

White Power - Black Challenge

Miss Phyllis Johnson has drawn our attention to a concern that is simply irrepressible. It is an issue from which there is no escape. However, troubled and tormented we may be by its discussion we might as well face up to the fact that we will be living with it for the rest of our lives. Moreover, it is one of profound Christian concern. I think it is not possible for us to gather as Christians for worship or live as Christ's witnesses in this world without confronting this all-pervasive matter. Our consideration, therefore, this morning ought to involve us in an effort to learn what God is saying to us. After the most prayerful thought of which I am capable I would suggest to you that the Gospel we have in Jesus Christ is teaching us these three things:

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In the first place I think that we are witnessing the working out of a supreme irony in that God is making us see that blackness is beautiful.

We, ~~who have existed~~ the white skinned children of God, who have controlled so long the destiny of the human race have contrived to make it appear that black skin was ugly and undesirable. In our minds and hearts we have held tenaciously to the notion that colored skin, especially black skin, is something destestable and for which one should be cursed. We have indeed cursed those whose color is black. But by our very cursing of the black skinned children of God we have at last stimulated them to rejoice in their blackness. They have in fact discovered that the only way they may reasonably rise from their long and humiliating servile status is to assert the beauty and the glory of being black. This is now what we are witnessing in the phenomenon of black power. Vincent Harding, a Negro scholar and chairman of the history department at Spelman College (Atlanta) has written a magnificent essay on "The Gift of Blackness." Dr. Harding asserts that the Negro is at last coming to accept his blackness as one

of the great gifts of God. This assertion he derives from the Apostle Paul's great statement in Corinthians about the "varieties of gifts." **"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one."** (I Cor.12:4-6) Harding believes that the Negro has come to that place in history where, prizing and using his blackness, he may contribute to the salvation of the world. Harding says:

So our blackness, in a sense, is like the wings of the birds. It is a burden when not properly used. But it is a gift. It is a gift in its highest potential, and it means not being burdened down. It means free at last. It means flying. Man, it means like soaring. It means like real soaring. . . . For this is a gift. It seems very clear to me that if there is nothing else to do, then those who are not black can rejoice in the search for black power whenever it seems creative. This is what the members of the body do. They rejoice over the gifts of others; they do not ~~run~~ run away in fear; they rejoice.

("The Gift of Blackness," PULPIT, Feb., 1968, p.18, reprinted from Katallagete, Summer 1967. The Committee of Southern Churchmen, Inc.)

Is this not exactly what we white people have done with our whiteness? Have we not rejoiced that we were born white? Have we not believed, and felt deeply, that to be born white was a gift of God? Well, now we have reached that stage of history where this same gift has been discovered by those who are black. And they too will rejoice and exult in their color, which is black!

So why can't we who are white learn to share in this rejoicing, realizing that all gifts are from God? When, for example, we watch a Lew Alcindor move with magnificent gracefulness around a baseteball floor, when we watch with bated breath his matchless skills, can we not say that black is beautiful? When we hear the rich and moving sounds of the voice of a Marian Anderson shall we not say that black is beautiful? Is this not what the "standing room only" crowds are saying in New York City as they attend the Broadway smash hit, "Hello Dolly!", ^{performed} ~~headed~~ by an all-Negro cast and starring Pearl Bailey? Don't you sense the beauty of black when you

And when you hear the glorious tones
of Louis Armstrong's trumpet, can't you
say that black is beautiful?

3

watch the extraordinarily gifted acting of Sidney Poitier? Is this not what the Methodists of the State of Iowa are saying as they express their love and gratitude for their bishop, James A. Thomas, the first Negro bishop ever to serve a predominantly white area in Methodism? And couldn't you feel this way as yesterday morning you opened your paper to read that a black young man, Army Capt. Roland Belcher of Columbus, 26, had died in Vietnam this week in ~~Vietnam~~ combat in Vietnam? This young man had told his sister that he was fighting in Vietnam for "freedom and democracy." Though now his life is lost, wasn't there something beautiful about his blackness? And if you go to Jane Case Hospital to the fourth floor and look through the glass window to see a precious little Negro baby, only hours old, sleeping beautifully in his crib, ^{Can't you say,} "Black is beautiful!"

Black is beautiful because it is one of the colors in God's creation. We look upon blonde, ~~brunet~~ or red hair, or into blue, ~~brown~~ or even green eyes, and we say, "They're beautiful!" Do you know why they are beautiful? They are beautiful because God is the creator and his whole creation is beautiful! So black is beautiful and we ought to be acknowledging ~~the~~ its power as a growing and exciting factor in the life of our world. ^{We see a woman dressed in a shimmering black evening gown and we say, "It's beautiful!"}

-II-

A second resource from the Gospel we proclaim says something to us about our guilt and forgiveness. The Gospel we have in Christ teaches us our need for forgiveness and the assurance of our forgiveness because God has acted in Christ.

Now many of us, of course, do not feel any particular ~~sense~~ sense of guilt because of alleged racial sins. We do not really feel, or recognize, that we have in any fundamental sense sinned against others because of their race or color. And yet there are many of us who are painfully burdened with a sense of the collective guilt we share for what we have done to the black men. If we were not directly ~~responsible~~ responsible for the society which forced African black men into slavery and brought them in chains to this country to perform in forced labor, we at least have benefitted, in one way, from the system of segregation and oppression which has insisted upon maintain-

ing our position of advantage and superiority. And now when black power is erupting in our cities and ~~ex~~ roaring with uncontrolled fury through our city streets, we are becoming aware of the terrible sins we have committed against our fellow men. And we feel a deep sense of guilt which we know not how to expiate because we cringe in fear and have not the courage to change our ways of life. *We shrink back with guilt when we notice that an unusually high percentage of young men fighting in Vietnam are black*

In the current issue of McCall's Magazine the celebrated theologian, Harvey Cox, writes of our condition:

Here the Biblical insight into guilt is particularly important. It teaches that God has forgiven man for his sins if he will only recognize it. The man who accepts forgiveness will make the proper restitution, not to get rid of his guilt but to make things right with his neighbor. I think white people in America must begin now to do the right thing vis-a-vis the victims of our racist history, not in order to expiate our guilt but because justice and restitution require it.

(January, 1968, p.120)

Indeed, there are those even in the Christian community who are beginning to think that the ancient Gospel is obsolete and utterly inept in dealing with the tough realities of our discordant world. But could it not be that that Gospel is more real and offers more of hope and healing than any ~~other~~ political, economic or military scheme in the whole world? If only we could acknowledge our sin and our guilt - even ~~these~~ ^{though} this is mighty unfashionable and admittedly galling - it might be that God could then enter our hearts and minds and fit for the kind of service desperately needed in a world ^{where} white men feel the rising menace of black power.

One of the most ~~ill~~ ⁴⁵ saintly Christians I know told me this week of his own need for forgiveness. After spending many years as a Christian missionary in China where he worked with yellow-skinned people, Bliss ^{Wiant} ~~Wiant~~ returned home for a furlough ¹²¹ to the the United States. One day driving his car along the highway he saw a Negro man signalling for a ride. But he did not stop. Later he realized that despite all of his service and his pretensions he harbored prejudice in his heart. In all of us there is this poison, and it needs to be exorcized as Jesus exorcized demons long

ago. Even those, especially those, who have felt closest to Christ, will know of their guilt and will ask God for his forgiving and redeeming grace.

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- In the third place I would like to support what Miss Johnson has said about white power. ~~xxxChristians~~ Most of us who are white do have a power that we cannot deny. ~~But~~ By our very whiteness we have advantages and privileges which spell power. But if we live under the control of Jesus Christ our white power must be placed under his direction and used in obedience to his will. This is what it means to be a Christian.

A Christian who possesses white power, therefore, will be finding ways in this world in which he can use his God-given resources for the restitution of justice and freedom for those who are not white. It is my own impression that there are many persons in our church, however sinful and negligent we may be, who are really ready to use their lives in this way. We hear a great deal about the bigotry and racial prejudice of many people who belong to the church. Over and over again we have heard the charge that ~~xxx~~ 11 o'clock on Sunday morning there is no institution so segregated as the Christian Church. The truth of this pains and offends us. But it is ~~xxxx~~ true. Yet I believe there are many of us who are willing to place our lives in risk at the disposal of Jesus Christ. I believe we are not afraid to provide equal opportunities in housing, education and jobs. I think there are many who are willing to give themselves for the sake of those who have been oppressed. Now indeed this is ~~some~~ something we need to recognize as the exercise of white power, used in obedience to Christ. Recently I read something by the great Christian novelist and humanitarian, Alan Paton, the author of Cry the Beloved Country, which describes what we need to do. He wrote:

When I face some problem whose solution seems impossible I always think of London on October 15, 1940, when 480 German aircraft dropped an estimated 386 tons of high explosive and 70,000 incendiary bombs. The incendiary bombs were something new, and while Londoners sheltered in the basements, strategic

and historic buildings burned out above their heads. If this were to go on night after night, nothing of London would be left. And what could Londoners possibly do? "To the basements," wrote Churchill, "must be replaced by 'to the roofs.'" What had ~~happened~~ seemed a hopeless future became an inspiring present. Everyone pressed forward to do his or her share. "Many became adept," wrote Churchill, "and thousands of fires were extinguished before they took hold. The experience of remaining on the roof night after night under fire, with no protection but a tin hat, soon became habitual." What Londoners did then, we must do now, because people are threatening to "burn America down."

("Called to Reconciliation," by Alan Paton,
in Christian Century, Dec.20,1967, p.1629)

You may have long ago concluded that there is not much you can do with your own little life to change the conditions in the world which have generating so much disorder and disaster. But I want to assure you that there is. If you are a white person you are in possession of power. And if you are one who professes Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior you are in possession of a boundless power. For you can use this power which God has given to you to make a difference in the relationships around you. You may be an employer who might decide to hire a black person at a decent job and give him a real chance in this world. You might live in a neighborhood where you might provide the welcome for a black family that is at the moment forbidden to exercise its God-given freedom to live where it chooses to live. You might be a student who in school could truly make an effort to know a black person and to know him as a real person. If you have a home you might make an effort to know black people as genuine friends by inviting them into your home as guests. And as Christians you can be the ones to welcome anyone ~~in~~ who comes to this church. In these ways you may be making your witness for Christ on the rooftops where, despite the danger to your own prestige and position, you will be effectively extinguishing those fires which threaten our common life. You are not helpless in this world as you look out upon its disarray. And if you decide to use the power of your whiteness you will discover that Christ will not let you struggle alone, that he will be with you as you live for ~~him~~ him. And above all you will discover that in the order of God's creation both black and white are beautiful.