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FROM THE SIXTIES to the NINETIES

“How Far Have We Come?”

A PERSONAL RESPONSE

Andrew J. Hairston

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26–28 NASB)

No biblical reference is more demanding and clear-cut regarding the oneness of God’s people of faith than the above Galatian passage. It articulates a oneness that defies discrimination based on racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual, or other natural groupings or classifications, even though our diverse forms of discriminations are based upon those phenomena. Gal 3:28 seeks the deconstruction of lifestyles that are based upon the convenience of classification; it affords us a unity in Christ that the world cannot give.

Systematic discrimination of diverse types is as old as humanity. It is unique to no group or segment of society. It is deeply and, apparently, permanently anchored in our systems of life. No period of history has been without discrimination, and it appears that there will never be a time on this side of eternity without it. Whether one views racial discrimination as a human, social, political, or spiritual issue, the obligation, the desire, the impetus, the power to effect change will be fostered only by those who are willing to sacrificially respond to a calling from beyond

the weak urgings of what would appear “fair” or acceptable for all times.

Perhaps no earthly entity claiming to be responsive to divine direction through Scripture has been better positioned than Churches of Christ and other bodies of the Stone-Campbell movement to cause real change at so vital a point of life. But they have not seized upon the opportunity. Equality without exception (anchored in Gal 3:26–28) and the Pauline metaphor of breaking down the walls of separation (Eph 2:11–22) are clear marching orders for God’s people regarding oneness. These scriptures, written in the crucible of discrimination and passed on to us by the New Testament canon, yet beckon us and solicit our obedience.

The sixties symbolize a period in which racism came under its strongest attacks. The period was characterized by demonstrations, sit-ins, pray-ins, forced busing, school desegregation, marches, freedom rides, civil rights legislation, school closings, jailings, bombings, special dangers, interracial groups working together to change life, and much more. Limited Churches of Christ groups engaged in race relations forums in Nashville, Atlanta, and other places. Black brethren were invited to address white audiences, and many personal dialogues were conducted. Black and white ministers sought for answers and exchanged pulpits in an effort to bring their churches to recognition of the problem. During this period of great

tension and stress some of my strongest relationships were built with both whites and blacks.

During the sixties and seventies, white brotherhood schools and some Churches of Christ began considering black Americans for enrollment and membership. But those accommodations occurred because of diverse factors including federal funding, tokenism, and other social and political trends as well as commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ and human brotherhood. Scriptural arguments were made for positive changes under God's will, but for the leaders of brotherhood churches and institutions (who decided who would be admitted to those churches and institutions), the arguments were no more effective than they had been for those who had preceded them. The teachings of Scripture were no match for their predetermined will to remain segregated.

Though the Churches of Christ and other churches of the Stone-Campbell movement contended that the Bible was their basic and foremost guide in matters of faith and practice, there is little or no reason to believe that the churches' adherence to Scripture caused them to begin to operate according to an open-door policy regarding the admission of blacks to their institutions. In many instances the race issue was classified as a social, personal, and political issue that lay beyond the responsibilities of the church. Yet it was through the social, economic, legal, and political spheres that changes were made, which the church then accepted.

To fail to acknowledge that life for the races is significantly improved in many ways in Churches of Christ and the larger world today would be unrealistic and would constitute denial of the obvious. For example, the very next article describes one congregation as fully integrated. Clearly, this is the exception rather than the rule and much remains to be done. In some cases blacks attend white churches without notice. As a matter of fact, blacks are solicited, courted, and encouraged by some whites to attend their churches. But integration has mostly been a one-way street. Whites generally do not attend or integrate black churches. When whites do attend, it does not appear to be with the same feeling of freedom that they expect blacks to have when attending white churches. Nor does it appear to be with the same feeling of comfort that blacks seem to have when attending white churches. Blacks appear to become leaders in white churches because black representation is needed by the white church. Blacks who are objective about life and less accommoda-

tive to the white system tend to be avoided. Nor are blacks who oppose the system likely to be chosen. The white system is more comfortable with blacks who "play ball." Black churches still seek only black preachers, and white churches still consider only white preachers for their congregations. The world beyond the church has advanced much further than the church in this area of human relations. The church remains segregated—in fact, in thinking, and in spirit—just like the world around it, and sometimes even more.

† The church remains segregated—in fact, in thinking, and in spirit—just like the world around it, and sometimes even more.

As a matter of fact, the social system of today predetermines what the church does and will do in the area of race relations just like it did before and during the sixties. To a great extent, the Churches of Christ are acting and responding today to the system just as they did then. The church is not on the "cutting edge" of that which humanizes or renders humans equal. It is answering the "call of God" according to world opinion. It is just "going with the flow." It gets upset about what the world gets upset about and seeks "worldly-approved" solutions.

When blacks and other minorities look for the source that is responsible for life's being better for them regarding equal citizenship, desegregation, integration, and the thrust for equality, they will not find a reason to turn to Churches of Christ, white or black. The Churches of Christ have not been on the "cutting edge." Although the famed civil rights Montgomery Bus Boycott lawyer was and remains an ardent member of the Churches of Christ, Churches of Christ have not been at the forefront of the battle against discrimination against blacks. The voice of the Churches of Christ (black and white) was not to be heard in Montgomery during the boycott. As a matter of fact, the voice was deathly silent.

Churches of Christ have tended not to be involved, have criticized those who were involved, or have run at the rear of the pack of those who chose to identify passively with right. They have not been involved with those

making changes in race relations. The law and the courts, sports and athletics, society and public policy have outdistanced the world and the church in effecting change for the disenfranchised.

Churches of Christ and other churches of the Stone-Campbell movement elected not to provide leadership in one of history's most critical hours. But hardly will Churches of Christ and other laymen-led churches ever be able to operate decisively on the "cutting edge" of life. They cannot speak with authority on issues; they are laymen-controlled. They claim themselves subject to the Word, but that "Word" must meet the approval of the membership rather than rely on God's power through the proclaimed Word.

So, race relations are better in some ways in the nineties than they were in the sixties, but that is because the pack we are running with is doing better, since integration is now more acceptable. Getting on the "cutting edge" regarding the real issues of life remains a ministry that calls us, but it appears to be a ministry to which we may not have the strength and commitment to respond.

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Notes from "Why the Social Gospel Is Essential"

¹Harold U. Faulkner, *The Decline of Laissez Faire, 1897-1917* (New York: Rinehart, 1951), 21.

²Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An historical account of the development of American religious life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 313.

³Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 48.

⁴_____, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 127-137, 56-66.

⁵Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 216.

⁶Benedict T. Viviano, "The Gospel According to Matthew," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1990), 632.

⁷Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, *Anchor Bible 28* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1981-1985), 361.

⁸See Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).