

LEST WE FORGET THINE AGONY: RACIAL RECONCILIATION, MEMORY,
AND THE WOUNDS OF CHRIST

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In the face of ongoing racial strife, many Christians in America seem willing to remain silent. Silent both in regards to the place of the Church today to affect racial reconciliation, and in regards to the painful history of racial oppression and violence that have been carried out with the Church's explicit or implicit (by means of silence) blessing. This paper will seek to join the tradition of Christian "noise," and provide a theological foundation for the necessity of listening to and remembering the narratives of racial injustice, both past and present, by tracing an argument through the concept of holiness as "inhabiting the cruciform God," the analogy of the cross and the lynching tree, and the wounds of the resurrected Christ.

Lest We Forget Thine Agony: Racial Reconciliation, Memory, and the Wounds of Christ

"As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." (Gal. 3:27-29).

One might think that, given the influence of such words in the very beginning of the life of the Church, racial divides would be something conspicuously absent within the bounds of Christian communion. Shamefully, the narrative of the past 2000 years of Christian history is overwhelming testimony of the opposite. In the United States especially, the looming shadow of slavery, the ubiquitous history of displacement of indigenous persons, the pernicious false promises of Manifest Destiny (alive and well under the guise of the "American Dream"), the not-long-gone political and social framework of Jim Crow, and the persistent xenophobia that accompanies all military conflicts have left many Americans (including many American Christians) ready to ignore repeated sociological, anthropological, and biological rejections of the concept of "race," not to mention the open and unifying image of humanity presented in Paul's letter to the Galatians (among other texts).

Racial reconciliation is not a novel idea, nor is it a program that has yet to be pursued. Many and varied approaches to such reconciliation exist, including, but not limited to, formal apologies for complicity in subjugation, community integration efforts, affirmative action programs, and the formation of multi-racial discipleship efforts such as Promise Keepers.¹ Yet as often as these efforts have made progress towards reconciliation, they have just as often been the occasion for tokenism², professions of white innocence, and ongoing racial violence.

Couched behind the ongoing failure of Christian attempts at racial reconciliation is the unwillingness of white America to remember its racist past, and to accept the ongoing reality of its racist present. After all, "we have a black President, now," and "the Civil Rights movement

¹ Ivan A. Beals, *Our Racist Legacy: Will the Church Resolve the Conflict?*, (Notre Dame, IN: Cross Roads Books, 1997), 189-190.

² James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 61.

was more than a generation ago.” Racism in America, it would seem from such comments, is a thing of the past. This in spite of the obvious publicity of racially charged acts of violence on the part of American law enforcement, the popularity of racially charged rhetoric from aspiring politicians, and the remarkably disproportionate demographics of our nation’s prison system.

The Church does not stand spotless in this story. As James Cone so poignantly points out:

White theologians in the past century have written thousands of books about Jesus’ cross without remarking on the analogy between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of black people. One must suppose that in order to feel comfortable in the Christian faith, whites needed theologians to interpret the gospel in a way that would not require them to acknowledge white supremacy as America’s great sin...It takes a lot of theological blindness to do that, especially since the vigilantes [who lynched blacks with impunity] were white Christians who claimed to worship the Jew lynched in Jerusalem...the tragic memory of the black holocaust in America’s history is still waiting to find theological meaning.³

Whatever progress towards racial reconciliation has been made—and there has been progress—it does not justify a refusal to acknowledge our own past and present. To do so is to refuse to listen to the stories of our black brothers and sisters. It is to insist that white discomfort at the mention of our communal sins is more important than the lived experiences of our black friends. It is to perpetuate the subjugation of black persons in the interests of whites.

This paper hopes to step outside the tradition of white silence. Especially within the context of the Church of the Nazarene, in which we desire, individually and communally, to be sanctified by the Holy Spirit and to live a life of holiness, this means, in the words of Michael Gorman, “inhabiting the cruciform God.”⁴ Further, this paper will follow James Cone in his *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, in affirming the analogy between the cross of this cruciform God and the lynching tree of America’s past (and present). Finally, a reflection on the wounds of the risen Christ will provide a theological foundation to insist upon the importance of memory and listening for the varied processes of racial reconciliation.

Nota Bene

A few things must be mentioned before we engage the body of this paper.

As even the cursory survey of the troubled racial past of the United States above demonstrates, the issue of race today cannot be treated as an assumed binary. Not only is white racism exercised against more than just black persons (as contemporary reactions to immigrants and refugees from Latin American and the Middle East demonstrate), but the ongoing tensions existing between different racial communities (for example, the racial violence between black-

³ *Ibid.*, 159-160.

⁴ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).

and Hispanic-dominated gangs in urban centers) further complicate the context in which racial reconciliation must be pursued. However, given both the limited scope of this paper and the preponderance of literature concerning racial issues between white and black America, this paper will take as emblematic of the wider reconciliatory needs an approach to the black-white binary.

Further, I write this paper from within the unavoidable prism of my context. I am a white, privileged, male who has grown up in suburban America surrounded, largely, by other white privileged persons. This is an important confession for two reasons: First, I must acknowledge the implicit racial prejudices which have marked my life—and I confess them even as I remain marked by them and yet struggling to be shaped beyond (and in spite of) them. Second, following Willie James Jennings’s caution that an uncritical acceptance of the (itself critical) acknowledgement of context itself reinforces the framework in which modern conceptions of race and racism live, breathe, and exert power⁵, I must insist, and indeed rely, on the power of the Holy Spirit to affect a transcendence of those contextual limitations by the myriad means of grace available.

Holiness as Inhabiting the Cruciform God

The great hope of the Christian faith is the promised, perfected, union of God with the creation. “When God will be all in all.” (1 Cor. 15:28) Christians of varying theological traditions variously anticipate this promised, consummated Kingdom of God. Within the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, this anticipation takes the form of a life of holiness, empowered by the sanctifying Holy Spirit. We call this sanctified existence “Christlikeness.” Michael Gorman puts it another way: “The goal of the Christian community is to allow the life and Spirit of this God [the one revealed in Jesus Christ], rather than the imperial spirit of domination and acquisition, to flow in and through it—to participate in God.”⁶ An examination of his work in *Inhabiting the Cruciform God* will allow us to see the call to holiness as the call to Christlikeness, which is a call to the cross, to “cruciformity.”

Gorman recognizes that Paul understands the Levitical injunction “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2) to culminate in *imitatio Dei*—being like God. He claims that Paul’s understanding of holiness finds its shape in the crucified Messiah, Jesus, who is “the revelation of the *holiness* of God the Father.” Further, we, the church, “the justified...are called to be holy through ongoing “co-crucifixion” with Christ by the power of the *Holy Spirit*.”⁷ Gorman’s identification of a “cruciform and Trinitarian vision of holiness” amounts to his phrase, “You shall be cruciform, for I am cruciform.”⁸

⁵ Willie James Jennings, “Wandering in the Wilderness: Christian Identity & Theology Between Context & Race,” in *The Gospel in Black and White: Theological Resources for Racial Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 45.

⁶ Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 105-6.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Gorman begins his demonstration by pointing to Paul's use of the term *hagioi*. Paul's regular address to the believers as "saints" or "holy ones" draws us to recognize that holiness (*hagiasmos*) is "both gift and task." Holiness is that which is found "in Christ" but it also the consequent activity of being "in Christ."⁹

This Christological location of holiness is fleshed out in 1 Thessalonians by Paul's relation of holiness to Father, Son, and Spirit: the Father calls (4:7) and the Spirit brings about holiness (4:8), and the Son judges the unholy (4:6b). Christological holiness is seen to be truly an "experience of the Trinitarian God."¹⁰ Gorman further clarifies, drawing from across Paul's writings: "Holiness is the call and will of God the Father; it occurs in Christ, who defines holiness for the church; and it is effected by the Spirit, who is the *Holy* Spirit... Human holiness is participation in divine holiness... Thus human holiness is not merely a human imperative; it is a divine product."¹¹

This Trinitarian holiness, for Paul, is Christlikeness, as Gorman notes from his exhortation to "put on" Christ (Rom. 13:14) or to "living with Christ" (1 Thess 1:2-10). And so, in keeping with this Trinitarian—communal—nature of holiness, we must understand holiness "in Christ" is not a private, individual event but is a "corporate *koinonia* of transformation."¹² This reminds us quite readily of John Wesley's claim that "there is no holiness but social holiness." The call of Christlikeness, the call of the sanctified life, is a call to social action.

Perhaps the most pernicious stumbling block to faithful attempts at racial reconciliation is the caution that "total" reconciliation is impossible because we live in a sinful world. Perfect racial harmony, it is said, must await the coming of God's Kingdom. Gorman's work allows us to at once acknowledge the truth of these discouragements—that total conformity to Christ is an eschatological reality—while refusing their defeatist implications. Eschatological Christlikeness "begins now" in "sharing Christ's status as a slave or servant of God and others, one characterized by non-retaliatory, other-centered love." (Rom 8:17, 29; Phil 3:11-12, 21; 1 Cor 15:49).¹³ Holiness, then, is primarily "a participation in Christ's cross."¹⁴

Again, working from Galatians, Gorman insists that "the meaning of holiness will be related to the inextricable bond between the cross and the Spirit as the outworking of God's eschatological salvation" and that "the entire letter [of Galatians] says that the salvation process—holiness—is crucifixion: *to* the flesh and the world (5:24; 6:14) and *with* Christ (2:19-20)."¹⁵

⁹ Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹¹ Gorman, 112.

¹² Gorman, 113.

¹³ Gorman, 113.

¹⁴ Gorman, 113.

¹⁵ Gorman, 116.

Over and over again, Gorman demonstrates from Paul that holiness is not “privatistic, self-centered, therapeutic, or sectarian” but is rather focused outward.¹⁶ It is “participation in a *cruciform* God of holiness” which “requires a corollary vision of life in the world that rejects domination in personal, public, or political life.”¹⁷

The Cross as Lynching Tree, the Crucified Lord as Lynched Victim

James Cone begins his theological consideration of the cross of Christ and the lynching tree of American racial oppression by presenting his work as a matter of evangelism. “What is at stake is the credibility and promise of the Christian gospel and the hope that we may heal the wounds of racial violence that continue to divide our churches and our society.”¹⁸ How can the Christian claims to the lordship of a good God, revealed to us in the person of a Jew executed by Roman political and Jewish religious authorities for crimes he did not commit, have any grounds for legitimacy if the followers of this crucified Lord do not live their lives and seek to shape their society to be in conformity with their God? “Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a “recrucified” black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy.”¹⁹ In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone seeks to give voice to the black victims of America’s history of lynching and, at the same time, introduce the present burden of black experience—an experience which includes the not-so-distant memory of those brutal lynchings—to the Church, both white and black.²⁰

The analogy between the cross and the lynching tree is almost painfully obvious. Roman crucifixion was an execution that majored in public spectacle. It was humiliating and excruciatingly painful. And it was used explicitly to keep a subordinate population in line by reminding them of their overlords’ power—ultimate power over their bodies. It was not those perpetrating this horrible violence that were labeled “criminal,” but the one on the tree who was named “insurrectionist.”²¹ Almost without revision, these same criteria could be used to describe the lynching tree in America’s history. From about the time of the Civil War up into the 1960’s, lynching was a not-uncommon attack upon the black communities of the United States by its dominating white population. In the face of slavery’s dismantling following the Civil War, the cultural, economic, and political dominance of whites in the United States was affected by means only marginally more subtle than the irons and whips of slavery. Jim Crow laws arose to deprive black persons of the rights and opportunities that were supposedly available to them under the newly amended Constitution. And the unpredictable practice of lynching was used to terrorize a people in their own nation. For the slightest of provocations (or for none at all) a black man in America between the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement might find himself subjected to

¹⁶ Gorman, 126.

¹⁷ Gorman 128.

¹⁸ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xiii-xiv.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 158-159.

the cruelest of tortures, including but not limited to burning, flaying, dismemberment, and hanging. All this was undertaken as a public spectacle, sometimes attended by as many as 10,000 men, women, and children.²² The lynching tree was the tool of dehumanization, a reminder that black persons were not as human as their white oppressors. It was crucifixion, indeed.

Cone outlines two ways in which black communities sought to “remain standing” beneath the weight of a society constructed to disadvantage them, and which gleefully implemented extra-legal means of terror to reinforce white dominance. The first of these was the music that came to be known as “the blues.”²³ The second was the practice of Christianity. Cone writes, “On Sunday morning at church, black Christians spoke back in song, sermon, and prayer against the “faceless, merciless, apocalyptic vengefulness of the massed white mob.””²⁴ And “while the lynching tree symbolized white power and “black death,” the cross symbolized divine power and “black life”—God overcoming the power of sin and death.”²⁵ The cross became a special symbol of hope for black Christians. In their experience of systematic violence and oppression they found solidarity with the broken Jew on the Roman cross. Cone makes the analogical relationship explicit: “If the God of Jesus’ cross is found among the least, the crucified people of the world, then God is also found among those lynched in American history.”²⁶

Cone urges us to reimagine the relation of the cross to our present social reality. Drawing on the haunting lines of Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” Cone insists:

Both Jesus and blacks were “strange fruit.” Theologically speaking, Jesus was the “first lynchee,” who foreshadowed all the lynched black bodies on American soil. He was crucified by the same principalities and powers that lynched black people in America...*Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus.*²⁷

If we will listen to Cone, if we will allow the reality of the lynching tree to inform our understanding of the cross, we will also avoid that enemy of Paul’s concept of holiness (outlined by Gorman): “abstract, [individualistic], sentimental piety.”²⁸

But the cross of Jesus is more than just the terrible memory of suffering. The cross is the paradoxical inversion of all the world’s structures. It is hope that “comes by way of defeat,” hope that “suffering and death do not have the last word.”²⁹ Does the analogy between the cross and the lynching tree fail, here? How can the cross inform our memory of America’s implement of

²² *Ibid.*, 9 and throughout.

²³ *Ibid.*, 12-17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

terror? Cone asks this question as another version of the question: “How will the church define itself today by the gospel of Jesus’ cross?” He casts the question in concrete terms:

The lynching of black America is taking place [today] in the criminal justice system where nearly one-third of black men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight are in prisons, jails, on parole, or waiting for their day in court. Nearly one-half of the more than two million people in prisons are black. That is one million black people behind bars, more than in colleges.”³⁰

Blacks have been “the object of white America’s torture and abuse for nearly four hundred years,” Cone writes. How will the Church in America respond? The dominant response of whites, both inside and outside the Church is “Why bring that up? Is it not best forgotten?” Cone’s response is, as ours must be, “Absolutely not!”³¹ Racial reconciliation will only be possible within our society once we are willing to listen to and remember the narratives of racial injustice and terror. Whites will not be able to repent of their horrid past unless “they confront their history and expose the sin of white supremacy.” Similarly, blacks will not be able to forgive unless they do the same, together.³² Here is the final beauty of Cone’s great and terrible book: neither blacks nor whites will be able to understand themselves without the other. “What happened to blacks also happened to whites. When whites lynched blacks, they were literally and symbolically lynching themselves—their sons, daughters, cousins, mothers and fathers, and a host of other relatives.”³³ The cross and the lynching tree bind us together.

The Wounds of Christ: “Doubting” Thomas and Eschatological Memory

Robert H. Smith, in his *Wounded Lord: Reading John Through the Eyes of Thomas*, urges a re-reading of the story of “Doubting” Thomas in John 20:24-29. Endless repetition has made a negative reading of Thomas a near-assumption for most exegetes, burdening the disciple with the labels of “skeptic” and “sluggish.” Smith questions these labels, and asks “What exactly did Thomas doubt?” And, in light of his doubting, what does his confession “My Lord and my God” (20:28) mean?³⁴

Smith urges us to seek to understand just what it is that Thomas is asking for when he demands to see the nail-marks and to see and touch Jesus’s wounded hands and side. “He does not demand to grasp Jesus’ wrists or ankles in order to assure himself that the resurrected Jesus is solid and no ghost. His request goes beyond merely establishing that this post-crucifixion apparition is the same Jesus whom he had known previously.”³⁵ And Thomas does not ask that Jesus speak with him as with Mary (20:11-18), nor that Jesus appear to him and proclaim “Peace

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 165.

³⁴ Robert H. Smith, *Wounded Lord: Reading John Through the Eyes of Thomas*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

be with you” and breath the Holy Spirit, as he had with the other disciples (20:19-23). Thomas’s demand, his doubt, is centered on Christ’s wounds. He does not doubt the possibility of a resurrection (there is no proclamation of its impossibility). Thomas wants to be convinced that the glorified, resurrected one, is identical with the one who was crucified.³⁶ He will believe when he sees a “strange paradox: wounds on a resurrected body.”³⁷

Jesus’s appearance and acquiescence to Thomas’s demand is not, in this view, a reproachful condescension to the petty demands of a skeptic. It is the divine affirmation of Thomas’s faith: the God who conquers does so by means of the cross and self-giving love. The Lord of all does not come to us in his eschatological glory unmarked by the cross of Golgotha. So “Thomas answers him, “My Lord and my God!” (20:28). He refuses to confess as Lord and God “any figure, no matter how marvelous or mighty, who lacks wounds.”³⁸ But his faith is rewarded, just as Jesus promises that ours will be, for the resurrected Lord, the one who conquers and redeems: he is wounded.

Conclusion

It remains to make clear what I intend with the use of these three writers in thinking about racial reconciliation.

No approach to the reconciling work of the gospel can be separated from the call to Christlikeness—from the call to holiness. Michael Gorman demonstrates (exhaustively) that this call to Christlikeness is a call to cruciformity, to the embrace of Christ’s cross. James Cone poignantly leads us to recognize the inescapable analogy between the cross of Christ and the lynching tree of America’s racial terrorism. If the holy life is the life of embracing the cross of Christ, then for American Christians it must also be the embrace of a life indelibly marked by our racist past. This marking is not merely a historical phase, however. Smith’s re-reading of the “Doubting” Thomas story reveals something very important to us about the eschatological Kingdom of God. The resurrected Christ, the foretaste of God’s Kingdom, the “first fruits from among the dead,” retains the wounds of the cross. Christ’s resurrection body is the only explicit image of the promised Kingdom given to us, and we must take seriously John’s description of it as “wounded.” This suggests to me, that the coming Kingdom of God, perfect and entire, will not come in such a way as to undo the history through which God has affected its arrival. Jesus’s resurrection body and, I suggest, the Church as the “body of Christ,” remain wounded, even in the consummated Kingdom. Jesus’s body ‘remembered’ the cross, for it still bore its wounds. Just so, the Church, especially as it anticipates its consummation in the coming Kingdom of God, must ‘remember’ the atrocities of our racist past. Only such a memory can help us address our racist present and will allow for confession, repentance, and forgiveness. In short, there is no reconciliation without remembrance. By this remembrance, God can take the evil of the lynching

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

tree, just as God has taken the evil of the cross, and “transform [it] into the triumphant beauty of the divine.”³⁹

I think it best to close with the final stanza and refrain of Jennie E. Hussey’s 1921 hymn: “Lead Me to Calvary”

May I be willing, Lord, to bear
Daily my cross for Thee;
Even Thy cup of grief to share,
Thou hast borne all for me.

Lest I forget Gethsemane,
Lest I forget Thine agony;
Lest I forget Thy love for me,
Lead me to Calvary.

³⁹ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 166.