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**The Long Road Towards Racial Reconciliation**

By  
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## **Introduction**

The issue of race in the United States has been long contested among different social and political spheres. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, Americans have been eyewitnesses to the long and evolving fight for racial justice and equality. Most recently, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 has proven to contest people's attitudes over the issue. As political polarization grows, mistrust within communities of color deepens, further hindering participation in bipartisan work to overcome these differences. When taking a close look at the American race issue, one must first recognize the vast complexity of this topic. Many are quick to compartmentalize the issue into one box, offering one solution, when in fact the race issue is entangled in history, social cultures, and political systems. In order to achieve racial reconciliation, one must first consider just how complicated the issue is. It is critical to study the history of the race issue in America in order to gain better understanding of the present form of the matter. Unity in racial reconciliation becomes harder to reach as each individual falls under one "sphere" or the other. A critical institution in this social narrative is the role of the Church body. The road to racial reconciliation cannot be made possible without the leadership of the Church Body and active implementation of the inclusive love of Jesus Christ.

## **Evolution of the Race Issue Throughout American History**

### **Colonial America through 1860s**

The race issue during slavery was just as complicated for Colonial Americans as any other era. Many colonists, being predominantly religious, faced the problem of slavery and their moral convictions. Many of the founding fathers shared in this pain. John Adams, George Washington, and James Madison, while being slaveowners, recognized the moral dilemma they faced. John Adams shares, "Every measure of prudence, therefore, ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation of slavery from the United States...I have, through my whole life, held the practice of slavery in... abhorrence".<sup>1</sup> Freeing their slaves would send them into a society where they would be considered inferior, but to keep them as respected slaves would withhold them from experiencing true freedom. Even Thomas Jefferson, in his initial drafts of the Declaration of Independence, included the charge of holding slaves captive towards the British Crown:

He [the king of Britain] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere...Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce.<sup>2</sup>

Slavery was a long part of the global economic sector before Colonial America was founded. From the beginning, the States inherited the race issue from Great Britain. The colonies'

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. West, *Vindicating the Founders: Race, Sex, Class, and Justice in the Origins of America* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997) p 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p 3.

jurisdiction belonged to the Crown and Parliament. By the time they gained independence, slavery was prominent in the Southern states' economy. While the U.S. Constitution at the time did not prohibit slavery, it left much jurisdiction to the states, still referring to them as "persons".<sup>3</sup>

## 1860s through 1960s

Major advances towards racial equality such as the Emancipation Proclamation, Thirteenth (abolition of slavery) and Fourteenth Amendment (equal protection under due process of law) arose out of the Post Civil War era. However, the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought an onset of new issues: segregation and the integration of racial minorities. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case held that separate but equal spaces for Blacks and Whites did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment Equal Protection Clause, commencing the Jim Crow Era.<sup>4</sup> The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's produced the fruitful Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, where "All persons shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations of any place of public accommodation...without discrimination or segregation on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin".<sup>5</sup> While equal rights were hard fought by the Civil Rights Leaders, much work had to be done to implement practical integration. Before his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. fought for fair housing after the While Fleet and history of redlining kept neighborhoods segregated.<sup>6</sup> The past of redlining segregation still shows its fingerprints today in city/suburban/rural racial demographics across the nation.<sup>7</sup>

## 1960s through 2010s

After the Civil Rights Movement, a new wave of problems bled into the latter decades. With the introduction of hard drugs like crack cocaine into the United States in the 1980's, violent crime increased by 270% between the 1960's through 1980's.<sup>8</sup> Neighborhoods experienced increased gang violence, drug overdoses, and domestic violence cases. As a result, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 as an attempt to combat the drug epidemic and its side effects of violence. In this Act, more than \$150 million were allocated for states to "... pay the costs of providing increased resources for courts, prosecutors, public defenders, and other criminal justice participants as necessary to meet the increased demands for judicial activities" and "...enter into contracts with public or private

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p18-19.

<sup>4</sup> "Plessy v. Ferguson." Oyez. Accessed January 21, 2021. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1850-1900/163us537>.

<sup>5</sup> Civil Rights Act of 1964 ; 7/2/1964; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789 - 2011; General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. [Online Version, <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/civil-rights-act-of-1964>, January 21, 2021]

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *History of Fair Housing* [https://www.hud.gov/program\\_offices/fair\\_housing\\_equal\\_opp/aboutfheo/history](https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/aboutfheo/history)

<sup>7</sup> William H. Frey, "Melting Pot Cities and Suburbs: Racial and Ethnic Change in Metro America in the 2000s" (Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings Institution, 2011) p 3.

<sup>8</sup> Lauren-Brooke Eisen, "The 1994 Crime Bill and Beyond: How Federal Funding Shapes the Criminal Justice System" (Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, 2019). <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/1994-crime-bill-and-beyond-how-federal-funding-shapes-criminal-justice>

agencies, institutions, or organizations or individuals to carry out any purpose specified”.<sup>9</sup> Through this “tough on crime” Act, states were funded to increase their police units and prison facilities. Higher penalties were placed for drug possessions, repeat felons could earn life in prison after “three strikes”, and broader punishment was awarded for nonviolent crimes.<sup>10</sup> From 1972 to 2009, the prison population skyrocketed by 700 percent, peaking at 1.9 million total inmates in the U.S. around 2010.<sup>11</sup> African Americans make up 13.4% of the total U.S. population, with Hispanics at 18.5%, and Non-Hispanic Whites at 60.12%.<sup>12</sup> However, in 2010, African Americans made up 38.8% of the prison population, with Non-Hispanic Whites at 31.2%, and Hispanics at 22.6%.<sup>13</sup> Regarded as one of the most impacting laws to the criminal justice system, former and current lawmakers are critical towards this Act that accelerated the United States’ rate of mass incarceration and engrained institutional racism. It is important to consider how drugs, crime, poverty, and gang violence predominantly troubled African American neighborhoods as a continued result of historical segregation and discrimination through the justice system. It can be argued that this led to the societal criminalization of African Americans, tainting individuals as dangerous due to their environmental circumstances. This widened the gap through mistrust between communities of color, law enforcement, and neighbors from understanding the larger picture of the multifaceted race issue.

## 2010s through Present

As the 2010’s rolled around, another wave of issues entered center stage: police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement was birthed from national unrest arising from Ferguson, Missouri, after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. In the coming years, more names would be added to the list of those who died in confrontation with the police: Trayvon Martin, Antwon Rose Jr., Eric Garner, Elijah McClain, Tamir Rice, and most recently George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Similar to the Civil Rights Movement, this wave of action is looking to amend the past’s impact on the current state of the nation in terms of criminal justice reform, law enforcement, and racial equity. In 2018, Congress passed the First Step Act, a bipartisan effort to reform the criminal justice process by lowering the prison population through correctional programs, good credit incentives, and oversight over the ethical treatment of inmates.<sup>14</sup> Much of the 2018 Act countered previous “tough on crime” Acts implemented in the 80’s and 90’s. Still, large groups are calling for further reform in terms of law enforcement, capital punishment, and reparations towards affected communities of color. Technology advances and social media sources like Twitter and Facebook have become a hub for aggressive forums between neighbors. Stark attitudes towards the current race issue have triggered many people’s insensitivity to each other’s differences. On top of political polarization, many opposers are quick to call the other side as racist, overly sensitive, lazy, ignorant, and more. People are

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<sup>9</sup> U.S. Congress. House of Representatives. House Judiciary Committee. Violent Crime and Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. 103<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1994. HR Rep. Sect. 210602, p 278-279.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. James Austin, Lauren-Brooke Eisen, James Cullen, Jonathan Frank. “How Many Americans Are Unnecessarily Incarcerated?” (Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, 2016), p 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> United States Census Bureau. QuickFacts (2019). <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>

<sup>13</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. “Prisoners in 2010” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011), p 26.

<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p10.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Nathan James. The First Step Act of 2018: An Overview” (Congressional Research Service, 2019), p 1. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45558>

villainized for their points one way or another. Today, the vision of racial reconciliation has no chance of occurring so long society's attitudes continue to deepen in division.

### **What Then, is the Answer? The Church's Role in Racial Reconciliation**

As analyzed above, the problem of race has stood against the test of time. As one practical solution is brought into the table, another rises from the former. History continues to tell the tale of the longevity and complexity of the race issue. It has discreetly seeped into culture, education, families, and the Church around the world. As attempted forms of solutions come and go, government continues to teeter the scale of liberty and equality. Creating absolute equality would deprive many of their rights to property and wealth, whereas ascertaining specific liberties to the individual opportunist defeats absolute equality and fairness. Many scholars argue a place of equilibrium is nearly impossible, but legislatures should continue to swing close to it. Therefore, government cannot be counted for the solution the nation is looking for.

Further, in spiritual matters, the general reason as to why the race issue exists purely derives itself from the sinful nature of man. Romans 3:23 tells, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"<sup>15</sup>. This indicates that human nature is and always will be susceptible to hate, prejudice, violence; all things not of God. Culture tells the individual to choose a side in the social narrative. Division is birthed from the lie that one side has all the answers and justification. People are villainized and solutions are stuck, corrupted, and at gridlock. Pastor Miles McPherson explains best, "We've been led to believe that we must choose one of two sides, we must *always* recognize it as a *false* dichotomy—a snare set by the Liar himself"<sup>16</sup>. During his ministry on earth, Jesus foretold of this divisive nature in Matthew 12:25, "Every kingdom divided against itself is headed for destruction, and no city or house divided against itself will stand"<sup>17</sup>.

If the solution to racial reconciliation then, cannot be found in man, where can it be found? Pastor and Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave revelation to this remedy from his jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama: "I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the "do-nothingism" of the complacent nor the hatred of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of *love*..."<sup>18</sup>. The hope for racial reconciliation does not, will not, and was never supposed to come *from* man, but from the love of Jesus Christ that flows *through* man.

Unity through mutual honor, inside and outside the body of Christ, requires the acceptance of a divine love that transcends human understanding. This divine love is only found in the life and death of Jesus Christ, who bore humanity's sins on a cross so mankind may be reconciled with God. Through His death, one is given the free gift of grace, forgiveness, and closeness to the Heavenly Father. 1 John 4:9-11 depicts that "God's love was revealed to us in this way: God sent His one and only Son into the world so that we might live through Him. Love consists in this: that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

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<sup>15</sup> CSB Bible. Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> McPherson, Miles. *The Third Option: Hope for a Racially Divided Nation* (Howard Books, 2018) p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> CSB Bible. Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Hornsby Jr., Alton, "Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter From a Birmingham Jail"." (The University of Chicago Press, Journal of Negro History, 1986) p. 42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717650>.

Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another”<sup>19</sup>. Once this love is experienced, all believers are called to go into the world and do the same.

This transformation of unity must first begin with the Church body. In recent decades, the Church received comfort in remaining mellow and ambiguous about controversial issues like the race issue. As a result, it has found itself in a place of decreased influence around the nation. However, being the Body of Christ, the Church has been called to be set apart from the world in order to lead and exemplify what honorable unity through Christ looks like.

The early Church apostles gave many references to what unity through honor looks like. The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 encourages believers that diversity in fact complements unity as one body:

For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body—so is also Christ...God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable so that there would be no further division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other. So if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individual members of it.<sup>20</sup>

When a certain community experiences injury, it is the responsibility for the other members to respond, for the grievance impacts the rest of the body. This is what majority of the Church failed to do during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. One can argue that more of the division and anger we see today in the race issue resulted from the complacency of the American Church. In his letter from Birmingham jail, Dr. Martin Luther King similarly expresses this frustration, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice anywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea”<sup>21</sup>. Empathy and humility are the driving forces that require planting and watering in order to turn the tides of strife between communities. This blossoms out of the surrender of one's faults and differences, finding a commonality of grace and forgiveness in the indiscriminate blood of Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

The Church institution is to lead by example the unity America longs to find. Racial reconciliation begins with humility, forgiveness, and grace found in hearts transformed by the love of God. Today, Churches must take a stand to address not only the racial injustices occurring in the nation, but also address the desperate need for the transformation of hearts everywhere. Churches are to teach believers how to carry grace into conversations instead of political correctness, how to have ears that listen instead of short tempers that diffuse, and how to build bridges of understanding instead of burning relationships out of indifference. Only through the grace of God the Church may continue leading the road of racial reconciliation until Jesus Christ returns.

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<sup>19</sup> *CSB Bible*. Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Hornsby Jr., Alton, “Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter From a Birmingham Jail”.” (The University of Chicago Press, *Journal of Negro History*, 1986) p. 39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717650>.

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