

Race in Evangelical America

BY JOY J. MOORE

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Now that an African American president of the United States is no longer merely a dream of Hollywood casting, some may question the need for a continued discussion on race. But the magazine articles describing racist children and the statistics about the whitening of college graduation classes suggest that we are far from being a post-racial culture. Despite advances, we still live in a society shaped by three hundred years of racial delineation. Though racial reconciliation is favored by most, it is in reality practiced by few.

Even the best efforts among evangelical Christians have not overcome racial segregation during Sunday morning worship. In the major Christian institutions the presence of persons of color in leadership often calls for a description of “the first.” The narratives and experiences of these groundbreaking few call the Church to continued attentiveness to the particular manifestations of the sin of racism.

InterVarsity Press has published several books that examine, often through personal narratives, the complex issues of social injustice, racialized churches, and evangelical Christian practices of racial reconciliation. In *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008, 207 pp., \$16.00) Edward Gilbreath provocatively exposes the inherent racism that lingers within the American evangelical church. In *Living in Color: Embracing God's Passion for Ethnic Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004, 217 pp., \$18.00) Randy Woodley, a Keetoowah Cherokee, chronicles from a Native American perspective the

effects of the quest for identity in a racialized culture. Seeking solutions to social injustices in general, *Crazy Enough to Care: Changing Your World through Compassion, Justice and Racial Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009, 150 pp., \$16.00) by Alvin C. Bibbs, Sr., with Marie Guthrie and Kathy Buscaglis, offers a twelve-session study guide for small groups to convert passive Christians into radically compassionate people. Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson's approach in *The Heart of Racial Justice: How Soul Change Leads to Social Change* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009, 206 pp., \$15.00) is to place problems in a larger theological frame and construe the work of racial reconciliation as the ecclesial demonstration of spiritual transformation.



In *Reconciliation Blues*, Edward Gilbreath provides a thought-provoking depiction of practices of discrimination and intolerance among evangelical Christians, exposing the indifference, disrespect, or neglect often experienced by persons of color in an Anglo context. Writing candidly of the difficulty of finding a spiritual home in the predominantly white evangelical church and then living out his vocation as a journalist for the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, Gilbreath details his own survival strategy to preserve his racial identity while working and worshiping in a 'white world.' While recognizing the gain in race relations that his profile alone signals, the author nonetheless chronicles the often painful experience of being the minority in a majority context. For Gilbreath, the racial division evident in the evangelical church mirrors that found in society, rather than demonstrating a glimpse of God's reconciled community.

The book rehearses the key events and leaders in the racial reconciliation movement—from Tom Skinner to John Perkins—in order to challenge readers to take action. Gilbreath's personal accounts of a black man worshiping in a largely white church give validity to his pronouncement that "it's no longer slavery, Jim Crow or organized discrimination that we're up against in our churches, ministries and society; it's an institutionalized racialization of religion that blinds us to the systemic issues of justice and reconciliation, even as it purports to bring us together" (p. 174). Clearly, for Gilbreath, the seeming collective progress of the reconciliation movement has not been without significant individual setbacks. Nevertheless, he maintains that "the church is the one institution that's best equipped to overcome racial divide" with God's justice and grace (p. 21).

While Gilbreath's call for faithfulness may seem modest, it indicts an evangelical movement that believes it can achieve the reign of God by the human efforts of tokenism, publicity stunts, and policy revisions, but has nevertheless failed to move beyond gestures of tolerance toward genuine neighborly hospitality. Sorting through the issues of prejudice versus racism,

integration versus assimilation, and multicultural versus multicolored solutions, Gilbreath demonstrates the pervasive oppression of America's institutional racism not only outside congregations but also within them. His admonishment of those who do nothing toward racial reconciliation while claiming not to be racist might be read by some as gentle. But he understands that his audience would not give a hearing to simple prescriptions. *Reconciliation Blues* may depend too much on the narration of personal experience rather than directly addressing new efforts toward racial reconciliation, but the narratives frequently have the force to awaken readers to their own provincialism and highlight the problems that exist both without and within the Church.



Randy Woodley's *Living in Color* tackles the dangers of desiring sameness and celebrates the diversity of God's creation. Acknowledging the human desire for stability and historical continuity, Woodley counters these human tendencies with biblical and theological descriptions that explain how sin "tries to exclude or denigrate the identity of others not like us; to limit or thwart potential relationships; and to impede communication by making our differences seem intolerable" (p. 144). From here Woodley aims to help the reader understand diversity and the effects of opposition to it, as well as God's intended restoration through diversity.

Woodley is familiar with the injustices committed against Native Americans, intimately knows Native American customs, and possesses a biblically literate theology. Using these resources, he shows how God can be encountered in many ways and warns against construing current dominant Western cultural practices as definitive of all Christian practices. He explores avenues from his own heritage and experience through which God may be encountered. His discussion of the need to heal the land and his recognition of its defilement as sin illustrate the promise in Scripture that God will heal all creation—the people and the land.

Living in Color unpacks how we can build cross-cultural relationships, contextualize the gospel message, honor one another's particular contributions to the Church, and recognize the subtle racism practiced in contemporary Christian communities. Woodley narrates stories that awaken the reader to the capacity of God's created diversity to expand experience. By challenging current practices, Woodley draws us toward a theologically rendered expectation that the people of God should reflect God's intended dynamic, multi-ethnic, multiracial community, and that conformity to an Anglo culture on the part of persons of color is not Christian conversion. The presence of persons of color among evangelical Christians should be a witness to the world of the reign of God: anything less is a reflection of hypocrisy.



In their text designed for group study, *Crazy Enough to Care*, Alvin C. Bibbs, Sr., Marie Guthrie, and Kathy Buscaglis do not focus on racial issues alone. They explore broader issues of injustice, brokenness, and suffering in contemporary society. The twelve sessions presented in the book guide participants through discussions that challenge claims of faith that are not actively practicing justice, compassion, and racial reconciliation. A detailed leader's guide provides a one-hundred-minute lesson plan for each session.

Like *Reconciliation Blues*, the book points out the ease with which we all are prone to engage in insensitive and unjust behaviors, or more often, ignore them. Speaking to the fears that impede our willingness to acknowledge others as neighbors, the authors use biblical events and true-to-life stories of rejection and reconciliation in order to move us to compassion.

These authors regard compassion as the primary Christian virtue through which racial reconciliation can be achieved. The exercises provide useful tools to engage conversation and raise awareness within the group to the reality of injustice, brokenness, and suffering in contemporary society. More than a mere description, *Crazy Enough to Care* offers viable means to practice reconciliation in the everyday encounters of life.



Larger in theological scope is Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson's *The Heart of Racial Justice*. Here the struggle for justice and reconciliation in general, and the work of racial reconciliation in particular, is described as spiritual warfare. As the authors say, "soul change" leads to "social change."

The book's premise is that evil—displayed as racism, hatred, division, and injustice—is a spiritual problem that cannot be solved by relations skills, good intentions, or insightful social analyses. While not denying the need for personal and institutional efforts, the authors emphasize the spiritual dimension to bring about change. They call for the Church to respond to evil in the world, making manifest the presence of God by being reflections of God's goodness in the world. They challenge Christians, who often *speak* of spiritual things, to actions that overcome their neglect of poverty, injustice, racism, and hatred.

Building on the work of past generations, the authors call for a new paradigm by noting that the presence of God makes all things possible. They bring to mind the atrocities of the past whose horrors could not have been halted without divine power working in the transformed imagination of humanity. By considering the slave trade, the Holocaust, the near destruction of First Nations people in North America, and the marginalization of Palestinians in the Middle East, the authors call us to move beyond the limited

navel-gazing of self-protection, resentment, or woundedness. Even as they identify larger spiritual forces at work against us, the authors also remind us that this work of reconciliation is possible because it is grounded in the forgiveness and work of Christ.

With the importance of worship setting the stage for this work of reconciliation, Salter McNeil and Richardson lean on the experiences of events and seminars they have led or attended to suggest a way forward. Their proposals are not general suggestions, but explained experience. They find hope in Christians recognizing the healing power of God that allows humanity to be transformed personally.

Though these books happen to be written from evangelical perspectives, they will challenge Christians who do not identify with the evangelical movement, as well as all persons of color who have taken part in cross-cultural or multicultural opportunities. Raising awareness is the first move toward more productive practices of reconciliation, and the narratives found within—or those elicited by—these books provide a glimpse into the cross-racial experiences of evangelical Christians in their congregations, at work, and in personal relationships. Thus the people behind the statistics speak with their own voices about the personal costs of racial integration.

In whatever ways we identify ourselves racially or theologically, these narratives offer a severe indictment of where we are now as a diverse society, but they also reveal that God is up to something in the world, something to which Christian communities today must give witness as they seek unity in diversity.



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