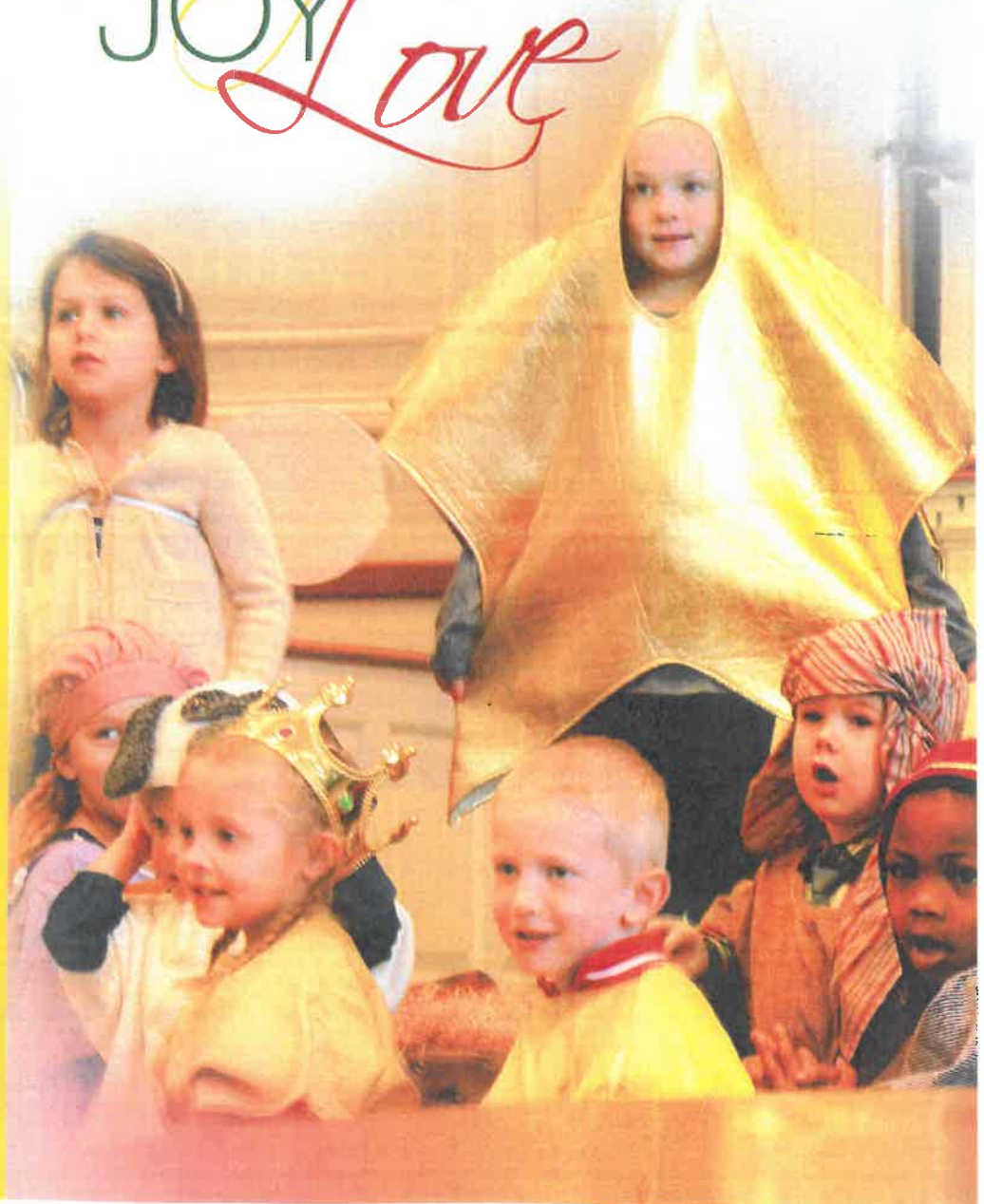
*In Times
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