

Race, Politics, and the Gospel - Race in America, Compromise in the Church, and Lessons for Today
Bart Box

I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hour, in Christian America. I definitely think the Christian church should be integrated, and any church that stands against integration and that has a segregated body is standing against the spirit and the teachings of Jesus Christ, and it fails to be a true witness. (Martin Luther King, Jr., April 17th, 1960)

Race in America and Compromise in the Church

- Approximately 12 million Africans underwent the Middle Passage to the Americas during the 16th through 18th centuries.

- The passage was so brutal that almost 2 million perished in transit.
- John Newton, once a slave trader, reflected on the slave trade:

I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was, once, an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders. ("Thoughts on the African Slave Trade")

- The need for slaves increased along with increased demand for Southern cash crops.
 - Christians were increasingly conflicted over evangelization and economics.
 - If slaves became Christians, what would that mean for continued slavery?

You declare in the presence of God and before this congregation that you do not ask for holy baptism out of any design to free yourself from the Duty and Obedience you owe to your master while you live, but merely for the good of your soul and to partake of the Grace and Blessings promised to the Members of the church of Jesus Christ. (Baptismal Vows for Slaves, Francis Le Jau)

- America was conflicted as well.
 - The *Declaration of Independence* claimed that “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”
 - The U.S. Constitution declared slaves as 3/5^{ths} of a person for the purposes of representation.
- Tragically, the Bible was often pressed into the service of slavery’s defense.
 - Christians sometimes argued from a generic view of providence—slavery was God’s will the course of history.
 - Christians wrongly argued from a specific text of Scripture—that slavery was the fulfillment of the curse of Ham.

The servitude of the race of Ham, to the latest era of mankind, is necessary to the veracity of God Himself, as by it is fulfilled one of the oldest of the decrees of the Scriptures, namely, that of Noah, which placed the race as servants under other races. (Josiah Priest)

- Southern Baptists owe their origin to the issue of slavery.

- Alabama Baptists insisted on the appointment of slaveholders as foreign missionaries.

That our duty at this crisis requires us to demand from the proper authorities in all those bodies to whose funds we have contributed... the distinct, explicit, avowal that slaveholders are eligible, and entitled, equally with non-slaveholders. ("Alabama Resolutions," 1844)

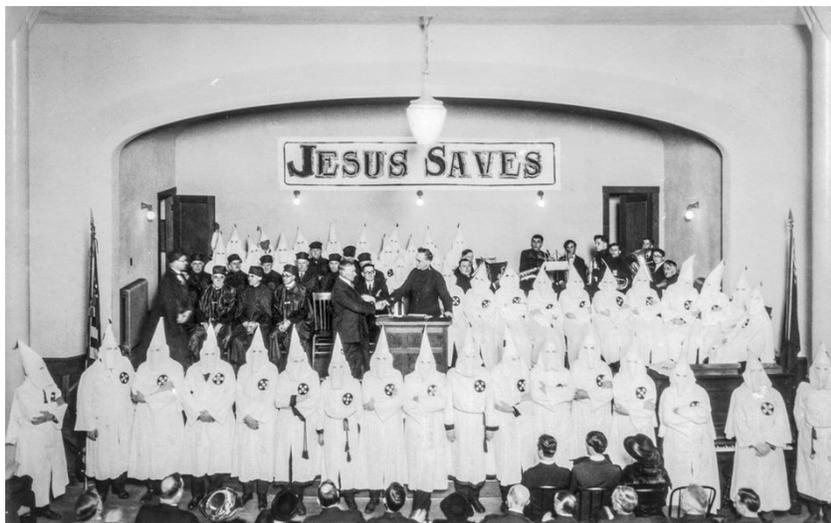
- Their petition was denied by the Triennial Convention (the first national Baptist convention).

If anyone should offer himself as a missionary, having slaves, and should insist on retaining them as his property, we could not appoint him. One thing is certain; we can never be a party to any arrangement which would imply approbation of slavery. (Reply of Triennial Convention to "The Alabama Resolutions")

- Baptists across the South formed the Southern Baptist Convention.

- That beginning was repudiated and repented of explicitly in 1995, the 150th anniversary of its founding.
- For the text of that 1995 resolution, see "Resolution On Racial Reconciliation On The 150th Anniversary Of The Southern Baptist Convention."

- After the Civil War, black Americans were given equal citizenship and the right to vote, but those privileges and rights were soon erased in the South.
 - Jim Crow laws led to enforced segregation & "separate but equal" became the law of the land.
 - These laws were reinforced through a reign of terror with lynchings & the rise of the KKK.



- The Civil Rights Movement brought all this to a point of crisis.
 - The doctrine of “separate but equal” was partially overturned in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education*.
 - The black church was at the forefront of the movement.

We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. (Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream")

- King challenged the idea of incremental change and patience in the struggle for Civil Rights.

*Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "n****", your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. (Martin Luther King, Jr.)*

- The bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in September 1963 proved to be a catalyst for legal change in civil rights across America.
 - The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964.
 - The Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965.

Lessons for Today

- Our history should lead us to humility, not hubris.
 - We can look at history in disbelief, or...
 - We can look at history in sympathy...
 - I probably have blind spots (and I'm blind to them!).
 - I should be more understanding of past Christians' failures.
 - That doesn't mean excusing past sins.
 - But it does mean the Golden rule should rule our judgments.

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

We would do well to not judge entire persons by one sinful part of their life, to remember that there "is a difference between the flawed man who accomplished great things and stood for a heroic cause and the flawed man who accomplished dubious things and stood for a sinful cause. (Kevin DeYoung)
- Our history should lead us to lament, not self-loathing.
 - We should apologize and express regret whenever we are complicit in sin.
 - However, we cannot wholly repent for the sins of others.
 - We should expect generational consequences...

Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities. (Lamentations 5:7)
 - And we should expect personal judgment.

Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die. (Ezekiel 18:4)
 - More biblical than self-loathing is genuine lament.
 - Our history inevitably shapes our present.
 - We can lament that racial disparities exist, even if we disagree in the particulars of why this happened or how much weight to give to that reason.
- Our history should lead us to a chastened patriotism, not a proud defensiveness.
 - We have much to give thanks for in America, and we should not belittle those blessings.

- But we should recognize that this country is not the best country—that distinction belongs to our heavenly home.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (Hebrews 11:13-16)

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. (Philippians 3:20)

- Our history should lead us to reformation, not resistance.
 - We should praise the Lord for genuine progress in America.
 - We should pray to the Lord and work unto the Lord for more progress in America.