

The subject: The New Humanity

Thanks to all the writers who have offered their wisdom, opinions and care to stimulate our discussion this quarter. As you read these thoughts, we hope you'll let God broaden your horizon to see all the people he loves and see all the ways you could love them. We are convinced that God's heart is open to everyone and the way to eternity is free. But how to make that all important connection — that's the question.

Can the Rich and the Poor Co-exist in the Kingdom of God?

The answer to the question above seems simple, right? But upon deeper consideration it only begs further questions and demands clarification.

Here are a few questions that arise: What IS the distinction between rich and poor? Is it as simple as economic difference? Can we divorce issues of gender and race from class? How would Jesus reflect on the fact that the richest one percent of the American population owns 40 percent of our nation's wealth? And most importantly, why didn't your fourth grade Sunday school teacher avail to you the theories of Karl Marx?

Marx advocated a "rising up of the people" in an era when there was a clear division between those who had and those who had not. It is unlikely that Marx ever envisioned the "people" consisting of a brotherhood of wide-eyed college students and broad shouldered unionists gathering together to protest in the face of the World Trade Organization, kicking in windows of the local Banana Republic store in Seattle. Today the wall that divides the rich and the poor is less clear, and becoming even more blurred with the advent of a technologically driven society.

The "Digital Divide" has been hailed by some as the new defining barrier between rich and poor in a country that anxiously awaits the next technological advancement, be it a new operating system from Windows or a really cool version of Doom. The disparity between those who have access to the information highway and those who don't is increasing as quickly as Bill Gates' net worth. The poor and the working class, who can't afford personal computers, find themselves on the outside looking in at an economy that is flourishing via technology. However, it is oversimplified to believe that future class wars will be fought only on the battlefields of computer literacy. The distinction between the classes encompasses issues of economics intertwined with a multitude of social issues, including gender and race.

It is impossible to enter into a debate about classism without defining just exactly who is rich and who is poor. Is it the single mother of two, flipping burgers at McDonalds who is poor? In a developing country someone making \$16,000 a year is practically aristocracy. According to Marxist theory it seems that a middle manager at Microsoft making \$100,000 a year is just as 'poor' because s/he is dispensable, in that s/he does not own the means of production. However, in a class war would this middle manager and McDonalds mother join as equals in the oppressed proletariat to fight against the capitalist powers that become increasingly rich through their labors? It is astounding that in the United States 500 individuals, most likely all white males, control two thousand billion dollars in business assets. In reality, most people believe that they have a clear definition of who the 'poor' are, drawn from a vague interpretation of an apparent 'culture of poverty.' However, defining this culture is seemingly implausible, as one attempts to sort through the myriad of gender, race and other socioeconomic issues.

In Jesus Christ our exhaustive intellectual efforts to make sense of classism are subverted, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ*

Jesus" Galatians 3:28, NIV. When the Kingdom of God is realized in its fullness will there be distinctions between the rich and the poor? Justice demands that there will be no poor in Heaven; therefore, our call as the Church in the Kingdom as it is now is to be working toward eradicating these distinctions.

Settling for reconciliation between the classes maintains the social order that now exists between rich and poor. It is not enough just for everyone to get along – we must cry out for justice. The Biblical model for the body of Christ is to ensure that everyone is sustained equally, *"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as they had need"* Acts 2:44-45, NIV.

Back to the initial question, can the rich and the poor co-exist in the Kingdom of God? The answer is an unequivocal "No!" We as a Church must labor so that *"justice rolls on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"* Amos 5:24, NIV.

Pam Rowen and Bob Herzog

Interview: A Transcultural Christian

A part of Circle of Hope, now, Jen Thuma grew up in Zambia, southern Africa. She lived there from age 1 to 3 and then again from age 8 to 15. Her father was a doctor with the Brethren in Christ world missions and grew up in Zambia and Zimbabwe. Her grandmother was a missionary kid from India. Transcultural Christianity has been the norm for the Thuma family. The following interview investigates her experiences as such a person.

How is it different being a Christian in Zambia as compared to being a Christian in the US.?

I don't think it's different being a Christian in Zambia; I think the Bible's pretty clear about what our roles are. We're supposed to love each other, love our enemies, and let the Spirit guide us. The difference is in how it's played out. In different cultures Christianity gets expressed in different ways. For example, when the early BIC missionaries came to Africa one of the first things they tried to do was dress the native villagers like the missionaries themselves were dressed because it was "modest." The villagers, in their [the missionaries] minds, were indecently dressed. In reality the people of Africa were dressed appropriately for their climate and life. The women didn't need long skirts to get caught in the fire! The missionaries could only see it through the eyes of their own culture.

Here's another example of a difference that's even more relevant to today that I remember from being there. Polygamy is very, very common in Zambia. One of the deacons had two wives and this became an issue. And what do you do as a Christian after you have 5 wives? Do you divorce 4 of them? But does having more than one wife make them any less a Christian?

Do you think it's even relevant to discuss these similarities and differences or do you think it's more productive to discuss that we're all under one Authority and one Kingdom of God?

I don't think the answer is that simple. It's not a matter of similarities and differences because focusing on that puts huge walls up between people. But it is important to be aware of the differences in cultures. In our American culture we expect people to be aware of our culture and we're offended if they're not observant of it. I think we need to be sensitive to those in other countries to the best of our abilities as well.

When we say we're under one Authority and Kingdom of God, that's all very true, but we need to make sure that we're saying the same thing. Making sure what you're meaning is getting across as well as just what you're saying. I see that there is a problem with cultural views getting in the way of communication- not just country to country but also person to person. Even people who haven't been out of the state are in mini cultures of their own. I think that it's important for us to somehow either by education or sheer willingness to be able to see out of our own culture...either in America or just in our own family.

In Zambia there wasn't segregation or apartheid but it was unique to see others integrating

into the life and culture of the local people. The Brethren in Christ church was intentionally good at that. When leaders and members of our church would get together it was a very mixed group. There were people from Zimbabwe, Zambia, Europeans, Americans. We were all Christians and spent time together and shared and there was really no distinction made.

How has the life of Jesus impacted your love for other nations of the world? In what ways?

As a whole I can say that life with Jesus as shown in the Bible and the life of my family has impacted my love for other nations. Observation about how Jesus crossed boundaries stands out to me. I'm thinking about when he spoke to women, when he talked to Samaritans and interacted with people across the Sea of Galilee. All three of those were not acceptable to interact with according to his culture and he stepped over the boundaries, showing what was right.

Anna James

A Road to Understanding

For over a year now I have been talking to one of our pastors, Rod White, about the possibility of participating in the Damascus Road process. The Damascus Road is a training process designed to help organizations develop the biblical background and analytical skills necessary to detect and fight institutional racism. Rod became a team member about a year ago as a member of the MCC East Coast Board. At that time our cell was trying to focus on the issue of racism and it seemed like the training might fit.

Now the time has come to form a team that will go through two intense training times over the next six months. While I'm sure there will be a tremendous amount of personal growth, the desire is that the team gain skills to become a resource, enabling Circle of Hope to continue its efforts in being an anti-racist environment.

I entered this process still coming to grips with my own understanding of race. As a black American who grew up with many upper middle class advantages I have found it, at times, very difficult to get in touch with the pain associated with the effects of institutional racism. But as my understanding grows I find it easier to identify with the pain and to see how easy it is to just buy into the system as it stands. It has also become clear how hard it is to separate the issues of race from class. I look forward to learning more about these issues and how I can play a role in what Jesus is doing to tear down that stronghold. The team format is particularly exciting to me in that you will have a group of brothers and sisters you are committed to, to work on these issues.

As we return from the times of training I am curious how we will be received. Will we be used as a resource? Will we just be another group clamoring for limited attention spans? Will people still not even understand that the issue of racism is one that not only Circle of Hope *wants* to take seriously, but that the Body of Christ *needs* to take seriously and therefore just blow us off?

I think there are yet many unanswered questions, but there is hope inherent in being part of something bigger than yourself that you know Jesus is excited about. I look for healing, reconciliation, increased knowledge, and righteous anger to spring from this and inform and impact how we go about being a Circle of Hope for ALL people.

Dave Valentine

Where Are the Angry White Christians?

Conrad Moore spoke vulnerably and forcefully at worship on January 16. His story of his life as a black man in Philadelphia was heartbreaking. It was probably shocking to some people who are generally blinded to the reality that so many people experience in the U.S. I was glad an "angry black male" (as he called himself) was willing to speak to us.

But one of my African American friends wrote me an e-mail that made me wonder whether it

was such a great event after all. My friend reminded me again about how tiresome it is for black people to not only bear the burden of racism, but to bear the burden of undoing it. The sin of racism, is not a black problem, it is a white problem.

Say all you want about how *everyone* is prejudiced and how the problem is a *human* problem. But the fact is, white people invented and preserved the American brand of racism that infects every thing we are and do in this country. Whites have the privileges racism created and whites have the power to keep their privileges or “share” them. They still run all the institutions and still blindly think everything is mostly fine — because it is mostly fine for them. Especially in the church, where we glowingly talk of love and justice, racism is a so-called white person’s problem.

We hear a lot about angry white males these days, who are feeling the threat of their privilege eroding as people of color take advantages of legal changes that have been made in the last 30 years. But we don’t hear about angry white Christians furious that people of color, especially the ancestors of slaves, do not receive justice. Like Conrad Moore implied in his speech to us, people of color are more likely to hear frustration that the “problem” is still coming up — “Why don’t you just get over it!”

Where are the angry white Christians?

Well, I am one. I don’t know if I am as angry as my e-mailing friend would like, or if I am willing to start talking about how angry is angry enough. But I am angry about racism. I have dedicated three years of training through the Plowshares Institute and Damascus Road to try and figure out how to do proactive things that can undo racism. But I am still angry. I thought I’d take the bait of my friend and come out about it.

The Bible says, “Be angry but do not sin.” I’m working on that. If I’m sinning, here, you let me know. But here are a few of the reasons I am angry about racism.

1) I am tired of being called white. I am a healthy dose of native American, for one thing. But I don’t much like that some people invented a racial distinction called “white” to use as a social tool and then fit me into it. I don’t liked being lumped together like that. I am a Christian, not white. So stop calling me that. You can dump black and yellow and brown, while you are at it, as far as I’m concerned.

2) I am mad and embarrassed that the church is still so segregated. People tell me that it is a matter of culture and taste, but I still think it is sin. I think Circle of Hope is mostly white because the so-called white people in it can’t bother themselves to make relationships across lines that aren’t “comfortable” for them and the black people in town feel like they’ll lose their soul if they connect with “whites.” Both sides are substantially conformed to the racist, sinful construct that was imposed on us all by people who did not care about Jesus.

3) I am angry that I live in a city and area that still reacts to race first. I know from my own experience that, on the street, being white is an advantage. My son and I have both been stopped by the police for driving around in black areas of the city, and I hardly know any black male who has not been stopped for being black. We all profile. The main threat one of my friends says, is not being pulled over for a DUI it is being pulled over for a DWB — driving while black.

4) I’m angry that I have so many friends that roll their eyes when I start getting mad about racism. They are tired of people being “politically correct.” I’m angry that mere political correctness has stolen the fire of righteousness when it comes to racism. I couldn’t care less about politics — that’s just a tool to use to foment justice. I care about righteousness flowing like a river through my church and city. Please don’t dismiss me like I’m a Democrat, or something. God needs a lot more than a Democrat!

5) There were some die-hard abolitionists in the UK and the USA in the first half of the 1800’s who hounded their governments until they abolished slavery. Most of them were Christians. Martin Luther King and others in the Civil Rights Movement were mainly motivated by Jesus, too. So what is up with the Christians of today? Are we under the illusion that everything is fine — no matter the facts? Or are we under the bondage of the domination system so completely that we can’t even see what is happening? Surely we can’t just be so unspiritual that all we care about is whether our personal economics are doing OK! I’m a lonely, anachronistic, angry abolitionist.

Where are the angry, so-called white, called-by-God-to-love-and-truth Christians?

Rod White