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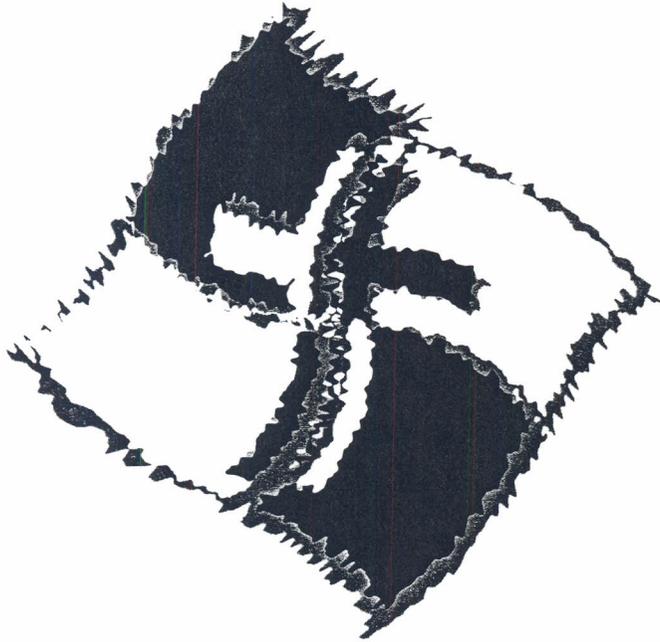
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Ira J. Jolivet Jr.

The Cross of Christ as a Treatment for America's Racial Schizophrenia

The majority of privileged Americans who have become geographically isolated and psychologically insulated by life in the suburbs might deny that this country has any such thing as a *race* problem. Others, recognizing the highly pluralistic character of this nation, might deny that America has a *race* problem. But if recent events such as the reaction to the verdict in the O. J. Simpson criminal trial and the debates prior to and after passage of the California Civil Rights Initiative (Proposition 209) have demonstrated anything, it is that the relationship between blacks and whites in this country still remains somewhat strained in spite of perceived or real gains in the area of civil rights over the last few decades. In fact, events such as those cited above may be viewed as symptomatic of an underlying chronic condition of the collective American psyche that we might diagnose as a type of national schizophrenia.

The primary cause of this serious condition is the phenomenon that some observers have described as the "perception gap" between blacks and whites in America. This gulf in the way the two groups perceive the same events is observable in the symptoms cited earlier. In the case of the debate over Proposition 209, a measure designed to end race-based preferences (affirmative action programs) in California's universities, most whites believed that such programs amounted to reverse discrimination, rewarding minorities for ethnicity rather than for merit. On the other hand, the majority of blacks felt that the programs were necessary to overcome past discrimination and to level the playing field for jobs and education. And in the case of the O. J. Simpson verdict, polls indicated that while the majority of whites thought that Simpson was guilty and that his defense team took advantage of a racially sympathetic jury, most blacks viewed him as the victim of a racist police department and justice system.

Two other indications of the national schizophrenia affect specific segments of the populace. For example, many white Americans suffer at times from long- and short-term memory loss when they forget that the brutalizing institution of slavery came to an official end in this country less than one hundred fifty years ago and that Jim Crow

segregation in the South and *de facto* segregation everywhere else became illegal less than four decades ago. That memory loss results in a condition of denial for some who insist that racism no longer exists or that its effects are inconsequential. Many black Americans, on the other hand, exhibit symptoms of schizophrenic paranoia when they see racism everywhere and envision themselves as victims and targets of all sorts of conspiracies, such as the AIDS epidemic and the plague of crack cocaine, which they feel have been perpetrated upon the black community by racist individuals, institutions, or governmental agencies.

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The symptoms are not surprising, considering the history of the patient. While historians generally view America's past in homogenous or monolithic terms, in reality our country developed first as two distinct "peoples" and then as a nation within a nation. This realization comes to light when we understand that the concept "people" "always implies unity of fate. It presupposes that in a great creative hour throngs of human beings were shaped into a new entity by a great molding fate they experienced in common."¹ In light of this insight we can see that, while settlers from England and other European countries were being forged into a people separate and apart from their former kinspeople and countrymen by such creative forces as the events before, during, and after the Revolutionary War, Africans from many different tribes were becoming another people through the traumatic events of the Middle Passage and institutionalized slavery.

Further insights regarding the relationship of peoples and nations help us to understand how a black nation developed within a larger white nation.

A people becomes a nation to the degree that it grows aware that its existence differs from that of other peoples . . . and acts on the basis of this awareness. So the term "nation" signifies the unit "people," from the point of view of conscious and active difference. Historically speaking, this consciousness is usually the result of some inner—social or political—transformation, through which the people comes to realize its own peculiar structure and actions, and sets them off from others. It is decisive activity and suffering, especially in an age of migrations and land conquests, which produces a *people*. A *nation* is produced when its acquired status undergoes a decisive inner change which is accepted as such in the people's self-consciousness.²

Viewing our country's history from this perspective gives rise to the observation that white America's "peoplehood" emerged almost simultaneously with its "nationhood," for it became a nation shortly after gaining its independence from England and forming its own constitution. Since, however, when that transformation took place the black "people" of America was in a condition of slavery, it could not *act* on a growing awareness that its existence differed from that of any other people. And while that people obviously underwent a significant transformation of social status with slavery's official demise, it did not experience a decisive and transforming inner change in its collective self-consciousness until the civil rights movement achieved major victories in the 1950s and 1960s and black cultural awareness emerged and became widespread in the latter half of the 1960s and the early 1970s. Not until that point can it truly be said that America became a nation within a nation.

Considering America's history, then, it is not surprising that she suffers from acute schizophrenia. The question that now arises is, what is the patient's prognosis? The answer to that question depends to a great extent upon the patient herself. If she chooses to ignore the obvious symptoms and fails to seek appropriate treatment, then it is likely that cultural affinities and national ties within each of America's two nations will grow stronger, while the bonds between them will steadily weaken. The result

will be a widening of the perception gap, which will cause further symptomatic misunderstandings and conflicts between the two nations as the national schizophrenia worsens. If, however, America acknowledges that she has a problem and administers the proper treatment, then there is hope that the condition can be forced into remission, allowing the two nations to truly become one.

But is there an effective treatment for the type of schizophrenia that affects America? Two events in her history suggest that there is. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as a result of the tide of revivalistic fervor that swept the country during and after the Second Great Awakening, many whites and blacks in the South overcame the very real gulf that separated them and, for a time, worshipped together as equals in Christ. And for a brief period in the 1960s, compelled primarily by the Christian principles espoused by and embodied in Martin Luther King Jr., people of goodwill of both races joined hands and hearts long enough to form a national consensus against racial injustice. Lyndon Johnson took advantage of that consensus to pass sweeping civil rights legislation that would eventually end Jim Crow segregation. It would seem, then, that Christianity possesses a characteristic that has the capacity to break down barriers between human groups, even under such extreme conditions as slavery and institutionalized segregation. Insights from three passages in the New Testament suggest that this inherently unifying characteristic is the doctrine of the atoning death of Jesus on the cross.

The first insight is to be found in John 3:16, which reads: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The key terms here are "the world" and "everyone," both of which emphasize the universal aspect of Christ's atoning death on the cross. God's selfless love transcends particularism and the real and imaginary geographical, psychological, and sociological boundaries that people consciously and unconsciously establish between themselves. And the cross rises above any national figure or flag as the object of human loyalty and stands counter to any and all harmful nationalistic tendencies.

Paul restates the same point in quite different terms when, in Eph 2:14–18, he writes:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing

wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

The cross of Christ, then, with its propensity for unifying diverse and potentially hostile segments of humanity, offers an effective treatment for America's schizophrenic condition.



Here Paul infers that Christ's death on the cross produced two major consequences. First, it brought about peace and reconciliation between God and humans, two parties who had been estranged since sin came into the world through the disobedience of humankind's common progenitors. Second, Christ's death abolished the Mosaic law, which formed a seemingly insurmountable cultural, ethnic, and religious impediment between Jews and Gentiles, thus allowing for the unification of those two formerly hostile groups in one body.

The final unifying aspect of the cross is implicit in Phil 2:1–11. This passage contains the well-known Christ hymn, in which Paul describes Jesus' preexistence with God, his humbly obedient incarnation and death on the cross, and his subsequent exaltation. The unifying character of the passage emerges when we consider verses 1–4, in which Paul states:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion, any sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish am-

bition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

We can see how the Christ hymn (verses 5–11), with its primary focus on the death of Christ on the cross, functions to provide the theological motivation for the exhortations that immediately precede it. Paul urges the Philippians to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” who did not selfishly exploit his preexistent status as Son of God, but rather humbled himself and selflessly gave his life for others. The Philippians are to act out of consideration for the thoughts and feelings of others rather than out of selfish motives. In this regard they are to be “in full accord and of one mind.” Here again, we see the inherently unifying character of Christ’s death on the cross.

The cross of Christ, then, with its propensity for unifying diverse and potentially hostile segments of humanity, offers an effective treatment for America’s schizophrenic condition. As is the case with any other human condition, however, effective treatment requires proper administration. Proper administration of the doctrine of the cross of Christ requires, first of all, that America realize that a significant percentage of her citizens either identify with or claim allegiance to some form of Christianity.

Many of those citizens already exert enormous pressure on their elected political representatives on such issues as abortion, prayer in schools, and “family values.” While those issues are important, so also is the widening perception gap between blacks and whites in this country. If the unifying aspects of Christ’s death were emphasized in pulpits, in Bible classes, and in various forms of Christian media across this nation, then sincere believers, both black and white, might just come to the understanding that the many truly become one only at the foot of the cross. And that understanding might move those same sincere people to cast down the nationalistic barriers that we have consciously or unconsciously erected, barriers that keep us from healing our schizophrenic condition and truly becoming one nation under God.

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Notes

¹Martin Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 50.

²Buber, 51.