

Racism and the Church A Dissenting Opinion

Parts 2 and 3 of *Racism and the Church* contain powerful and eloquent reminders that God is no respecter of persons and that the Church in her proclamation and practice must always make that clear. No one should think that this minority report is meant to deny these biblical truths. Part 1, however, is confusing, misleading, and sometimes wrong. Moreover, by adopting a sociological analysis of contemporary society, the majority of the CTCR has stepped outside of its own area of expertise and into one where it does not really belong.

1. First of all, the document is confusing because of its failure to give a clear definition of racism. Instead of a *theological* definition of racism, e.g., *pride* in one's group (family, nation, race, etc.), on the basis of which one demeans those who belong to other groups, the document insists that racism is an ideology regarding the genetic transmission of socially relevant qualities or abilities (pp. 9, 18). Obviously, this definition is too narrow. The document itself notes that the heyday of this theory was the 19th century (p. 19), admits that it "is now publicly spurned" (p. 18), and quotes *no* contemporary proponent of it. Therefore, the document adds to its first definition a second one when it states that "racist ideology also makes judgments about people's worth on the basis of their inclusion in nonbiological ... groupings," including religious sects and cultural groups (p. 9.)¹ Either definition presents problems and both together create confusion.

Neither definition applies necessarily to the kind of behavior that the document clearly means to indict, since people who cast aspersions upon other races or biological groups need not be motivated by some biological theory—they may not know any biological theory. If someone characterizes a certain group as "lazy" or "greedy," he may think that these characteristics arise from environmental factors rather than heredity. Does he therefore escape the charge of "racism"? The document suggests yes.

Moreover, this definition seems to preclude reasonable research into the relationship of heredity to personality, intelligence, and other "socially relevant qualities or abilities." Is the document suggesting that such research is always out of place or only if it attempts to relate such characteristics to race and ethnicity? If the latter, why? If it is permissible to investigate such relationships in individuals, why is it wrong to do so in groups?

Perhaps the CTCR majority would answer that their concern is not with the recognition of

differences between groups but with using those differences to make judgments regarding a "people's *social worth* and their value as human beings [emphasis mine]." Clearly, Part 2 shows that it is unchristian to suggest that any human being is inferior to another as a creature of God, as one for whom Christ died, or as an object of Christian love. Nonetheless, it is also true that ethnic groups *do* exhibit characteristics that are "socially relevant." After all, Paul, quoting Epimenides, advised Titus, "Even as one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true" (Titus 1:12-13). Thomas Sowell, *Ethnic America* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), has done a very fine job of demonstrating a remarkable correlation between the various ethnic groups that have come to America and "socially relevant qualities or abilities." But by its definition, the CTCR seems to be saying that Sowell *and Paul* are racists. This cannot be correct.

Expressed more theoretically, the argumentation of the CTCR document precludes making generalizations of any kind concerning any social group. This itself cannot be correct, as illustrated in a recent article in *USA Today*. A piece entitled "Pair Helps Firms Work on Diversity," (Monday, October 11, 1993, 4B) details the work of African-Americans Floyd and Jacqueline Dickens, authors of *The Black Manager: Making It in the Corporate World*, who "make a living by telling U.S. corporations how to manage cultural diversity." The article concludes with the following paragraphs:

The Dickenses say it's foolish to pretend that people of different ethnic backgrounds perceive and react to the world the same way. The couple uses a hypothetical corporate project to illustrate different approaches of African-American, white and Asian-American employees. According to the Dickenses:

—African-Americans tend to want a general description of the project and investigate several options for finishing it.

—Whites tend to want a precise description of the steps to bring the project to fruition.

—Asian-Americans tend to want a detailed description of the finished project, then want the project to perfectly match that description.

Asked if that approach is stereotypical, Jacqueline Dickens says she and her husband rely on generalizations. "Stereotypes [sic] are fixed images without

variation,” she says. “Generalizations are neutral, contain no value judgments and have to do with what you observe.”²

The CTCR document would have to label the Dickens approach as “racist.”

2. Even more problematic than the lack of clarity in the definition of racism is the insistence of the CTCR majority on including “culture” in its discussion of racism. Race involves physiology, but culture involves “systems of symbols, ideas, beliefs, ... values” and “distinctive forms of behaviour (... groupings, rituals, ...)” (footnote 16, p. 11). Clearly, “culture” is not something about which Christianity can be neutral, as the document itself admits (p. 54; footnote 17, p. 12). Nonetheless, the document is misleading regarding culture in a couple of respects.

First of all, in spite of its indictment of American culture (the “pervasiveness [of racism] in our time,” p. 17), the document affirms the culture of other groups to such an extent that it insists that “[the church] must ‘translate’ the Gospel into the idiom of that community [into which it is introducing the Gospel]” and specifies by way of example “using its language, art, and music” (p. 55). But art and music of a culture almost always arise and are employed in the context of religious beliefs and attitudes, and it is incorrect to assume that they can always be sanctified for Christian use. Even language can pose serious problems for the proclamation of the Gospel as the “Chinese term for God” controversy demonstrates.³ Frequently in Paul’s ministry, what people ate created real, theological problems (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8)! Moreover, the Bible passage cited in the document (1 Cor. 9:22) to support “indigenization” of the Gospel refers to Paul’s behavior and not to any attempt on his part to articulate the Gospel “in the cultural forms” of another community.

What the document never really addresses is the question of the relationship of Christianity to culture. If, as the document asserts, culture is “a blueprint within the mind by which people perceive the world. ... a group of assumptions about the world and according to which one organizes the world, defines, values, manipulates, and responds to that world,” then Christianity *must* have an enormous impact upon culture, and Christians cannot be cultural relativists. Since culture is laden with beliefs and values, the CTCR majority is only confusing the church by equating distinctions based on culture with those based on race. Our beliefs and our behavior, our customs and our rituals, should flow from our Christian faith. Too easy an accommodation of pagan culture by the church can only lead to syncretism.

In this connection, the document without a single piece of evidence cites the early efforts of the Synodical Conference to work with African Americans as an example of “cultural racism” (footnote 84, p. 45), because the synodical fathers attempted “not only to impart a theology, but to impose a particular cultural expression of Christianity on black converts as though the Synod possessed the only acceptable way of expressing the faith of Jesus.” It is certainly true that in the 19th century the pastors of the Missouri Synod did not accept the prevailing American Protestant theologies, liturgies, etc., of the South *or* North, black *or* white as adequate, but they would have contended that their reasons for rejecting them were biblical and confessional. It is unclear why the committee thinks they were contending for “culture” rather than God’s truth.

3. Besides its definition of racism and its treatment of culture, *Racism and the Church* is also deficient on account of its operating assumption that only an egalitarian social system, in which there are no political, social, or economic distinctions based on birth, is Christian. Thus, for example, on page 26, the document positively describes someone who “genuinely professes egalitarianism or equal rights for all” and on page 31 in its discussion of integration affirms the desirability of “structural participation so there is equity with respect to ‘input’ (institutional participation and decision-making) and ‘outcome,’ that is, all those who participate in a given institution receive equivalent goods, services, and benefits.”

Most explicitly on page 14, the draft indicts a social system with “(1) ‘patterned dominance’; (2) a stratification system with a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority; (3) ‘categorical status,’ that is, individuals have an ascribed status regardless of what they do in life ...; and (4) unequal distribution of power.”

But these four points are characteristic of most traditional (pre-modern, pre-Industrial Revolution) societies, including that of Europe all during the time that Christianity in its variety of forms was the established religion: birth determined position. Likewise, in the Roman Empire of early Christianity, rights and privileges were accorded Romans, including St. Paul, that were not available to others. And yet neither Christ nor the apostles urged changing the social/political system. In fact, Jesus commanded obedience to Caesar and Paul ordered Onesimus home to Philemon. It is simply going beyond the biblical evidence to maintain that an egalitarian and social system, which minimizes the significance of birth, is more Christian than one that makes social distinctions based on birth.⁴

Nor can the majority answer that since God is no respecter of persons, an egalitarian social system like our own is the only Christian one. God's egalitarianism is absolute, but ours is only nominal, since what really distinguishes modern societies from traditional is not the absence of social differences but their basis, for instead of honoring birth alone, our society distributes power and ascribes status according to patterns and norms that permit a great deal more social mobility. We use things like wealth, talent, education, and personal connections as well as birth. But is this social structure any more Christian than a traditional one? The Scriptures have a great deal to say about relationships within a social system but very little about the organization of that system and the Christian Gospel does not call for the elimination of traditional and hierarchical societies in which birth plays a much larger role than in our own.

Perhaps this assumption regarding the Christian character of an egalitarian society accounts for a major problem in the historical section, viz., the document's facile identification of slavery with racism. If racism is a belief system regarding the inferiority of certain races, the document should show that slave owners held this ideology, but it does not. First of all, as the document itself acknowledges, slavery in the early 18th century (e.g., Boltzius and Berkenmeyer, pp. 20-21) preceded the racist defenses of it that developed in the 19th when that institution was much more generally under attack. European society of this earlier period was a traditional one, in which the social hierarchy was considered normal, and the English colonies followed suit.

Significantly, none of the evidence from Lutheran sources cited in defense of slavery from before the Civil War resorts to *racist* ideology. Thus, the quotation from the South Carolina Synod (p. 22) in defense of slavery in 1835 does not refer at all to inherent differences between the races but rather to constitutional rights and biblical precepts regarding slavery. C.F.W. Walther made the same kind of arguments.⁵ What then is the point of this material? That is not clear unless the CTCR majority believes that structural, social inequality is inherently racist. Unfortunately, the biblical evidence does not sustain this position.

In conclusion, therefore, we have decided to vote against *Racism and the Church*. Although we are in agreement with the biblical principles enunciated in the document as well as with a number of the practical suggestions for implementing these principles in the church, we are also convinced that the biblical evidence does not support the sociological analysis, especially in Part 1. Problems in definition, especially the inclusion of culture, and unwarranted assumptions about social organization demonstrate the wisdom of the CTCR's usual practice of sticking to theology. Unfortunately, that was not the case in this document.

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- 1 On page 12, however, the document states that “racist” thinking often diminishes or even rejects altogether the role of culture in defining the differences between human groups.” This is hardly consistent with a definition of racism that includes *making* judgments about people on the basis of “cultural” groups.
 - 2 While one may discuss the specific definitions of the terms “stereotype” and “generalization,” the point made by Jacqueline Dickens is still clear. It should be noted that, while footnote 26 in the CTCR document does attempt to address the point made here, doing so in terms of the distinction between “stereotype” and “prejudice” (with “stereotype” being used here to mean what “generalization” does in the discussion above), such a discussion and distinction does not in any way inform the argumentation of the document. Indeed, the second-last sentence of footnote 26 rejects any possibility of neutral generalization, and the majority of the Commission voted to allow the two be equated in the body of the text (p. 16).
 - 3 Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1964), pp. 283-84 and Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), pp. 262-63. For specifically Lutheran involvement in this controversy, see George Lillegard, *A History of the Term Question Controversy in Our China Mission and the Chief Documents in the Case* (privately printed, 1930).
 - 4 In this connection, it is interesting to note that social distinctions based upon birth may not be as arbitrary as they would seem. Walter Toman, *Family Constellation: Its Effect on Personality and Social Behavior* (New York: Springer Publishing, 1969) shows that birth order is extremely significant in the development of a child in almost all respects, and certain traits can be associated with firstborns, for example, which are not generally associated with middle children or the “babies” of a family.
 - 5 August R. Suelflow, “Walther the American” in Arthur H. Drevlow, C.F.W. Walther: *The American Luther* (Mankato, MN: Walther Press, 1987), pp. 24-25.