

Race, Americanism, and the Ministry of the Churches in the 'Eighties

Preface: What Happened to Us In the Sixties?

Human history is too complex to remember in all its tangled details. Symbol always aids and shapes our real, living memories. If intellectuals have not learned that from theology and religion, they have had to perceive its actuality in the way we all talk about history, especially as we move from the rhetoric of memory to the action of politics.

In my own experience of the so-called Civil Rights Era, nothing stands out more symbolically than a day in March, 1965, when a group of southern Presbyterian white church people joined a worship service in the Brown Memorial Church in Selma, marched three abreast down the street to lay claim again for voting rights before the door of the county courthouse, and in the end of that day listened to Lyndon Johnson recommend to Congress the Voting Rights Act. I heard the speech sitting in the back of an automobile. Its most memorable moment came when, Texas drawl and all, the President quoted the song that we sang in Selma that very day: "We *shall* overcome," he said.

It was an *ambiguous* moment. Did Lyndon Johnson have a right to that phrase from the theme song of the Civil Rights Movement? Among the various equalities that must be written into the life and law of a democratic order, are there included equal rights to each other's memories, songs, traditions, defining culture? Can the words "we shall overcome" *mean* the same thing to a white politician and a black marcher in Selma? Does the transfer of the song from the lips of one to the other imply a certain assault and insult? To detect this ambiguity in so little a detail was to enter, via one's own white participation in the Civil Rights Movement, into the pain of that ambiguity. And it was a stand on the verge of a new era in interracial understanding in America. The new era began in the late 'sixties and took root in the 'seventies. It had at least three defining characteristics.

The cultural relativizing of "white America."

The pain in the phrase was accurate and educative from its first echo

* Most of this essay was delivered as the Harr Lecture at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary on May 1, 1980. The writer is President of the Faculty and William E. Dodge Professor of Applied Christianity at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

in white American ears. Many local cultures of the world have only one word for "human," and no word for strangers beyond the local tribe. So, mostly, in the white American tribe: the old "melting pot" imagery of the nation's life assumed a strange chemistry wherein the broth turned up white. Neither amalgamation nor whitewashing but particular historical integrity: that was the claim of black power, black theology, and black studies, a claim long overdue in the life of a country that has selectively buried the collective memory of black people. There was no more dramatic evocation of this claim in national culture of the 1970's than the television series "Roots." This drama was important for white Americans as well as for black, for it provided them a vivid experience of history seen through black eyes. It portrayed national economics and politics as perceived from the bottom rung of the racist ladder. It dramatized new definitions of human dignity that black people have characteristically and miraculously forged in the fires of suffering. Among these other contributions, "Roots" gave white Americans the experience of knowing that Black people have as much right to American history as whites. Furthermore, it alerted us all to the *moral* meaning of all history. It helped put educators and intellectuals on notice that they must calculate the moral variable in the writing of history itself. Thus by the end of the 1970's many white people were on their way to some form of the confession: "We and our kind are but one stream of life in America. Whatever the 'mainstream' may be, we have no right to define it only according to our own memories, hopes, and self-interests. Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth and Alex Haley are definers of the American experience, too."

The shift from political to economic life as the focus of the pursuit of justice in America.

The Civil Rights Movement often counted on the economic self-interest of whites to serve the Movement's goals for changes in the political order. But only as the stubborn facts of housing in Chicago, the quotas for the Vietnam draft, and the unemployment statistics for Black teenagers became clear, did the attention of the movement turn to economic analysis, economic criticism, and a new interest in politics for the sake of economic change. In the 1970's the motivations for this shift accumulated as America began to shudder from the multiple pressures of escalating oil prices, energy shortages, inflation, the collapse of government-sponsored economic opportunity programs in the cities, and all that goes under the label of "a shrinking economy." What does it mean to be a black person in a shrinking economy? It is likely to mean only a new version of the old law, "Last hired, first fired." It means vying with Hispanic people for the lowest employment scores and losing out in even *that* competition. It means shock at the inability of government to know whether teenage employment in Harlem is 40 or 50 or 80 percent. In a shrinking economy, issues of economic justice float to the top of the social agenda. Political freedom grows empty in proportion to the emptying out of family income; and the legacy of racism comes home in all the

floodwaters of injustice that flow in economic affairs long after the tributaries of civil rights and government programs have exerted their modest influence. The irony here is that events forcing Black people to focus on economic questions play also on the minds and interests of all other Americans. Tough times for white Americans have always meant *disastrously* tough times for Black Americans. The reality of that legacy remained grim and undimmed throughout the 'seventies. It remains so now in the threshold of the '80's.

The shift from a national to an international context for the consideration of all these questions is a third difference between the consciousness of the '60's and that of the '80's. Looking back on it, one can only be disturbed and humbled by the consensus of white opposition to Martin Luther King's expansion of his own agenda to include the Vietnam War. The costs of that war fell disproportionately upon black Americans. Their youth fought in the paddy fields in numbers beyond the rough justice of the census; their social programs went down the war-drain of national wealth; inflation spawned by that war began to haunt their lives, and — most embarrassing of all — the racist element in the war scarred the minds of Americans and Southeast Asians alike. The struggle against racism and other injustice is a global struggle. To the American mind of 1980, it no longer sounds like a new truth. To the mind of the 'sixties, it was new; and we are indebted to prophets like King for seeing that truth ahead of the rest of us.

I. *Some response to the 'Sixties by the Churches in the 'Seventies.*

1. *The Myth of Over-Involvement*

Ever since the establishment of the republic, with its disestablishment of religion, organized religion in America has been fated to experience a certain unease, ambiguity, and risk in its forays into social criticism and social change. Our political *society* has been structured to implement a certain "hermeneutic of suspicion" *vis à vis* religion. Yet it has also been structured to give religion a vast freedom to pursue its own organized way in the land. Added to the structural reasons for this separation of religion from the rest of society was the liberal individualism of the Enlightenment, feeding and fed by the individualism of revivalist Protestantism and the individualism of capitalist liberal economic theory. It is a long, complicated story told best in the church history books; but it is all background for one of the peculiar counter-protests of white American church people in the early 1970's: the protest that the "church is dying from too much social action." Dying from too much social action? It was like the old story of the Mexican who died at the age of 104 from smoking too much! Accompanied by threats of withdrawal of financial support, such a protest had in it the character of a self-confirming prophecy. Further, so seldom coupled with cool analysis of data, it had the character of myth. In research which I helped to conduct in North Carolina in 1972, hardly more than 25% of the population at large was active in politics in any definition of that term. No more than 25% of church

people, either. And, as for the proportion of church members who marched with Martin Luther King, contributed to the NAACP or wrote letters to Congress in 1965-65—the numbers were a small minority indeed, even of the so-called liberal churches of many a northern city. That only a minority of church people should be so involved is no surprise to the student of American history. Always movements for social change have begun in a minority, in a voluntary association, in new coalitions of citizens who draw apart from their respective established institutions to convert those institutions and the society to a new solution to an old problem. The same was true of the Civil Rights Movement in relation to irregularly activist black churches. Say all of that, however, and one must still take account of the power of the myth of over-involvement in the life of American churches in the 1980's, especially on the levels of national and international boards and agencies. Was ever \$10,000 so influentially spent as the \$10,000 which one United Presbyterian agency managed to funnel to protecting the civil rights of Angela Davis? Or the few American dollars that may have trickled through the World Council of Churches to liberation movements in Zimbabwe? Was ever so much political mileage derived from so little money associated so indirectly with national church budgets? The data speaks clearly to the point: *A majority of members of the white churches of the land have few deep thoughts or habitual concern for the critical mode of relation between religion and society.*

2. *The retreat from politics to individualism.*

In 1970 occurred one of the surprises of my career as a minister. Last to get caught up in massive student protest against the Vietnam war, the students of North Carolina State University finally were struck with terror at the Cambodia invasion and the Kent State killings. Politics arrived on campus; even the world of technical education stopped to listen. It was, I thought, a sure birth of interest in politics, long overdue for the engineering students whom I knew. Then came the fall of 1970 and Congressional elections. Were students ready to campaign for causes related to justice at home and abroad? No, they were not ready. The world of national and international politics had opened its hungry mouth enough to frighten some, to subdue many, and to turn off most.

We shall never know how much the so-called "evangelical revival" of the 'seventies owes to an individualism as old as DeTocqueville's America and older. A classic response of many Americans to social crisis is retreat to their own personhood. There they heap blame on themselves for their troubles. They look around for bootstraps by which to lift themselves out of the troubles. Much of that interior response to trouble was evident among many white Americans ground down by the Depression of the '30's.¹ A similar response was evoked among some of their

¹ See Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pocket Books, 1970).

descendents in the 1970's. The churches surely had their role in the shaping of that response. The Gallup Poll of "unchurched Americans" in 1979 discovered something interesting about both the "churched" and the "unchurched": "You can be a Christian believer without belonging to a church," they say cheerfully. "I can think these things out for myself without help from the church," they say even when they belong to the church. "Believing without belonging" is one summation of the poll's conclusions about the majority of Americans and their churches.²

Some changes are blowing in the winds of evangelical Christians here, as the non-political '70's give way to the newly political 'eighties in their ranks. At last, one might think hopefully, the evangelical theme in American church affairs is joining up again with a cry for social change, as it did, for example, among some of its adherents, in the Abolition Movement of the 1840's and 1850's. But no, the campaign to elect evangelical Christians to public office and politically to discipline them once elected has little ethical and political *resonance* with Abolitionism. And one reason has to be: the under-representation of one wing of the evangelical movement among American churches, namely, the *black* evangelical churches.

3. *The residue of suspicion between white and black churches around the issues of social change in light of the Gospel.*

The black churches of America have their own wrestle with the temptation of evangelical individualism. As a black colleague of mine (a church executive) said to me recently: "The great problem in black churches is the consumption of energy over questions of internal leadership. We get all wrapped up in ourselves. We have little left over for facing great social questions. The C.R.M. pulled us out of that for a while. It called us to something beyond denominationalism." He went on further to comment, however: "The younger, well educated, upcoming leaders in our churches will be impatient with all this in the '80's. They are going to voice, through the church, a demand for some fundamental changes in American society." And they will do so, he implied, by drawing on a range of black church tradition quite distinct from that of many white Americans.

That tradition, combining the personal and the social meaning of the Gospel, is the positive substratum in the suspicion that stalks black-white church relations in our time. Any Christian church movement is rightly suspect if it divorces the salvation of persons from the salvation of societies, and God may have raised up the Black churches of American to confront the white churches with just this suspicion. Insofar as they are justifiably accused of separating what God has joined — the personal and the social Gospel — the white churches have a narrow door by which to enter their own future: the door of the Black experience, which,

² "The Unchurched American," Princeton Religion Research Church Center and the Gallup Organization, Inc., 1978.

as its theologians wish to tell us, has a fundamental contribution to make to the illumination of the Christian experience as such. How might American Christians begin to appropriate, share and learn from that experience? To ask this question is to ask if the churches can read the past and anticipate a future through the eyes of Black Christians. It is to consider some particular agendas for all the churches of America in the nineteen-eighties and beyond.

III. *The Future Through Black Eyes: A Church Agenda for the 'Eighties*

1. *We must work our way, throughout the churches, towards new moral readings of American history.* That a moralist like myself should call for a moral reading of history would strike most members of a university history department as idiosyncratic at best, as presumptuous and intellectually dangerous at worst. Even inside the discipline of church history the methodological status of faith, value, axiologies of all shapes, stand in crisis, and a call to do "moral analysis" of all history raises problems for that discipline which some would rather load onto the social ethicists, who have a taste for strange combinations of data and categories anyway. By these methodological mumblings from my colleagues, however, I am unmoved. My counter to them—to the historians, the social scientists, and the philosophers—is that they have lunch more often with physical scientists, who live in growing perplexity these days over the intermixture of human constructs with the "objective" sources of human knowledge. Or, perhaps more directly, they should have more lunches with the Marxists, who now have a century of tradition in wrestling with the issue: Are we morally responsible for what we know? For what we try to find out? For where we look at the beginning of our trek towards knowledge? The answer to such questions from the founders of the Black Theology Movement, as largely written in every chapter of the recent Wilmore-Cone documentary history of that movement, is a very stubborn "yes." The introduction of *ethical* categories into *theological* substance, on the one hand, and into the reading of human history, on the other, may be the most important general innovation in Black Theology, as it combines with the sociology of knowledge to inform us that social position always influences intellectual position. How to keep some "objectivity" clean from the pre-judgments of morality, social position, and social interest remains a great methodological problem for all these disciplines. But "moral history" is no more problematic than "amoral history." To be clear about that is a great gain in honesty about the problem of being honest in things intellectual.

Concretely, this means that all of us should look at history, for a change, through the eyes of the people least visible in the history, that we bring to the search for historical documentation a sense of the *missing* documents. It means search for the traces of people who are not there in the record but who *were* there, however much difficulty they may have had in leaving traces of their presence. Feminists of course, are making parallel claims upon the history-writers. Together the Black and

feminist theologians both remind us that history always needs to be revised. This means welcoming an opportunity to read history emotionally and imaginatively through the eyes of Kunta Kinte and Chicken George, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. It means dwelling with curiosity on the mystery of how a church of Black people came into being under the pressures of slavery; by what interior strength the Black family survived slavery, the Black church found nourishment in the ghetto, and the lures of an other-worldly hope spilled over into hope for this world. To read history morally is to ask how some things came to be that should not have been; how other things came to be in spite of much that hindered their being, and what things have yet to be, whose right to be must be asserted.

It is a long intellectual lesson to learn. Truly to do so, we must begin anew to approach our reading of national and world history with the same openness that we say we bring to our reading of the Bible: "God has yet more light to break forth from his holy word." Yes, and more light to break forth from our understanding of our legacy from the pilgrims Pastor Robinson sent off from Plymouth with those words. Reading a book of mine that made allusion to those 1620 immigrants to New England, my colleague James Cone cautioned me not long ago: "Remember the slaves that had already arrived in Virginia in 1619." The country began with Black people, too. No one let them write the history of their survival for 250 years, but it is time their descendants wrote it.

To take this route towards a re-reading of our nation's history will be to court two real dangers. *We must be moral, in our search for our history, without being guilt-ridden and we must see history through the eyes of the oppressed without being blind to the virtues of the society that oppressed them.* I come from a part of the United States whose cultural leaders have been history-minded. Not by coincidence did a Mississippian, William Faulkner, say, "The past is not dead; it isn't even past." Southerners, like the oppressed, remember history, partly because the results of history still *hurt*. In the depths of the social crisis of the '60's in Mississippi, Governor Ross Barnett turned savagely to his fellow white southerners on the side of the Civil Rights marchers with the accusation: "These people who want to change southern traditions are burglars in our midst. They are stealing our grandfathers' inheritance." It is difficult to repent of the sins that your grandfathers committed. If you love and revere them at all, you cannot disagree with them with peace of mind. And if you feel *guilty* for such disagreement, you have assumed a burden from the past which the God of history—notably the God of Ezekiel's grape-eaters—does not mean for any generation to assume. In the final stages of our research on the relation of the next generation of "millhands and preachers" in Gastonia, I had a casual conversation with a young woman who had grown up in Gastonia in the years following the great textile strike of 1929. Liston Pope's book centered on that strike, a traumatic social experience in Gastonian memory even to this day. Unwittingly this young woman vouched for the trauma when she commented to me, "I have almost worked up the courage to read the Liston

Pope book."³ It does take courage to *look at* some ranges of historical data. Lingering derived guilt will not serve the cause of intellectual objectivity here. Only a certain subjective freedom will serve it. That subjective freedom is best received, to my mind, by the social-historical power of Christian belief in the forgiveness of sins.

This freedom must embrace the freedom to say a good word for the good in American history. As one travels the earth, one encounters in the cultures of human society a range of things to admire, but one comes back home aware that the range includes the virtues of one's own country. No church historian, theologian or ethicist will serve the American church or the American people well if he or she systematically ignores the possibility that there is something good, as well as something evil, hidden or revealed in American history. These days the capacity of Americans to affirm this good is subject to great threat and temptation. What *is* the part of our nation that, on grounds of Christian faith and ethics, should be applauded? Not to answer this question in the context of asking the opposite question will be poor Christian *teaching* of the American church and the American people. Sociologists like Robert Bellah have set an exceptionally fine example to all us theologians here, but as eloquent an example may be implicit in the determination of many Black people in America to settle down and *live* in this country. That so many should be so willing to "keep on keeping on" in this, so long racist society constitutes an enormous compliment and hope for that society. Here is one clue to the virtue in the society, and a clue so identified on grounds of ethics tutored by Christian faith. There is an Egyptian deliverance to be hoped for while still living in Egypt; the promised land lies ready, underneath one's own feet!

2. *We must preach and teach the faith in the context of a wider range of "ordinary" experiences than is customary in most white churches of America.* In his description of his indebtedness to the early influence of the Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church in Bearden, Arkansas, James Cone says of the preaching that took place in that church:

"the truth of the story was dependent upon whether the people received the extra strength to go one more mile in their struggle to survive and whether they received the courage to strive one more time to right the wrongs in this world."⁴

Theresa Hoover made much the same point about the role of the black church in building and maintaining the dignity of black women in the black ghettos of northern cities. She quotes the distinguished American actress Cicely Tyson's account of her own girlhood in the 1940's in New York City:

"We were in church Sunday morning to Saturday night. It was our whole life, our social life, our religious training, everything . . . I sang in the choir and played the

³ Cf. John R. Earle, Dean D. Knudsen, and Donald W. Shriver, Jr. *Spindles and Spires: A Re-Study of Religion and Social Change in Gastonia* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), especially chapter 7, pp. 308-312.

⁴ James Cone, *The God of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 50.

piano and organ. Sometimes when my mother worked late at night, Nana would take my sister, my brother and me to the Baptist Church. It was that kind of thing that saved us. Church became a shelter for us. A lot of kids growing up with us are not here today because of drugs or alcohol, or, they died some violent death. They weren't necessarily bad kids."⁶

One might call that a historical-contextual-pragmatic theory of the church's mission. Or perhaps the New Testament phrase, as always, is best: "doing the truth." If that is the best way to talk about the Gospel truth, perhaps the American Black church remains the best American example of regular, faithful interchange between the truths of ordinary experience and the truth that delivers us from the tyranny of the ordinary. Many white Christians have yet to approach this level of interchange. For them, the church is other - worldly, not in the heavenly sense, but simply in its social-psychological isolation from meaningful reference to the life of the world in the midst of the cultivation of the spirit. I know, for example, how hungry American church congregations were for some spiritual illumination of the Kennedy assassination in November 1963; how similarly hungry some white and all black congregations were for such illumination of the Martin Luther King assassination; how hungry they were for some theologically consistent interpretation of Watergate; and how hungry they must be now for some such interpretation of this nation's current decline in power, prestige and peacefulness vis à vis the community of nations. *It is the black church tradition in this country that comes closest to providing an example of the freedom of the Gospel to illuminate all these things.* No quarrel *there* with the preacher's attempt to call a president, or a governor or a mayor to account for a recent decision. No problem *there* with the Barthian method of preaching with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. How could one otherwise preach about the God and Father of Jesus, who inhabited a specific human history with us, in order to announce the co-habitation of the Spirit with every nook and cranny of human time and space? All else is docetism! The black churches of America may have the most convincing available traditions for the abolition of docetism from the heart of American churches.

The relation of the new white evangelical *social* gospel to all this, of course, remains a great problem, especially for any Christian who, like myself, teaches and administers at a place in the church once graced by the presence of a Reinhold Niebuhr and a John Bennett. Will anything good come out of the evangelical crowd that descended upon Washington on April 29, '80? *Something* good might, but only in combination with people not highly visible in that crowd or its lobbyists. I refer to the old evangelical social gospelers—the black church. And this implies a third agendum:

3. *The churches must work together on new patterns of racially com-*

⁶ Quoted in Teresa Hoover, "Black Women and the Churches: Triple Jeopardy," in Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), pp. 379-80.

prehensive partnership. Black theologians, black church leaders, black Christians generally over the past ten or fifteen years, have demonstrated their determination to be heard, on their own terms, by white Christians or not to be in speaking distance of them. We are closer to real church unity on the basis of this new candor than we ever could be so long as one party to conversation is holding back on deeply felt truth. We are also closer to real unity in the church because we have available to us, by spoken and written word, the normative claims of the Black American Experience upon American society and its churches. For the first time in the history of American race relations, there is now a fair chance that people of different histories, different theologies and different social perspectives might actually be capable of communicating those differences to each other in a new expression of the "one body with many members." Best of all, this very condition holds out some promise of defining and *experiencing* the church in American society in some degree of liberation from the insulating shackles of racial and class structures. The agony of the American church, especially the American Protestant church, has long been here. It will be here for the lifetimes of most of us. Freedom of religious organization in America has meant the freedom religiously to organize with people of your own race, class, neighborhood, ideology, nationality or education. Political freedom, added to individualistic religious inclination, has thus been a formula for social-religious alienation among American citizens. One may then ask skeptically: Who in America seeks in the church to experience anything *socially comprehensive*? But if some black theologians have their way, the black church will remain or will become just such a place of seeking. Protesting against the forces in the black community that also make for a socially insulated black experience, James Cone makes this notable plea:

" . . . if Black religion is identical with the *only* possible interpretation of the Bible for Black people, then what is the universality implied in the particularity of Black religion? Without this universalism, I do not see how we can make any Christian or human claims about Black religion . . . To be Christian and human means developing a perspective on life that includes all peoples."⁶

Cone is cautioning his own Black church against the dangers of provincialism in definition of the church, the Gospel, and humanity. That is quite different from white theologians voicing the same caution to the Black church. Let a similar caution sound loud and clear in the pulpits of white churches long before it gets recommended from those pulpits to the Black church!

Where all divisions of the church are struggling against the tides of history to "develop a perspective on life that includes all people," there, I suspect, the Holy Spirit camps in our midst. But if we are so to struggle, in our separateness, we must have occasions of relatedness. We must have occasions on every level of the human global community. What are

⁶ James Cone, "Epilogue: An Interpretation of the Debate Among Black Theologians," in Wilmore-Cone, p. 619.

the structures by which the parts of the church in our time can acquire ready, even if painful, access to the whole church? What are the pathways down which we must walk together in order to experience the ecumenical qualification of the congregational? The national qualification of the local? The global qualification of the national? The unemployed's qualification of the employed?

The powerless qualification of the powerful? *The island-mind of our upbringing must yield to the continental human that God means to bring to birth.* And this is the best possible moral argument for a *connectional* church theory, and the best possible argument for the ecumenical movement.

Here as a Presbyterian I gladly join Methodists in their section of the church parking lot, but my experience of both middle class American denomination sounds a warning: In our search for new structures of communication and partnership, we must confess that the *weakness* of American denominations as "ecumenical educators" may lie precisely in their financial, organization and political *strength*. Strong people grow easily into the illusion that they do not need weak people in order to be human. The same applies to strong nations and strong churches. The travail of Iranian-American relations in our time may be at just this point: Consider the impatience of Americans over their need of those 30,000,000 Iranians, if not to ship us oil, at least to keep us from World War III. Communities of the strong *need* communities of the weak. The churches of the oppressed in America still provide our best access to an understanding of the oppressed. They may be our best hope of living ecumenically in the world.

Is there not a sort of ecumenical spirit in the willingness of Black people in Harlem to keep treating people in Morningside Heights as their neighbors? And is there not an ecumenical resource in the simple sociological fact that through the churches the name of Jesus is confessed in virtually every neighborhood of America? The name of Jesus is a little door through the looking-glass of race and class discrimination in America. With the name of Jesus on your lips, there are lots of social barriers you might cross in America. The meaning of the ecumenical movement is here: the hope for ecumenical *humanity*. Can the power of big church structures be put to the service of real, equalitarian, unpatronizing community between the strong and the weak of our society? The nature of Jesus' church and his mission among us demand the search for such bendings of power.

4. *We all have our part to play in this nation's search for a new understanding of its pluralistic unity.* In a recent Bulletin of the Martin Luther King Fellows, James H. Hargett writes on "Black Church Ministry in a World-Inclusive U.S.A., 2000 A.D."⁷ It is an essay with shrewd, prophetic, hopeful perspective on what it may mean to be Black, Christian, and located in the late 20th century American urban ghetto. The

⁷ In *The Bulletin of the Martin Luther King Fellows, Inc.*, Spring, 1980, pp. 1-4, 7.

voting rights act was not the only historical legislation of 1965, Hargett reminds us. There was also the National Origin Immigration Quota and Refugee Act, which, breaking the racist immigration policies of the 20's, opened the doors of this country to a cross-section of the world. The result, in a mere 15 years, says Hargett, is that especially in the cities of America, "Black is a shrinking though still highly visible entity in the old melting pot that has become a pluralistic stew. . . . By the year 2000, Black culture will be only one of many cultures and clearly less significant numerically than the Hispanic in a vast majority of cities." The results are already threatening the interests of some black people in those cities. "Asians . . . seem to arrive here with the entrepreneurial skills to get ahead regardless of political power or land ownership. . . . Korean and Mexican gas stations and groceries in Los Angeles are already showing (this) strong tendency, to say nothing of the Cuban dominance of retail outlets in Miami. Even the underworld in the ghetto has been taken over, and the dope traffic brought under the control of non-White, non-Black operators in Black communities in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. With this acceptance of Third World overlords, Black confidence in Blacks will take a turn for the worst, unless something significant is done to reverse the trend."⁸

Something significant is being done by the Black *churches* of these cities. As Hargett implies, no other ghetto organization is committed simultaneously to the welfare of one ethnic group and the welfare of all. For these newest arrivals to the ghetto, some Black Christians must now see themselves as *hosts*, as those who must communicate to these new immigrants some version of the word, "Welcome to America!" "One Black church in Los Angeles has already established classes in Spanish and ordered its large staff to take them." The hospitality-tradition in the Black church must now be stretched to include all sorts and conditions of human beings, as Black Christians lift their "own proud ghetto lamp of welcome to others oppressed."⁹

This is a hard challenge to lay on the spirit and the resources of a movement scarcely able to keep its ministry to the body and soul of its own people. But here it is—an example of universal perspective upon an emerging national community in the poorest, most overburdened segment of that nation. If this is not a miracle of the Spirit, then we must say that the age of miracles is truly over.

The time is overdue for the churches of white European ancestry to join their Black brothers and sisters in a commitment like this. It is not an easy commitment, and the road to fulfilling it will be full of stones and bridges-to-be-built. I have tried in a recent article in the *Christian Century* to state some rules of this road for American Christians who want to take their share of suffering in the construction of a truly pluralistic *national* society. The précis of the rules is this: (1) We must, like

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

good scientists, study the details of strange world cultures until we no longer subject them to our ignorance or our ill-informed prejudices. (In this we shall need the help of history and social science.) (2) We must, like good neighbors, cultivate the art of empathy so that we feel a little of what the stranger feels, even if we cannot make those feelings really our own. (In this we shall need personal acquaintance with our strange neighbors, and good listening ears.) Finally, (3) we shall have to let our ideas of right and wrong be subject to the criticism of the foreigner and, in the meantime, while we learn, if foreigners inflict on us what we believe to be sin, we shall have to forgive them. (In this we shall need the strength of one who forgave us, because we also know not what we do.)¹⁰

If we build such bridges we shall be participating in the building of a new country, not a duplicate of old America. It will be a country of certain characteristics

- a country that values the self-direction of individuals a little less if that is the price of valuing the integrity of cultural communities more.
- a country that abandons the melting pot image of itself as it rewrites history in its schools, teaches foreign language there, and tests its students on their mutually acceptable knowledge of each other, all out of respect for the labor that builds a culture over millennia and that must not be destroyed in a generation.
- a country that also abandons the dream of unlimited economic growth as the solution to the imbalances of the rich and the poor, that shapes its tax policies around a new dream of "liberty and justice for all" wherein the price of liberty and justice gets paid by all and distributed to all.
- a country whose leaders test their claims upon the world community by the reality of liberty and justice inside this national community, who are not pretentious about national achievement because history and current fact do not justify such pretense, and who display justice partly in their vision of what it still demands of the nation.

Last year at Union Seminary we convened a small group of black and Hispanic pentecostal leaders to talk to us and to each other about their experience in the faith and in the church. Said one young man: "I have been a Christian for only two years. Before that I had only prejudice against black people. Back then I wouldn't worship with them the way I do now." The remark not only resonated in my ear with the historical Christian experience of Pentecost; it also mounted to the rafters as a hopeful prayer for the American church of the future. What secret does the Christian movement have to contribute to the national culture of the future in these scarcely United States of America? One hesitates to predict. But we should know enough about the origins of our movement to know that we might have some knowledge, some experience, for the explication of a famous line from a great American poet:

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it *down*."¹¹

We know a lot about what it takes to *build* walls. That is no secret.

¹⁰ Donald W. Shriver, Jr., "The Pain and Promise of Pluralism," *The Christian Century* Vol. XCVII, No. 11, (March 26, 1980), pp. 345-350.

¹¹ Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), p. 34.

What does it take to tear them down? Deep in the history of Israel, the church, and especially the Black Church of America, there are answers to that question. How was a community built between scattered slaves in Egypt? How did a community of liberation survive in the American Egypt of Black slaves? How did "one Lord and one baptism" manage to bind together Black and White Christians on this continent when the very language of baptism was used by some to cover over the deep injustice of other bonds? How did anyone born in Bearden, Arkansas, grow to write the sentence, "To be Christian and human means developing a perspective on life that includes all people"? The answers, for American Christians Black and White, are not remote. They are very near in our history, upon our lips and in the heart of our memories—"ready to be kept."¹²

¹² Deuteronomy 30:14, N.E.B.