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How God Is Using the Murder of Nine People
To Bring Racial Reconciliation to All People

Austen Haney

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How God Is Using the Murder of Nine People to Bring Racial Reconciliation to All People

The headlines surrounding the Charleston shooting were heartbreaking to say the least: “Dylann Roof Kills Pastor and 8 Others During Bible Study,”¹ “White Man Kills 9 Members of Black Church in South Carolina,”² “Dylann Roof Wanting to Start a ‘Race War.’”³ Unfortunately, the Charleston shooting was not an isolated event. Racial confrontations have been around as long as humans have, and they are woven into the very fabric of what America struggles with as a nation. The dramatic violence in Ferguson and Charleston tend to make the news, but racialization is not isolated to any single city – it affects people everywhere. When Dylann Roof walked into Mother Emmanuel church on June 17th, he admits his intentions were to stir up a “Race War,”⁴ what he did not expect was for the murders he committed that night to give Mother Emmanuel Church, along with churches everywhere, a huge opportunity to speak the Gospel’s view on race directly into mainstream culture.

Now that the country is a few months removed from the shooting, it is to see the storylines that emerged. For many Christians, this became a story of nine fellow believers who were murdered in the Church. There were talks of this being similar to Christian persecution

1. Samuel Smith, “Dylann Roof Kills Pastor, 8 Others During Bible Study at Historic Black Church in South Carolina,” *Christian Post* (June 2015), accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/white-gunman-kills-pastor-8-others-during-bible-study-at-historic-black-church-in-south-carolina-police-label-act-as-hate-crime-140560/>.

2. Kelly Chen, “Charleston Church Shooting: White Gunman Kills 9 at Historic Black Church,” *The Huffington Post* (June 2015), accessed October 25, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/17/charleston-shooting-churc_n_7608738.html.

3. CNN Wire, “Dylann Roof Confesses to Killing 9 People in Charleston Church, Wanting to Start ‘Race War,’” *Fox8* (June 2015), accessed October 30, 2015, <http://myfox8.com/2015/06/19/charleston-shooting-suspect-dylan-roof-confesses-to-killing-9-people/>.

4. Mosendz, P., “Dylann Roof Confesses: Says He Wanted to Start ‘Race War,’” *Newsweek* (June 2015), accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/dylann-roof-confesses-church-shooting-says-he-wanted-start-race-war-344797>.

overseas, and many desired the nine victims to be esteemed as heroes of the faith. With that as the general position, the call to prayer, peace, and unity that occurred makes perfect sense. Christian's encouraged people to not allow the media's racial narrative to cloud the greater reality of us all being sinful people living on a broken planet. In essence because Christian's saw the problem as a spiritual one, they saw salvation as the solution.

Another angle in the story scrutinized the psyche of the shooter Dylan Roof. People questioned the possibility that Roof, someone who appeared normal, could commit such a heinous crime. The media became overloaded with interviews of people who knew Dylan; they released his age, his high school, where his family lives; and kept the world updated live on the chase to find him. In many ways, where his acts of murder had dehumanized him – as people began to learn about him – he became human again. People began to empathize with him and made statements such as “that could have just as easily been my son, or my neighbor's son.”⁵

The most popular narrative however – and the focus of this discussion – was the racial tension of nine African Americans being shot dead by a white racist in a historically black church. As the world tuned in to see the church's response, they were pleasantly inspired by the church's acts of forgiveness. This shooting in large part prompted the removal of the Confederate flag from South Carolina's capitol,⁶ and brought large numbers of whites and blacks from all over the world together. However, as CNN news reports, “The removal of the flag was both momentous, and nowhere near enough In many people's mind it was a symbolic

5. Amato, L., “Dylann Roof's Family: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know,” *Heavy* (June 2015), accessed October 30, 2015, <http://heavy.com/news/2015/06/dylann-roof-family-mom-dad-uncle-carson-cowles-sister-amber-parents-charleston-shooting/>.

6. Shoichet, C., Fantz, A., & Yan, H., “Charleston: Governor, Senators Join in Saying Confederate Flag Should Go,” *CNN* (June 2015), accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/22/us/charleston-church-shooting-main/>.

gesture, orchestrated by people – politicians especially – so that they could feel better about themselves.”⁷ One church member at Mother Emmanuel church said, “People reach out in love and respect, but eventually they return to their separate places.”⁸ As many who have experienced the death of a loved one know, no amount of flowers, political statements, or encouragement can bring a person back to life. People can visit the church, love can be offered on social media, and President Obama can come and speak at the funeral, but it won’t cure the pain of never seeing those people again. *Only Jesus can do that.*

After the shooting, Mother Emmanuel Church received a nearly unprecedented microphone to speak hope into a situation many Christians are scared to even talk about. In general, the church has been confused as to how the Gospel appropriately engages race, and therefore its hands often do not move past asking people to pray and love one another. When conflict comes up, quotes circulate such as, “This shooting wasn’t caused by a skin problem, but a sin problem.” While Christians should agree that the root of all evil action is sin, the church cannot afford to brush off racism as not being a real issue.

The very existence of Emanuel AME Church exposes a long history of battling racism. The church was started in 1816 when African American’s disagreed with whites on burial grounds. In 1822, the church was burned to the ground after plans for a slave revolt were exposed. The church rebuilt, but in 1834 it, along with all other black churches, were outlawed by the state legislature.⁹ Fast forward to 2015, and Dylann Roof, a white male, is welcomed to

7. Ravitz, J., “After Confederate Flag Comes Down, Charleston Church Starts New Chapter,” *CNN* (July 2015), accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/12/us/charleston-south-carolina-emanuel-ame-church-new-chapter/>.

8. *Ibid.*

9. AME, “Church History: Brief History of Mother Emanuel,” *AME* (n.d.), accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.emanuelamechurch.org/about/>.

Bible study but then chooses to murder nine black members out of hatred and racism. People would have to be either misinformed or delusional to believe that America is a post-racial society. As Lecrae Moore, who has publicized his desire to bring true understanding to the situation, points out:

Although frustrating, History has lasting effects. No one is shocked that the stockyards and cowboy culture that existed in Texas during the 1800's continues to influence the state of Texas. People who rarely, if ever, ride horses continue to regularly wear boots designed for equestrians. Now, in that same vein of thinking, imagine the lasting effects of taking a male slave and not allowing him to marry, but only using him as a "stud." Think of the impact of making him breed with countless women, so that within 10 years he may have fathered over 100 children. Yet he is not allowed or expected to be responsible for any of them. The historically high rates of fatherless homes in the black family would surely be affected.... We, as individuals, are of course culpable for our actions, but we cannot overlook the effects of the past.¹⁰

Sometimes as Christians it is easy to get excited about mission trips and disaster relief projects. Christians celebrate adopting children from China, we fund Compassion children in Africa, and send first responders to Haiti, but among the church, we tend to deny our racial struggles here in America. When situations like Ferguson or Charleston come up, we are quick to change the subject or make blanket statements. The Church's response was different this time though. Louie Giglio, pastor of Passion City Church, is one example as he spent two Sunday's in a mini-series titled "Not Colorblind" – asking his audience from Atlanta Georgia to wrestle through the question, "Is there any racism still in me?" Following the lead of Mother Emmanuel and Passion City, churches everywhere are beginning to become more vocal and more prominent in the fight against racism, and honestly, they cannot afford not to be.

10. Lecrae, "Lecrae Op-Ed: Charleston Shooting Comes from Deeply Rooted Racism & Injustice," *Billboard* (June 2015), accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/6605623/lecrac-charleston-shooting-op-ed>.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”¹¹ In times of peace, and especially following tragedies such as the shooting in Charleston, the responsibility of the Church is to help people understand that the antagonist in the story is not covered in black or white skin – it is the brokenness of humanity. The Good news of the Gospel is not that human circumstances no longer matter, it is that Jesus is writing a story much larger than those circumstances. The reason families of the victims were able to extend grace to Dylan Roof, even after he murdered their loved ones, is because the Gospel they believe in – the Gospel we believe in – really works. True reconciliation between the races is something worth fighting for, but it will never be realized without the involvement of the Church. May Christian’s love their neighbors in a manner that spurs the world towards belief in racial reconciliation.

11. King, Martin Luther, and James Melvin Washington. *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992. Print.

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