

Ferguson (12-03-2014)

With what has happened in Ferguson, Missouri, I believe I need to address the question, “How should we, i.e. pastors of predominantly African-American churches, address this situation?”

Let me first say to those of you who are White in our congregation that we are glad to have and Whites have always been a part of this struggle. Although it is seldom acknowledged, Abraham Heschel (Jewish Rabbi and Scholar) marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. We would have achieved the level of freedom that we enjoy without Whites marching with us.

Pulitzer Prize winning author Isabelle Wilkerson, writing in “The Guardian” wrote, “Not terribly long ago in a country that many people misremember, if they knew it at all, a black person was killed in public every four days for often the most mundane of infractions, or rather accusation of infractions – for taking a hog, making boastful remarks, for stealing 75 cents. For the most banal of missteps, the penalty could be an hours-long spectacle of torture and lynching. No trial, no jury, no judge, no appeal. Now, well into a new century, as a family in Ferguson, Missouri, buries yet another American teenager killed at the hands of authorities, the rate of police killings of black Americans is nearly the same as the rate of lynchings in the early decades of the 20th century.

About twice a week, or every three or four days, an African-American has been killed by a white police officer in the seven years ending in 2012, according to studies of the latest data compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. That number is incomplete and likely an undercount, as only a fraction of local police jurisdictions even report such deaths – and those reported are the ones deemed somehow “justifiable”. That means that despite the attention given the deaths of teenagers Trayvon Martin (killed by neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman) and Jordan Davis (killed by a white man for playing his music too loud), their cases would **not** have been included in that already grim statistic – not only because they were not killed by police but because the state of Florida, for example, is **not** included in the limited data compiled by the FBI.

Even though white Americans outnumber black Americans fivefold, black people are three times more likely than white people to be killed when they encounter the police in the US, and black teenagers are far likelier to be killed by police than white teenagers.”

There have also been recent questionable shootings of youth in Cleveland and Akron.

I’m not indicting all White police officers or all police officers. We have some very fine police officers in our church, but not all police officers are trustworthy.

These statistics are shocking and appalling. They indicate that what is happening is more than a few unfortunate situations, but a pattern of bias and discrimination. What has been percolating in this country for years is coming to the surface.

As pastors of predominantly African-American churches, what responsibility do we have to address this pattern, especially in light of the so-called “wall of separation between church and state”?

First of all, it was Thomas Jefferson who coined the phrase “wall of separation between church and state.” This phrase is **not** a part of the Constitution of the United States and it was never meant to suggest a separation of **religion** and **politics**. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution provides that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ...” and Article VI specifies that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.”

“The separation of church and state is a separation of institutions. That is there is to be no connection of church and state. Churches are to receive no state support, patronage or privilege. At the same time, no religious institution is to be subject to state control. Any interference with the free exercise of religion is strictly forbidden. Churches are to be wholly voluntary, dependent solely upon persuasive powers to marshal support for themselves. In short, there is no separation of religion and politics—only a separation of the two institutions of government and church.”¹

“U.S. churches have always been politically active.”² Religious leaders have always been involved in public policy issues: from the American Revolution, to abolition, to the Civil War, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, to the Vietnam War. “The clergy have campaigned against dueling, lotteries, and bingo. They sought prohibition of liquor traffic and argued for voting rights for women and civil rights for blacks. At the turn of the century, they supported tough antitrust laws. In fact, there has rarely been a time when political issues have been absent from American pulpits....”³

Campaigning for candidates, allowing them to speak from our pulpits, and church contributions to a politician’s candidacy are activities that are much more questionable.

Furthermore, I don’t need to remind you that the Civil Rights Movement was led by ministers and gatherings were naturally held in churches.

¹ Martin H. Belsky and Josephy Bessler-Northcutt, *Law and Theology: Cases and Readings*, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2005, p. 310.

² Martin H. Belsky and Josephy Bessler-Northcutt, *Law and Theology: Cases and Readings*, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2005, p. 319.

³ Martin H. Belsky and Josephy Bessler-Northcutt, *Law and Theology: Cases and Readings*, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2005, p. 309-310.

Yet, the question is “How prophetic should we be?” Should we ignore issues like this, or include them in our sermon, or preach a sermon on them, or become involved in a political response, etc.?

One of the movements that impacted my early ministry was the Evangelical, Fundamentalistic movement of the 1970’s. During those days, Evangelicals saw politics as something that the churches and their leaders should stay out of.

However, after beginning to study cultural anthropology, I began to understand that everything that Jesus said and did was a political statement, because religion and politics were embedded in each other.

So, I had to reevaluate this entire area!

First of all, let me say that it is incumbent upon us to use our influence to speak out about issues of justice concerning people. Whether we choose to make a statement on a Sunday morning, or do a sermon on issues, or get personally involved in doing something about these issues in our communities, the Gospel of Jesus, the Christ, includes justice and love for all! Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere!”

I’m not talking about burning down our own neighborhoods or other violent responses, because I still believe in the nonviolent approach of Jesus and King. However, I believe that some redress is needed prophetically, politically, economically, or in some other manner. Burning down our own neighborhoods does not serve us well.

Furthermore, I believe we have failed modern young people, by not educating them concerning the dangers of this society. When my father took my brother and I to the Deep South, his words to us were, “When you get down South, you say ‘Yes sir’ and ‘No sir’... ‘you don’t look White folks in the eye,’ and you keep it moving, lest you find yourself swinging from a tree.” I didn’t understand exactly what was going on at 5 or 6 years of age, but I learned that if I wanted to survive—this was the way it was.

I’m not indicting all White people! There are good Whites and evil Whites, as there are good Blacks and evil Blacks.

Modern young people have no parents, significant others, or role models to teach them how to survive in this so called “post-racial” era. Of course, it has never been truly post-racial and the mask of post-racialism is being pulled off. Nevertheless, the failure of the Black Community has contributed to belligerent youth.

So, we must teach young Black men how to respond to interactions with the police and others. It is a matter of survival and properly responding to authority.

At the same time, we must be careful that a particular issue does **not** overshadow our calling to preach the Gospel of Jesus, the Christ!

Jesus knew that His calling was to go to Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world, but He stopped and got involved in the lives of people all along the way!

Finally, I'm reminded of

Jeremiah 29:7 (NASB), “⁷ ~‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.’”