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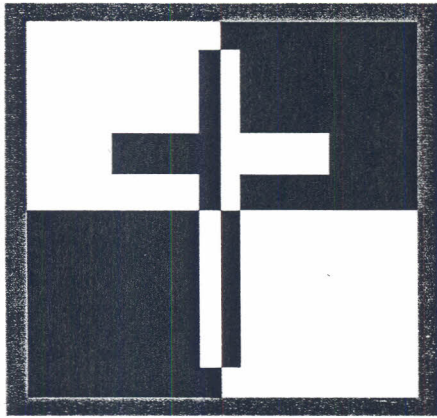
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# Racial Reconciliation: A Neglected Mandate of Christian Unity

Robert Oldham Fife

In a sociology class some years ago, we were studying the problem of racism. During the discussion a young leader of our Jamaican churches somewhat hesitantly shared a personal experience that left the class utterly silent.

During the previous summer this student had been returning to Jamaica from a visit to Canada, accompanied by a Canadian friend. On the Lord's Day they sought a place to worship and were delighted to find a Christian Church in a small town. As they approached the open door, a deacon greeted them in a friendly fashion. But while he welcomed the Canadian student, the deacon said to the Jamaican, "I'm sorry, but colored folks do not worship here. There is a church two blocks down that street where you will be welcome."

Soon after arriving home, the Jamaican told his experience to the American missionary who had baptized him. The missionary asked, "What church did you say that was?" When the Jamaican told him the name, the missionary exclaimed, "Why, that congregation is one of my main supporters!"

What an irony! But the saddest thing was to hear the Jamaican say, "Of course, I wanted the communion."

What has happened? Here was a congregation born out of the Stone-Campbell reformation with its plea for Christian unity. It was an assembly devoted to proclamation of the gospel and "faithful observance" of the

"ordinances." Yet it turned a believer away from the Lord's Table simply because of his race.

Doubtless, elders presiding at the Table had occasionally read these words:

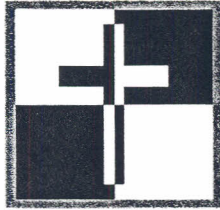
The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion of the body of Christ? seeing that we, who are many, are one bread, one body: for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Cor 10:16–17 ASV)

Surely, it was not because they understood the truth of this passage that they excluded their Jamaican convert! I would hope it was rather because they, like many other modern heirs of the Stone-Campbell reformation, have not considered its meaning for our contemporary American situation. If that be the case, there is hope, for, as Alexander Campbell wrote to the lady from Lunenburg, "Mistakes of the understanding and errors of the affections are not to be confounded."<sup>1</sup> The latter are far more serious than the former.

The neglected teaching to which we have referred is this: *Christian unity has social significance*. The Stone-Campbell movement has long advocated Christian unity through the recovery of the faith and order of the apostolic church.<sup>2</sup> But with few exceptions, we have not placed a similar emphasis upon the social dimensions of that unity.

To be “right” on the meaning of *baptizō* has apparently been more important to us than to be “right” on the social significance of *koinonía*.

Is it not true today that many congregations desperately need to recover the social significance of the Lord’s Supper?



Thirty years ago Gibson Winter stated the problem succinctly: “How can an inclusive message be mediated through an exclusive group, when the principle of exclusiveness is social-class identity rather than a gift of faith which is open to all?”<sup>3</sup> The reality of the *koinonia* was revealed to the apostolic company as God’s gift—a reconciliation already accomplished through the blood of the cross. Thus Peter was told, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” The apostle therefore concluded, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:15, 34, 35 NIV).

Likewise revealed was the divine purpose in making Christ “our peace.” That purpose was “to create in himself one new man [humanity]” (Eph 2:14–22). In that new humanity “there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, free-man,” because “Christ is all, and in all” (Col 3:11).

In similar fashion Paul wrote to the Galatians:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ. There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye all are one man [humanity] in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:27, 28 ASV)<sup>4</sup>

But if the reality of the *koinonia* was revealed as a divine gift, the historical actuality has often appeared to be a gift yet “unopened.” The gift of the *koinonia* has commonly been the church’s “hot potato.” Witness the difficulty Peter had in convincing the elders from Jerusalem that the gift was truly from God. Then, later in Antioch, Peter himself was intimidated by racist Judaizers and thus withdrew from eating with Gentile believers. Nor was that the last time racists in the church intimidated those who sought to receive more completely the gift of the *koinonia*.

It was truly a crucial moment in the life of the early church when Paul condemned Peter’s behavior to his face (Gal 2:11–14).

But race was not the only focus of alienation in the early church. Socioeconomic class was also a factor, as it is today.<sup>5</sup> The Corinthians (during the “love feast”!) refused to share their *own meals* with the poor who had none but afterward piously shared the *Lord’s Meal* with them.<sup>6</sup> Paul flatly declared that such behavior made it “impossible to eat the Lord’s Supper.” Theirs was a mockery—an empty ceremony of eating and drinking. It was devoid of the Savior’s presence, for they grossly failed to “discern the body” and to minister to its members’ needs as Jesus would have done (1 Cor 11:20–29).

Is it not true today that many congregations desperately need to recover the social significance of the Lord’s Supper? Surely, it is not wrong that we have emphasized the importance of “self-examination” in partaking.<sup>7</sup> But have we not unduly privatized the Supper, not giving sufficient emphasis to that other-centered awareness which is also necessary to authentic “communion?”

We who are concerned for racial reconciliation would do well to consider this thesis: *It is at the Lord’s Table that the social reformation of the church must be learned.* The *koinonia* that was accomplished at the cross and is recalled in the breaking of the bread is far different from mere “integration.” Integration has been mandated by law and is limited to what law can do. But the *koinonia* is rooted in the love of Christ and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, wills and accomplishes what the coercion of law cannot do.

*Koinonia* emanates from Spirit-filled hearts and transforms social relationships. Since Christ died for all, Paul declared, “Henceforth, we know no man after the flesh,” or, “We regard no one from a worldly point of view” (2 Cor 5:16 ASV, NIV). Churches must prayerfully reconsider what such passages mean for today. We are called to a social relationship far higher than “integration.” Our calling is to make real the *koinonia* for which Jesus died.

In the antebellum South, it was common in Christian Churches and Churches of Christ for slaves and masters to worship around the same Lord’s Table.<sup>8</sup> Yet the *koinonia* in its fullest sense was exceedingly difficult to achieve. Numerous congregations had slave deacons, but there were apparently no slave elders. Records speak of a number of slave or freedmen preachers. But full participation in the life of the church was almost impossible for slaves under

the duress of the slavery system. The “nature of his case” made a slave’s authentic participation difficult—and authenticity is the key to worship.

Yet there is abundant evidence that despite the obvious social and legal restrictions to which the churches submitted, much love was present. One reads with great tenderness of the deaths of Christmas and Eli, who were slave deacons. In sorrowful retrospect, Tolbert Fanning wrote in 1872 from Nashville:

Time was when thousands of the best informed colored people of the south lived in full fellowship as members of the church of Christ, with their white brethren. They prayed, sang, exhorted and broke bread together, as members of one family. . . . These people sat with their white brethren many years in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. It was a joyful season.<sup>9</sup>

But told by authorities that they had the “right to pick up and go,” multitudes of freedmen left the churches of their former masters. Many joined already existing “colored” congregations, although some chose to remain in their home churches with their former masters.

Today, critics are quick to condemn the churches of the Old South because they did not succeed in completely erasing the “line.” We read of the Welch’s Creek Church in North Carolina, where all communed together but “drew the line” at the footwashing service. It was evidently too much to expect a master to kneel down and wash his slave’s feet. Yet who are *we* to judge? Indeed, a popular school of thought seeks to justify socially and racially “homogenous” (segregated) churches, teaching that they “fit” American culture better and “grow” faster.

But where is the Christian counterculture that calls troubled societies such as ours to repentance? Where is the “new humanity” in which there “can be neither Greek nor Jew?” These pressing questions remain: Amidst the turbulence of our multiracial, multicultural age, can the church reclaim its role as pioneer of the new humanity in Christ? Dare we learn “henceforth” to “regard no one from

a worldly point of view?” Or is it too radical and risky for churches to exemplify what they confess, that “Christ is all, and in all”?

Today, racial reconciliation must begin where it began: at the cross of Jesus, which is ever recalled around the Table of the Lord.

**ROBERT OLDHAM FIFE** was adjunct professor of church history at Emmanuel School of Religion and Founding Director of the Westwood Christian Foundation in Los Angeles. He has authored the definitive study of Alexander Campbell’s role in the slavery controversy: *Teeth on Edge: Alexander Campbell and the Christian Church in the Slavery Controversy* (Baker, 1970).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Alexander Campbell, “Any Christians Among Protestant Parties,” *Millennial Harbinger*, n.s., 1 (September 1837): 412.

<sup>2</sup>See Alexander Campbell’s essays entitled “Restoration of the Ancient Order” in *Christian Baptist* (1823–1829).

<sup>3</sup>Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), 33.

<sup>4</sup>The ASV is used in this instance because it correctly reflects the strength of the original. “Cannot be” is much more emphatic than “is not.”

<sup>5</sup>Not only are denominations in America divided socially (See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* [New York: Meridian Books, 1957; original copyright, Henry Holt, 1929]), but congregations within the same denomination are commonly socially separated.

<sup>6</sup>See S. Scott Bartchy, “Biblical Interpretation: Table Fellowship with Jesus and the Lord’s Meal in Corinth,” in *Increase in Learning*, ed. Robert Owens and Barbara Hamm (Manhattan, Kans., 1979).

<sup>7</sup>We have rightly practiced weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper. We have correctly affirmed the priesthood of all believers and the consequent right of any persons chosen by a congregation to preside at the Table. We have also rightly placed the Lord’s Supper in the center of our common worship.

<sup>8</sup>See Robert O. Fife, *Teeth on Edge* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 67ff; also, “Alexander Campbell and the Christian Church in the Slavery Controversy” (Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University, 1960).

<sup>9</sup>Tolbert Fanning, “The Colored People of the South” in *The Religious Historian* (Nashville, 1872), 89, 90; quoted in *Teeth on Edge*, 123.