

Jubilee in the Age of Racism

by H. Malcolm Newton

The Mark Fuhrman developments in the O.J. Simpson case as well as the Million Man March in Washington D.C. tend to confirm the view that those failing to learn from history are condemned to repeat it. It was simply a matter of time before circumstances exposed the deep-seated racial hatred rampant in American society. Both incidents reveal that America is descending into "a state of psychological apartheid." They reveal what "the future is going to be, unless the church grabs hold of its prime directive: to be God's reconciling agent in the world" (Dr. Bill Pinnell, *The Crowning Race War*).

The Bible records the response of faithful people to events and issues. It is action arising from the foundation of biblical witness, church tradition and a community of faith. Jesus' call to repent and turn away from the destructive forces that permeated his society was followed by an invitation to be part of a new community of faith. **The church cannot be just another social institution; it must be a new social reality presenting an alternative way of life.**

The challenge is for Christian leaders to resurrect a new vision of hope and faith in the face of the spiritual nihilism and material decay in our inner cities. How does the church do theology (ministry) in light of such challenges? Strict doctrine, speculative theology and political ideology cannot be the basis for action. **The church must root itself again in the values of the kingdom and live a theology of response.**

Foundational to reconciliation is a theology of creation. Scripture records that God created the earth and the whole of creation is his. God gave Israel the use of the land, but it was not their possession: "No land shall be sold outright, because the land is mine, and you are coming into it as aliens and settlers" (*Leviticus 25:23*). **Stewardship of God's creation became a crucial aspect of Hebrew theology.** The Torah taught that the right of property was subordinate to the obligation to care for the weaker members of society, such as the poor, the homeless and the stranger (*Leviticus 25:35*).

The year of release established a universal release of debts and freedoms every seven years to all enslaved for debt (*Deuteronomy 15*). In the 50th year, the year of jubilee was celebrated (*Leviticus 25*) in which all land sold returned to its original owner or his heirs. **The jubilee year met three basic demands for justice: remission of debt, liberation of slaves and redistribution of land.**

God designed jubilee to protect the poor and weak. The Hebrew nation, however, strayed from this system of justice. God stood strongly with the poor through the prophets who frequently pronounced judgment on the nation because the poor had been oppressed, exploited and denied justice (*Amos 5:7-13*). **God judged the nations because they had reneged on their promise to observe the jubilee and sabbath years (*Jeremiah 34-35*).**

Jesus' message proclaimed the ethic of jubilee: release of the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and good news to the poor. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus read the words of the prophet Isaiah, saying that these words had come true:

The Spirit of the Lord . . . has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to let the broken

*victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (*Luke 4:18-19*).*

In Jesus the reality of jubilee was present.

The church must raise the question, what is the level of pain and hurt that minorities, and in particular black males, are experiencing in this country that they are attracted to Louis Farrakhan, a non-Christian? **The evangelical church missed the opportunity to proclaim the good news to the poor because it has failed to understand the justice issues related to the poor.** Farrakhan is trying to fill that void.

Evangelical leaders need to be empowered for a ministry of reconciliation. It is time that evangelical ministries become deeply involved in addressing the consequences of systemic violence, child abuse, battered women and gang violence as well as rivalry and conflict between and among ethnic groups. The culture of confrontation and violence taking hold in our cities is making new demands on the Christian community who can no longer ignore the pain and suffering of their brethren. Christians must validate the integrity of that pain and hurt in order to speak to the crisis in people's lives. At the same time, **Christians must talk seriously about escape strategies (love-informed strategies) and how to allow the grace of God to transform those lives and the society in which they live.**

Christian leaders must proclaim to the drug user and drug dealer, the homeless, the prostitute and the gangs that Jesus is the Christ and that is the good news! The sin-bound, blind, brokenhearted and despairing need healing. The captive and oppressed need transformation. The devastated and ruined cities need repair.

As the presence of Christ in the world, the church is to become the embodiment of jubilee. Based on Scripture, I call upon churches, church agencies and the academic, theological communities throughout the country to consider, discuss, debate and take action. Establish "Adopt a Gang" programs that evangelize youth in gangs; commission missionaries to serve as court advocates for black and Latino juveniles; train street-corner evangelists to work with youth involved in drug trafficking; establish rape crisis centers and services for battered women; provide counseling for abusive men.

The crises generated by the capitalist urbanization process present an opportunity for the emergence of new moral and intellectual leadership. "The ascension of Farrakhan as a pivotal figure in the black community is a result of the failure of black church leadership to develop a coordinated program of evangelism and rehabilitation for black males" (Eugene Rivers as quoted in *Christianity Today*). If we, the community of faith, — black and white — rise to the occasion, we may be able to retrieve a generation cut adrift. If not, we will have brought down the judgment of God on ourselves for renegeing on Jesus' promise of jubilee.

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