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Matthew 5.21–26: A Missional, Confessional, Pragmatic Approach toward Racial Reconciliation

RUSS D. KIRBY

In 2003 Glen Stassen proposed a triadic structure to the Sermon on the Mount proper (Matt 5.21—7.12).¹ While his work is open to criticism, it nonetheless provided new energy to existing biblical critical efforts and prodded scholars and students alike to take Jesus' actual words seriously. In this article I propose that Matthew 5.21–26 indeed conforms to Stassen's proposed triadic divisions *and* offers a three-fold, grace-filled strategy that, when viewed through the lens of contemporary congregational segregation, refigures efforts at racial reconciliation. This missional, confessional, pragmatic approach does not permit a comfortable, kumbaya, once-a-year pulpit switch program. It does, however, in pointing to actual practices and realistic responses, empower a way of being in the church and world that offers enormous hope for the color of our future.

TRYING OUT THE TRIAD HYPOTHESIS

Stassen's basic position is that the prevailing difficulties in making sense and use of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount stem from interpreters not paying enough attention to the internal structure of individual pericopes. Focusing on overall groupings and accepting the longstanding language of "antitheses," the exegetical emphasis has landed on hard teachings, and prohibitions impossible to master. By noting the presence of remarkably consistent structural patterns and privileging grammatical forms present in the texts, Stassen uncovers fourteen triads. The third member of each triad always includes imperatives, not merely illustrations and never impossible ideals. We can with God's gracious help, he argues, take concrete initiative(s) to break free from habits that lead to sin and traps that capture our loyalty. Every time we make the decision to follow Jesus this way we participate in the inbreaking reign of God on earth.

A Note on Assumptions and Audience

Despite differences, commentators have (rarely!) applied Jesus' remarks on reconciliation in Matthew 5.21–26 to *racial* reconciliation. I will be using Stassen's divisions because I believe he is basically correct and because this structure allows us to see (in the climactic section—Matt 5.24–26) a three-fold response to the racial divisions that exist within Christian churches, especially in the United States. As a white participant in non-instrumental Churches of Christ I will be telescoping the application(s) of this material for white Christians attending so-called "white" churches of Christ, and will be specifically attentive to black-white relations. Other scholars—perhaps in this edition of *Leaven*—can fill in the admitted, intended gaps.

Jesus Points to Traditional Commandments

Stassen shows that each triad uniformly begins with Jesus' recollection of an existing paraenetic tradition. These "traditional teachings/righteousness" and later "traditional practices" are mostly rooted in the Hebrew

1. Glen H. Stassen, "The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-7:12)," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 122/2 (2003): 267–308.

Bible and serve as springboards for the material unique to Jesus. The traditional commandment in Matthew 5.21—“Do not kill”—remembers the prohibition of Deuteronomy 5.17. Jesus states this simply enough, though historically perhaps no teaching has complicated discipleship more.

Acknowledging the emotion of debates, it is curious that discussions of racial division in the United States so infrequently mention this verse. Christians professing a commitment to racial unity in the church do well to remember that just over a hundred years ago in this country it was not illegal to kill most blacks.² Even after formal emancipation white Christians found themselves complicit in a history of hangings and a legacy of lynchings. These historical blights would be easier to dismiss were it not for the persistence of violent racial discrimination: disparities in access to quality health care,³ the convergence of white flight, geographic steering, and the toxic targeting of non-white neighborhoods,⁴ and the disproportionate percentage of legal black executions.⁵ Though “do not kill” is not the point of this passage, it is a commandment that nonetheless deserves our attention.

Jesus Points Out Trapping Cycles

That this passage is rightly identified as a triad can be more clearly seen in the second section. Against the term “antithesis” Stassen notes that Jesus’ words are consistently non-oppositional. This should not be surprising given Jesus’ preface to this section; rather than abolish or oppose the law his desire is to “fill it full.” Also striking is the absence of any imperatival material in Matthew 5.22. Jesus’ clear directives uniformly occur in the last member (vv. 23–26) of the triad.

Yet Jesus’ words in this section are not unimportant, and they certainly have application to racial reconciliation. Stassen argues that here Jesus diagnoses “vicious cycles,” patterned practices that prevent us from living into the spirit of the law. Anger is not prohibited in the passage, nor are we forbidden to call someone a fool. Jesus had occasion for both. The active verb in verse 22 (*orgizomenos*) should not be translated “anger,” but “being angry,” and this grammatical feature, Stassen argues, is significant. Rather than advocate an unreachable moral standard, Jesus simply identifies unbridled anger and unchecked insults as behavioral traps with undesirable consequences.

Racism uses anger and insults as fuel, and over time this trapping cycle creates possibilities for deadly violence. The connection between name-calling and violent anger might seem hyperbolic, yet they are perversely and profoundly inseparable. In fact, the development of the concept of “race” in the United States is at its core an adamic process of re-calling and re-naming. To be re-named “white” in the late seventeenth century meant a measure of protection, and introduction into a nascent system of privilege. “Negro” and its nastier variants, however, became a synonym for “slave,” “animal,” and “disfavored by God.” Use and acceptance of these names simultaneously functioned as (unconscious?) justification for the kidnap, capture, dismemberment and murder of “other” human beings. When language dehumanizes it desensitizes, and so the words and the ways that we speak matter deeply.

2. For example, note the prevalence of black female slaves executed for nonviolent “crimes,” or without any stated cause. See Keith Harries, “Gender, Execution, and Geography in the United States,” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 74, no. 1 (1992): 25. Many slave codes considered things like theft, slave gatherings and “bruising” a master to be capital offenses.

3. Stephen H. Woolf, Robert E. Johnson, George E. Fryer, George Rust and David Satcher, “The Health Impact of Resolving Racial Disparities: An Analysis of US Mortality Data,” *American Journal of Public Health* 94, no. 12 (December 2004): 2078–2081.

4. See Robert D. Bullard, Paul Mohai, Robin Saha and Beverly Wright, “Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty: Why Race Matters After All These Years,” *Environmental Law* 38 (2008): 371–411.

5. “United States of America: Death By discrimination—the continuing role of race in capital cases,” Amnesty International, April 2003, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR51/046/2003> (accessed December 10, 2009).

Though it is fashionable to lament “political correctness,” and to trumpet a Lochnessian “reverse racism,”⁶ white Christians should instead be honest about the persistence of color injustice, and concerned about language and names that trap us. It was not until I heard a “black joke” from the pulpit of a white church this decade that I realized how broadly and easily the genre moved an audience. It was the only joke that landed that morning. “I’m not a racist” is much easier to say than it is to prove, especially when we are betrayed by our words. When white churches ask, “How do we get *them* to come to *our* services?” they reveal controlling assumptions and effectively confirm the truth of Jesus’ diagnosis. The trapping cycle of insults and anger tempts us to forget that in Christ we are brothers and sisters.

JESUS MAKES HIS POINT: TRANSFORMING CHOICES

In Stassen’s hypothesis the third member of each triad is differentiated by its increased length and by its inclusion of positive imperatives. So, for instance, this material (vv. 23–26) is twice as long as the first two sections combined and is full of distinctive, climactic commandments. This pattern occurs repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus rarely stops at diagnosis; he reveals realistic, concrete ways to break free from the cycles that preclude Christian faithfulness. Jesus’ point then in Matthew 5.21–26 is that we *can* choose to “be reconciled,” though it requires that we “leave,” “go,” “remember” and “make friends with.” Taking these “initiatives” disempowers anger and insults, and reshapes relationships once bound for murder, death and judgment. In practice, this *missional, confessional, pragmatic approach* is a stark contrast to dominant Christian efforts at racial reconciliation. The third member of this triad is a clear compass, reorienting our individual and corporate actions, and moving us past superficial, short-lived racial “unity.”

A MISSIONAL PURSUIT

The problem with the question, “How do we get *them* to come to *our* services?” is not simply that it assumes and maintains “us-them” relational categories. It also reduces our Christian identity to the production of corporate worship, and confuses racial reconciliation with getting *other* people “to *come*.” In Matthew 5.23, Jesus says that before offering a gift at the altar you must “be reconciled,” and in order to be reconciled you must “leave the altar” and “go” [to your brother]. So then, Christian racial reconciliation is necessarily missional, and the locus for reconciliation is not (corporate worship inside) the church building. The so-called “attractational” ecclesiology is not entirely bankrupt. Even so, we must move from “invitation” to incarnation; it is axiomatically impossible to practice (racial) reconciliation absent the *pursuit* of (racial) reconciliation. For white Christians, then, there ought to be a positive correlation between taking Jesus seriously, and feeling increasingly uncomfortable in all-white Christian assemblies.

Frankly, however, the average, stable white church is not even proactively attempting to “attract” non-white members. While white congregations are increasingly confronted with “people of color” due to discontinuous, demographic change, many remain unaware that so-called black Churches of Christ exist at all. Years ago, I brought our church to an event hosted by a primarily black congregation. I still remember the sincerity in the eyes of a church youth group member who said with confusion, “There are *black* churches of Christ!?” That brief encounter underscores the real-life distance between Jesus’ expectations, and the common experiences of contemporary white congregations. Not only is missional, multicultural engagement rare there; it is equally rare for majority white congregations to plan their services with people of color in mind, or to simply include non-white congregations on direct and electronic mailing lists. The most literal answer to the “Why don’t they come?” question is that “*they*” were often not invited in the first place.

6. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Amanda Lewis and David G. Embrick, “‘I did not get that job because of a Black man . . .’: The Storylines and Personal Stories of Color Blind Racism,” *Sociological Forum* 19, no. 4 (December 2004): 555–581.

Of course, achieving true racial reconciliation requires (more than) invitations and thoughtful, attractional worship planning. The transforming choice envisaged by Jesus involves missional displacement. That he expects us to “leave” our comfort zones, and “go” on a pursuit of reconciliation should not be surprising; Jesus’ commands here grow out of, and are shaped by, the larger narrative of God’s salvation story. Here Stassen importantly notes God’s grace. We are privileged to participate in the activity of the divine reconciler. While the missional mandate is not without effort and challenges, in our “leaving” and “going” we acknowledge the partnership and precedent of God. Our actions must be in conformity with what God has graciously been doing all along.

A Confessional Posture

Apart from the imperatives that Stassen rightly notes, “remember” (*mnēsthēs*) in verse 23 also carries implied imperatival force. The New Century Version does a fine job of maintaining the original grammar of the text: “So *when* you offer your gift to God at the altar, and *you remember* that your brother or sister has something against you . . .” Jesus’ picture of reconciliation involves a missional pursuit, and a *confessional posture*. When we are not pursuing reconciliation it is often because our experience at the altar is not confessional. Though remembering the “body” and “blood” of Jesus sounds thoroughly confessional, God equally expects us to “remember that” our “brother and sister has something against” us. To read the text as saying “if there happens to be a time that you remember” or “if you ever remember” is to saddle the English rendering with an idea not clearly present in the Greek itself. Our “remembering,” that is, our adopting a consistent, confessional posture before God, should not be exceptional.

Yet one of the difficulties inherent in racial reconciliation is the desire on the part of white Christians to catalyze racial change while claiming radical, racial innocence.⁷ This mythology can only be maintained as long as racially homogenous Christian communities persist; mono-racial settings, by design, make viable cultural contestation nearly impossible. To “make it plain,” when white Christians retort, “I am not a racist,” there is most likely not even one black Christian available to object. If our communities were designed differently, perhaps white Christians could be more easily convinced that racism is more than individual acts, that it is embedded in systems, structures, and sinful “powers,” as Robert Foster has pointed out in his article for this edition of *Leaven*. Perhaps they could come to see the connection between active racism and their quiet, grateful acceptance of the privilege(s) “whiteness” affords. Interestingly, the text does not deal with these questions of innocence or guilt, and instead focuses on confessional awareness. Recognizing, without defensiveness, that others have some things against us is the initial step that impels the activity of reconciliation.

Another roadblock to racial reconciliation is the tendency for white Christians to call for racial unity without committing to racial justice. This hardly constitutes a confessional posture. The Confessional/Confessing Church that emerged in Germany most visibly after the 1934 drafting of the Barmen Declaration intended (among other things) to oppose a “faith founded on race . . . and nation.”⁸ While her history has much to be commended, the ultimate failure of the Confessing Church was a failure to courageously confront oppression, and oppose injustice.⁹ To be confessional as Jesus advocates, we must “remember,” and respond appropriately to that confessional admission. It is inappropriate and ineffective to conceive of possibilities for racial unity without at least acknowledging the problem of racial injustice. This text requires not only that we “leave” and “go” (having remembered), but, most importantly, that we will do what it takes to “be reconciled” (*diallagēthi*). Becoming a (temporarily) colorful congregation is far easier than taking the transforming choices necessary to become a reconciled multicultural community.

7. Gail Griffin, “Speaking of Whiteness: Disrupting White Innocence,” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 3–14.

8. Wolfgang Benz, *A Concise History of the Third Reich* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 42.

9. So notice the clear and credible critique in Dietrich Boenhoffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 31.

A Pragmatic Appeal

As the text concludes, Jesus paints a final (parabolic ?) picture. For Stassen, this is not a separate illustration; rather, verses 25–26 are part of the same climactic appeal to break free from trapping cycles that lead to judgment. Jesus describes a scenario involving two enemies with pending litigation; and in this context we find the imperative “come to terms” (*eunoōn*, v. 25). This transforming choice is rendered with interesting variety into English: “come to terms,” “make friends,” “agree with,” “make peace,” “settle matters.” While these English options send preachers on exciting tangents, whether translated with legal or relational shading, the word is basically synonymous with “be reconciled” (*diallagēthi*) in verse 24.

The text does not tell us what the plaintiff “has against” the defendant. As white Christians attempt to contextualize the passage, many may feel like they do not know what their black brothers and sisters “have against” them. It would surely be ironically inappropriate of me to speak for black Christians in Churches of Christ; though in speaking with and listening to black church leaders, key historical and contemporary themes emerge. These include: the “closing” of the Nashville Christian Institute; patterned exclusion from enrollment in Church of Christ schools, forcing attendance at denominational and state schools; the complex admixture of congregational segregation, white benefaction and lingering paternalism; underrepresentation on the faculty, staff and lectureships of academic institutions associated with Churches of Christ; feigned interest in unity efforts or cooperative events; specific, reproduced instances of individual and corporate racism; white reticence to admit and reject power and privilege(s), and to stand in solidarity against oppressive systems and structures; and the marked invisibility of black congregations to white congregations, even as current geographies often farcically overlap. Jesus’ command to white Christians today is the same as it was to that unnamed defendant: “come to terms” and “be reconciled.”

Although these verses (vv. 25–26) do not really introduce a new transforming choice, they tell us two interesting things regarding reconciliation. First, it is never too late to seek reconciliation. In this text, the trapping cycle of anger and insults has spiraled all the way to litigation. As hopeless as things may appear (then and now), Jesus is unwaveringly optimistic, and so we should be as well. This does not mean we should put off the practice of reconciliation for another day. Quite the contrary, Jesus implores us to reconcile “quickly” (*tachu*). Second, Jesus tells us why we should practice reconciliation. For those expecting a theological rationale, Jesus chooses a different, perhaps disappointing logic. I actually find Jesus’ *pragmatic appeal* refreshing. To paraphrase, we should engage in the practice of reconciliation, Jesus forewarns, because if we do not things will go from bad to worse. This fits with Stassen’s view that what Jesus is doing in these triads is principally diagnostic. We make the transforming choice to pursue reconciliation because unless we disempower the trapping cycles of anger and insults, murder and incarceration gain viability. In other passages, a broader theology of reconciliation is developed. Yet even if this text were all that we had, (racial) reconciliation should be practiced because our lives will be better as a result.

FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS WHO WANT CONCLUDING LISTS

Glen Stassen’s work on the Sermon on the Mount has focused on the concrete words of Jesus, and on identifiable patterns (e.g., triadic divisions) that help us understand him better. In Matthew 5.21–26 (the first triad), a traditional commandment (do not murder), and related trapping cycles (being angry, uttering insults) are introduced. Jesus’ climax, Stassen argues, uncovers choices we can take (be reconciled, etc.) that, as God’s grace allows, will transform relationships and situations, preventing imminent “judgment.” When applied to racial reconciliation (and directed specifically to white Christians), a three-fold approach can be discerned: Jesus commands a missional pursuit, and a confessional posture, and offers an urgent, optimistic, pragmatic appeal. For white Christians wanting to know something of the shape that missional, confessional, reconciling engagement might take, this concluding list offers representative possibilities.

1. Do your church's e-mail and direct mail lists include predominantly black Churches of Christ?
2. When is the last time you, or your congregation, attended an event at a predominantly black Church of Christ?
3. Do you know the story of how your congregation and the nearest predominantly black congregation began?
4. The last time there was an outside search to fill a ministry role, how many black candidates were interviewed?
5. When is the last time you or your minister preached a sermon series on the sin of racism?
6. When your area ministers meet for prayer and fellowship, are the area black ministers in attendance?
7. When is the last time you were in the home of a member of a predominantly black Church of Christ? When have you last had that member in your home?
8. How would you respond if your daughter or son decided to seriously date/marry a black Christian?
9. How many deep friendships do you have with black Christians? Is your relationship deep and safe enough for them to point out your prejudices and blind spots?
10. When is the last time that you told or laughed at a "black joke?" When is the last time you used a racial epithet or stereotype?

May the grace of God enliven us with courage and perseverance as we enter the lifelong journey of (racial) reconciliation.

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