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Racial Reconciliation In Christian Ethics: Toward Starting a Conversation

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In this article, delivered originally in 1998 at Marquette University, the author confronts the reality of racism by introducing the need for racial reconciliation. Addressing such issues as social structures and evangelical approaches to the question of race, Massingale ends with a critique of the approach of Catholic theologians and ethicists to racial justice. In the end, Massingale remarks that for Catholics the legacy of slavery continues to hinder an openness to the reality of Africans and African Americans in the Church and in society.

For the past several years, I have taught a course entitled, “Christian Faith and Racial Justice.” After attempting to gain clarity as to the nature of “racism,” my students and I seek to discover how the Christian faith has been both complicitous in and subversive to the existence of racial hierarchy in American life. As an instructor, one of the challenges I face is providing resources from a Christian perspective which address the concept of racial reconciliation or healing. There are few published resources available from professional theologians or ethicists . . . and most of these are written from an Evangelical faith perspective. The lack of serious and

sustained reflection upon such an important issue is a major lacuna in theological ethics in general, and Catholic ethics in particular.

Hence, the goal of this presentation is to engage in an adventure of theological pioneering. I invite you to skirt the frontiers of Christian ethical reflection by pondering questions such as: How can we conceive of "reconciliation" in racial matters, where the "forgiveness" sought is not merely - or even principally - between suspicious and antagonistic *individuals*, but between estranged racial *groups*? What contribution does a Christian theo-ethical imagination bring to the effort to overcome long-standing and deeply entrenched racial antipathies and injustices? I propose to explore these questions by: 1) coming to some clarity as to the meaning of "racial reconciliation"; 2) exploring the treatment of this topic in the body of racial reconciliation literature authored by American Evangelical theologians and pastoral ministers; 3) probing the Catholic ethical tradition and its potential contribution to this issue; and 4) concluding with a summary of the work that lies ahead toward a more adequate theological understanding of racial reconciliation from a Christian perspective.

At the outset, I offer three caveats which set the parameters of this presentation. First, because of the nature of the subject, what follows cannot be a complete or comprehensive treatment of the questions engendered by "racial reconciliation." What I offer is better characterized as a "conversation starter," that is, an initial sketch of the contours of this pressing social ethical problem.

Second, I will limit my reflection to the issue of racial reconciliation as it presents itself in the U.S. experience, and

within that experience, to the racial tensions and divisions between the racial groups designated as “white” and “black.”

This is a somewhat controverted position. I grant that a study of American race relations which focuses only on these racial groups is somewhat inadequate. Yet, I contend that the estrangement between these two groups has shaped American society in decisive ways not matched by either the estrangement between whites and other racial groups, or tensions among the “groups of color.” Thus the “black/white” divide merits privileged attention.

Finally, I hope to demonstrate that the issue of racial reconciliation is not – or ought not be – peripheral to the interests and concerns of Christian theologians and ethicists. To many, the stain of racism in American society is our most perduring and intransigent social injustice.¹ Moreover, one can argue that almost every major social question or phenomenon in the United States today – whether education, crime, health care, poverty – is entangled with, and/or exacerbated by, historic racial animus and present-day discrimination against people of color in general and African Americans in particular. Thus healing or overcoming of the social divisions between the principal racial groups is not only of paramount importance for the nation; addressing this issue is also crucial for the adequacy and relevance of Christian social ethics.

¹So avows Christian ethicist Donald W. Shriver, Jr., who calls anti-black racism “the oldest American civic injustice” in his *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 171.

What is "Racial Reconciliation?"

I believe that it will prove helpful to arrive at an understanding of "racial reconciliation" through an imaginative consideration of questions such as: What would a racially just society look like? What would an America free from the stain of racism be like? What would be the racial composition of its classrooms, neighborhoods, professional schools and occupations? Far from being a distraction or trivial exercise, moral imagination (that is, "a playful suspension of judgement leading us toward a more appropriate grasp of reality"²) is critically important. Envisioning an alternative future not only sheds light upon what is lacking in the present; it also provides a guide as to what actions are required to bring the desired future to fruition.

Yale Law School professor Harlon L. Dalton considers such questions and then engages in a series of "thought experiments" in an attempt to envision what he calls "a racial Promised Land," that is, an America free of the virus of racism.³ One such racial utopia he calls "Beigia," an exact mirror image of the planet Earth, except all of the inhabitants of this world experience a sudden transformation of their skins into an identical shade of beige. Their hair, facial

²Philip S. Keane, *Christian Ethics & Imagination* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 81.

³Harlon L. Dalton, *Racial Healing: Confronting the Fear between Blacks and Whites* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 213.

features and body types are also changed in such a way as not to signify racial differences. Quoting Dalton, "It is as if someone mixed three parts Mariah Carey to one part Connie Chung."⁴ Individual differences and familial similarities still exist on Beigia, but do not fall into "racial" patterns. He further extends the thought experiment by removing from the Beigians any memory of their previous racial identities. In this scenario, racial tensions and divisions are eliminated because the category of "race" as we know it (i.e., human groups socially defined by obvious physical differences) has ceased to exist. Racial harmony and peace prevail through the cancellation of racial difference. Racial conflicts, then, are eradicated through the elimination of racial diversity. This is a truly "color-blind" society: with no racial differences, there are also no racial tensions.

We have to recognize that this thought experiment has a certain popular resonance. How often have we heard people say, "When I look at you (i.e., a person of color), I don't see black?" Or, "There is only one race: the *human* race." Or again, "We need to stop focusing on race, because deep down we are all the same." Such statements, while often well intentioned, nonetheless can be subtle expressions of a desire to get beyond race by ignoring (that is, psychologically eliminating) racial differences.

Without discounting the significant benefits of living in a world free from the poison of racial bigotry and estrangement, Dalton believes that most of us would find

⁴Dalton, *Racial Healing*, 215.

such a monochromatic world an undesirable place.⁵ He posits two reasons. First, he worries that the lack of physical differences would make cultural distinctiveness harder to preserve. Granted that race and ethnicity are distinct realities, nonetheless he states that many associate color difference with cultural heterogeneity. Thus he fears that a lack of visible distinctiveness compromises a group's ability to resist what he calls the "homogenizing pull of American mass culture."⁶ Second, and most significantly, stripping away memory of racial identity also deprives us of what makes us who we are; indeed, Dalton observes that without "our past, whether noble or ignoble, painful or pleasurable, we cease to exist."⁷ All of this militates against "Beigia" being a model of racial utopia, or the goal of a process of racial reconciliation.

The significance of this thought experiment for Christian ethics is that any adequate account of racial reconciliation needs to provide a positive interpretation and embrace of racial difference and distinctiveness.

Dalton's next thought experiment posits the existence of another planetary duplicate, a racial utopia he calls "Proportia." In this utopia, every city, school, neighborhood, church, occupation, profession, sports team, civic and voluntary association in Proportia's United States has a racial

⁵In one place, Dalton opines that Beigia is like a world populated only with generic "birds," rather than starlings and cardinals (*Racial Healing*, 218).

⁶Dalton, *Racial Healing*, 219.

⁷Dalton, *Racial Healing*, 219.

composition of 75% white, 12% black, 9% Latino, 3% Asian, and 1% Native American. Thus, in every aspect of American life, the racial composition of every group and association would mirror the racial distribution of American society as a whole.

Again, there is a certain popular resonance with this utopian arrangement. We often find this approach utilized in our public discourse. A severe proportional imbalance of persons of color in positions of social influence is often taken as *prima facie* evidence of racial exclusion or detriment. Such reasoning, for example, underlies concern regarding the racial disparities present in the law clerks for the Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court,⁸ and the fact that the major executives of Fortune 500 companies are overwhelmingly white males. Proportional representation, then, would appear to offer some promise as a vehicle toward the goal of racial reconciliation and harmony.

Yet this “racial promised land” is also unsatisfactory. Besides the massive population shifts which would be required, proportional presence is no guarantee of a cessation of racial suspicion and animosity. Moreover, a rigid adherence to proportional representation fails to take into account or allow for genuine cultural differences and/or group preferences.⁹ For example, would we want to insist that a gospel choir must have a membership that is 75% white, or

⁸“Corps of clerks lacking in diversity,” *USA Today* (March 13, 1998), 12A.

⁹Dalton, *Racial Healing*, 221.

that a professional basketball team be only 12% black, or that a math department could have only 2% of its students be Asians, or that an Irish dance troupe be 9% Hispanic?

But “Proportia” does indicate what is at the heart of racial tensions and animosities. Interest in proportional representation reflects a concern over racial exclusion from positions of power and social influence. Severe racial imbalances are a cause for concern when they compromise access to social prestige, political power, or cultural influence. In other words, anxiety over proportional representation reflects concern about a racial group’s ability to be effective participants in U.S. society and public life.

Thus these thought experiments are helpful for ascertaining the problematic, and the goal, of racial reconciliation. What is problematic in American culture is not the presence of racial differences, but the linkage of power and prestige to racial difference. It is the social significance of race – the use of race to advance or circumscribe, enhance or impede, the life chances and opportunities of a human group – that is problematic and socially divisive.

Thus I contend that racial reconciliation is not concerned with the elimination of racial differences, but rather the elimination of the social stigma and privilege associated with race. Racial reconciliation, then, is the process of healing the estrangement, division, and hostility between racial groups by overturning or severing the linkage between race and social, cultural, and/or political subordination and dominance.¹⁰

¹⁰Dalton expresses similar views to the one I advocate: “The fact that

It should be noted that this understanding of racial reconciliation privileges a concern for the systemic, structural, and institutional character of racism. It gives less attention to individual and interpersonal transformation. Some might question if such a focus is sufficient; I maintain that it is essential and critical. For until the nexus between race, power, and privilege is overcome, relations between racial groups cannot but be marked by resentment, suspicion, mistrust, and hostility.

Mainstream Evangelical Theology of Racial Reconciliation

Given this understanding of racial reconciliation, we now turn to an examination of the theological approach adopted by American Evangelical writers on this issue. The literature which stems from this faith tradition is significant for several reasons. For one, Evangelicals are a significant presence in American religious life, accounting for 25% of the Christians in the United States.¹¹ Second, Evangelical writers have produced a corpus dealing with racial reconciliation which is unmatched by any other Christian tradition.¹²

people come in different colors is not a problem, nor are racial differences necessarily a bad thing. . . . What needs changing is the negative value our society places on racial difference, and its use of race as a basis for maintaining a social hierarchy” (*Racial Healing*, 220).

¹¹J. Christopher Soper, *Evangelical Christianity in the United States and Great Britain: Religious Beliefs, Political Choices* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 3.

¹²Cf. the following books: Raleigh Washington and Glenn Kehrein, *Breaking Down Walls: A Model for Reconciliation in an Age of Racial*

Space limitations do not permit a detailed account of this movement and its perspective on race relations. I will make some observations about the principal themes and motifs present in this literature.

The designation, “popular,” characterizes most of this literature. That is, these works are directed toward a lay audience and presuppose no formal theological education. Much of it is also of the genre of “personal testimony,” that is, the authors are giving an account of their personal faith journeys and the convictions to which this journey has led them for the purpose of inspiring their readers to embrace a similar faith stance.

Another hallmark of much of this literature is its interracial authorship. The major works are jointly authored by a white male and an African American male, who speak of their journey from racial naiveté, hatred and/or bitterness to a commitment to interracial friendship and racial reconciliation

Strife (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1993); Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice, *More Than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993); John Perkins and Thomas A. Tarrants III, *He's My Brother: A Black Activist and a Former Klansman Tell Their Stories* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1994); William Pannell, *The Coming Race Wars? A Cry for Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993); George A. Yancey, *Beyond Black and White: Reflections on Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996); and Dennis L. Okholm (ed.), *The Gospel in Black and White: Theological Resources for Racial Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997). A recent overview of evangelicals and race relations is provided by Edward Gilbreath, “Catching Up with a Dream: Evangelicals and Race 30 Years after the Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *Christianity Today* 42 (March 2, 1998), 21-29.

ministry.¹³ Thus the authorship of the works gives testimony to the commitment they hope to engender in their readers.

Another distinguishing feature of this literature is a sense of urgency. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that these works are written in the almost immediate aftermath of the Los Angeles riot of 1992, events which almost all of our authors specifically mention. These authors view the events of Los Angeles as a dire wake-up call to the church and a summons to the self-examination and repentance needed in order to avoid more cataclysmic events in the future.¹⁴

In their understanding of racial reconciliation, the following characteristics mark this literature:

1) There is a universal, emphatically stated conviction about the utter incompatibility of personal faith in Jesus Christ and practices of racial discrimination and attitudes of racial hatred. Perkins and Tarrants provide a searing statement of this conviction:

If we are puzzled why so few professing Christians in America are concerned for racial reconciliation or the poor, part of the answer may be that they are not really Christians at all. One of the greatest challenges we face today is helping the “Christians” come to saving faith.

But lack of true conversion is not the only

¹³Cf. especially the works by Washington and Kehrein, Perkins and Rice, and Perkins and Tarrants.

¹⁴Here take note of the title of Pannell’s book, *The Coming Race Wars? A Cry for Reconciliation*.

problem in the Church today. Among many who are true converts of Jesus Christ, there is another problem: **lack of total commitment to Him.** ...

In the broadest sense, then, racial alienation in the Church goes back to these two root problems--lack of true conversion and lack of total commitment.¹⁵

2) Another common characteristic is the belief that racial estrangement, especially between Christians, is evidence of the power of the demonic at work both in the world and in the church. The authors often speak of their conversion experiences from racial hatred, bitterness, and fear as an experience of “deliverance” or “release” from spiritual captivity or bondage.¹⁶

3) With few exceptions, this literature understands racism as consisting of attitudes of racial hatred and personal actions of culpable omission and/or commission. While some avert to the concept of “institutional racism,” by far the most attention is given to issues of personal culpability in racial divisions. Evidence of this is found in the discussion of whether “blacks can be racist.” The almost universal answer is a virtually unqualified “yes.” The following is a most cogent expression of this conviction:

¹⁵Perkins and Tarrants, *He's My Brother*, 171-173; emphasis in the original.

¹⁶See Perkins and Rice, *More Than Equals*, 216-227; and especially Perkins and Tarrants, *He's My Brother*, 212-214.

Therefore, according to this definition [i.e., racism understood as involving the power to dominate or oppress], white society (the dominant culture) is racist, but the black community is not, nor could be, racist. When translated to the individual level this means that the actions of the police who beat Rodney King were racist, but the actions of the mob against the white truck driver were not.

As Christians we must categorically reject this conclusion. It denies all levels of personal responsibility. *Racism is first and foremost a condition of the heart. . . .* [L]ike all sin, racism is first personal, and every one of us – African-American, Euro-American, Hispanic, Asian, Native American – must deal personally with this sin in our own lives. . . . Whites must admit responsibility; but blacks also must admit wrongful attitudes.¹⁷

4) As mentioned above, Evangelicals posit that the remedy for racism is personal conversion and deeper adherence to faith in Jesus Christ. For only Christ can break the demonic hold of racism that grips churches and individuals; moreover, in Christ reconciliation has already been gained for us. A principal text to which reference is continually made is Ephesians 2: 13-16; Christ's dissolution of the barrier separating Jew and Greek is taken as the present

¹⁷Washington and Kehrein, *Breaking Down Walls*, 204; emphasis in the original. See also Yancey, *Beyond Black and White*, 35-39.

action of Christ breaching the wall of hostility separating black and white.¹⁸

5) A concrete measure of the authenticity of one's conversion is one's willingness to be an "ambassador of reconciliation" (cf. 2 Cor. 5: 17-20). This willingness is evidenced by one's commitment to develop relationships of mutuality and friendship with members of another race. Evangelical racial reconciliation stresses the importance of cultivating deep interracial relationships as the means of remedying the racial divide that plagues American churches and society. This conviction is virtually universal:

[O]ne of Satan's primary tools to inhibit racial reconciliation and cross-cultural outreach is to make us very comfortable with homogeneity However, being Christ's ambassadors at home may mean sacrifice – sacrifice that relinquishes an established status or position to adopt a lesser position in order to develop a cross-cultural friendship.¹⁹

Indeed, these authors devote considerable space to articulating what they consider "biblical attitudes" which ground, facilitate and characterize Christian racial relationships. For example, Perkins and Rice develop these principles: "*admit*" that there is a separation or division;

¹⁸Washington and Kehrein, *Breaking Down Walls*, 107, 187.

¹⁹Washington and Kehrein, *Breaking Down Walls*, 187. See also Perkins and Rice, *More Than Equals*, 18; and Perkins and Tarrants, *He's My Brother*, 159.

“*submit*” to the healing power of God; and “*commit*” to “an intentional lifestyle of loving our racially different neighbors as ourselves.”²⁰ And Washington and Kehrein devote considerable space to explicating the principles of “commitment, intentionality, sincerity, sensitivity, interdependence, sacrifice, empowerment, and call.”²¹

6) Finally, these Evangelical writers typically do not devote much time or attention to public policy issues relative to race. For example, one finds little sustained reflection upon or analysis of affirmative action, criminal justice reform, welfare reform debates, or civil rights legislation. The overwhelming evangelical consensus is that society and church are transformed through personal conversion and the cultivation of interpersonal cross-cultural relationships. As Perkins and Rice declare, “*Civil rights* is a political concept; the *brotherhood* spoken of by biblical and contemporary prophets is a much higher calling.”²²

Two possible reasons might be adduced for this accentuation of the personal and virtual neglect of the social/systemic. First, evangelical theology and faith emphasize the necessity of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;²³ this endemic focus on the experience of personal salvation facilitates a marked concern

²⁰Perkins and Rice, *More Than Equals*, 18-19.

²¹Washington and Kehrein, *Breaking Down Walls*, 113-220.

²²Perkins and Rice, *More Than Equals*, 17.

²³Soper, *Evangelical Christianity*, 38-40.

for the *individual's* responsibility and participation in all forms of sin, particularly that of racism. Second, in some evangelical quarters, the legacy of the 1960s – including the Civil Rights Movement – is viewed suspiciously as the product of liberal activists whose religious convictions were at odds with what they believe to be religious orthodoxy. For example, many evangelical leaders and believers were wary of Martin Luther King, Jr., partly because of what they considered his theological liberalism – a concern that exists even to the present day.²⁴ This suspicion that systemic social change advances the agenda of theological liberalism provides another explanation for the Evangelical bias toward individual and personal approaches to social ills.²⁵

I now offer a critical commentary. There is much that I find admirable in the evangelical approach. These authors evidence a passion, commitment, and urgency for the cause of racial reconciliation which is sorely lacking in other Christian traditions. The testimony of the risks that the authors have

²⁴That this suspicion about King still holds among many evangelicals is evidenced in Gilbreath's article, "Catching Up with a Dream." Moreover, one finds in the writings of Evangelicals a tendency to draw a contrast, if not opposition, between "social gospel" and "personal biblical faith." On this, see Jay Kesler's remarks in the "Forward" to Pannell, *The Coming Race Wars*, 11.

²⁵There are evangelical exceptions to this lack of concern for the institutional and systemic dimensions of racism. The evangelical communities associated with the periodicals *Sojourners* and *The Other Side* are two very prominent examples. It must be pointed out, however, that these communities and their publications are outside of the mainstream of evangelical thought. On this point, see Pannell, *The Coming Race Wars?* 113.

taken, and the costs they have paid for their convictions and witness to racial fellowship, is truly inspiring. My students, for example, seldom fail to be moved, and even amazed, by these works; for many, reading these works is an occasion for deepening and/or renewing their own faith convictions.

Yet, I must conclude that the evangelical perspective on racial reconciliation is inadequate, principally because of its neglect of the structural and institutional dimension of racism. The cultivation of mutual interracial relationships, based upon spiritual principles, is admirable and even necessary. Such friendships go a long way toward overcoming the endemic racial isolation of American society which facilitates racial stereotypes, suspicion, and fear. However, such relationships are insufficient. Friendship (or “yokefellowship”²⁶) cannot overturn and dismantle the cultural stigmatization and structural disadvantage which I argue lie at the core of America’s racial quagmire. Authentic loving relationships can exist even in the midst of a socially unjust situation. For example, despite the friendship, commitment, and love that these interracial authors evidence for each other, they never address the reality that one of the pair would likely experience racially pejorative treatment when seeking housing or approval for a mortgage loan.²⁷ Housing discrimination is a structural reality that cannot be

²⁶Cf. Spencer and Rice, *More Than Equals*.

²⁷On the enduring existence and significance of residential discrimination and segregation, see Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

remedied solely by friendship. Again, the major shortcoming of the evangelical approach to racial reconciliation is that it is insufficiently attentive – if not blind – to the nexus of race and social/political/cultural power and privilege, and the need to dismantle this linkage.

Racial Reconciliation in Catholic Ethics and Theology

The most salient fact to note about the Catholic approach to the issue of racial reconciliation is how little there is to report. Despite a corpus of official Catholic Social Teaching, and a tradition of ethical reflection upon pressing social issues, a search of the theological literature on the topics of “race,” “racial discrimination,” and “race relations” yields little - and nothing that is specifically concerned with racial reconciliation.²⁸ The Catholic perspective offers nothing comparable to either the genre or extent of literature found in the Evangelical tradition. The most notable fact of the Catholic theological contribution to racial reconciliation is its absence.²⁹

If the core of racial reconciliation in the United States is

²⁸Cf. for example, the CD-ROM *Religious Periodical Index* and the *Catholic Periodical Index*.

²⁹This is a reflection of the overall pattern of “omission, silence, neglect, and indifference” concerning racial justice that I have argued marks American Catholic moral theology. See my essay, “The African American Experience and U.S. Roman Catholic Ethics: ‘Strangers and Aliens No Longer?’” in Jamie Phelps (ed.), *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1997), 79-101.

the critique and dismantling of the structured pattern of racial privilege and disadvantage, then Catholic theological ethics has the resources for making a substantial contribution. We possess an understanding of distributive justice which requires that social harms be apportioned in such a way as not to burden those members of the community least able to bear them; we possess a sophisticated understanding of social sin which recognizes that sin becomes embodied in public life and social institutions; we possess an understanding of the gospel which entails a stance of solidarity with and decisive commitment on behalf of the poor, dispossessed, and socially vulnerable. It is not, then, a lack of resources which prevents a Catholic presence and contribution to this discussion.

I believe that there are at least two kinds of factors that contribute to Catholic nonparticipation. The first is theological. For example, despite the resources listed above, it can be argued that Catholic theological ethics has not fully overcome the influence of the practice of auricular confession upon its theological endeavors. The moral historian John Mahoney has masterfully demonstrated the decisive impact of the discipline of private confession on Catholic moral praxis and reflection.³⁰ Specifically, I would argue that a lingering privatized understanding of sin, and an inadequate appreciation of the communal dimensions of sacramental reconciliation, hinder Catholic theological reflection on the issue of racial reconciliation.³¹

³⁰John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1-36.

³¹On efforts to develop the communal dimensions of the Sacrament of

A second factor also hinders Catholic theological reflection on this issue; it is something Catholic ethicist Paul Wadell describes as a lack of hospitality toward the African American experience on the part of American Catholic moralists. Indeed, Wadell declares,

“Hospitality is a precondition for justice and justice is a precondition for morality. American Catholic ethics can move to justice when it begins showing hospitality to the stories, experiences, and challenges of African Americans.”³²

I can only concur with this view. A lack of hospitality – a lack of regard, attention, or sensitivity – to the African American experience on the part of the Catholic moral guild is undoubtedly a significant factor in the lack of Catholic reflection upon racial reconciliation.

It would be an injustice and major oversight not to mention two Catholic theological texts which, while not dealing specifically with racial reconciliation, make valuable contributions to our understanding of the systemic dimensions of reconciliation.³³ Among many potential contributions, the

Penance, see Peter E. Fink (ed.), *Alternative Futures for Worship: Reconciliation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987).

³²Paul Wadell, “Response to Bryan Massingale,” in Phelps, *Black and Catholic*, 102-106.

³³Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992); and Gregory Baum and Harold Wells (eds.), *The Reconciliation of Peoples: Challenge to the Churches* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

linkage between reconciliation and the pursuit of justice, and the need for a spirituality to undergird efforts at systemic reconciliation, are especially noteworthy.

Concluding Reflections

In light of this overview of the state of the question, and with the aim of furthering this vital conversation, I will conclude by offering some observations concerning the work that lies ahead on the topic of racial reconciliation in Christian ethics.

1) Sustained scholarly research is needed upon two Pauline texts:

2 Cor. 5:17-20

So whatever is in Christ is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Eph. 2: 12-18

[You Gentiles] were at that time without Christ, alienated from the community of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have

become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh, abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims, that he might create in himself one new person in the place of two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it. He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

These texts speak of the Christian's call to be an "ambassador of reconciliation" and of Christ's initiative in effecting the reconciliation between peoples rent by hostility. Critical exegesis which grounds Christian reflection and practice in our best understanding of the word of God serves as a control upon idiosyncratic, though well intentioned, usages of these texts.³⁴

2) The ethical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity need to be further developed. If we are indeed created in the image of God, and if God is constitutively one yet diverse, this cannot but have profound ramifications for an understanding of racial reconciliation. Some work on the relationship between Trinitarian confession and racial justice does exist;³⁵ yet it remains true that Trinitarian doctrine and

³⁴Robert Schreiter provides an example of such critical reflection in his *Reconciliation*, 41-59.

³⁵For example, Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1997) 54-69; and Gary

anthropology play a minor role in Catholic social ethical reflection.

3) Any serious reflection upon racial reconciliation in the U.S. context must deal squarely with the legacy of slavery.³⁶ For the horror of slavery lies not only in the events of brutality, cruelty, and dehumanization of a not so distant past. The horror of slavery *continues in the present* through a rarely acknowledged legacy:

[S]lavery continues to shape our lives more than a century after abolition because the link it forged between Blackness and inferiority, Blackness and subservience, Blackness and danger, has survived to this day. Slavery's enduring legacy is that our "subhumanity" has been deeply imprinted in the American psyche. The resulting mental imprint continues to shape the way people think about race to this very day. . . . [S]lavery lives on in our lives; not as broken bones or clanking chains, but as a largely unconscious way of framing how we are seen, how we see ourselves, and how we relate to the world around us.³⁷

W. Deddo, "Persons in Racial Reconciliation: The Contributions of a Trinitarian Theological Anthropology," in Ockholm, *Gospel in Black and White*, 58-67.

³⁶I am not taking a position on the current debate over whether there should be an official apology to African Americans for the practice of slavery. As will become clear, I believe that that debate, focused as it is upon events of the past, is often misplaced.

³⁷Dalton, *Racial Healing*, 156-157.

The concrete effects of this legacy are seen in the following:

[P]rejudice against black people in American culture gets expressed among Los Angeles white residents who will hire a newly arrived Latino immigrant from Mexico before they will hire a “fifteenth-generation” black resident of the United States. “They trust Latinos. They fear or disdain blacks. . . . Latinos, even when they are foreign, seem native and safe, while blacks, who are native, seem foreign and dangerous *This is what slavery has done to us as a people*, and I can scarcely think of it without tears.”³⁸

Thus this concern about slavery is not so much concerned about an apology for the *past*, but rather an acknowledgment of the *present*. Slavery’s legacy as an African stigmata of inferiority needs to be forthrightly articulated and addressed in any adequate account/process of racial reconciliation in America. A further implication of this line of thought is that antiblack prejudice and discrimination cannot be adequately addressed by generic approaches/appeals to “diversity” and “multicultural sensitivity.” In fact, many suspect that appeals to “multiculturalism” often are subtle ways of avoiding a forthright engagement with the issue of race.³⁹

³⁸Jack Miles (white editor at the *Los Angeles Times*), quoted in Shriver, *An Ethic of Forgiveness*, 214; emphasis added.

³⁹On this matter, James Cone is particularly relevant: “White ethicists, from Reinhold Niebuhr to James Gustafson, reflect the racism current in

4) Finally, an adequate account of racial reconciliation needs to articulate the eschatological dimension of human reconciliation. This facet of reconciliation is well-articulated in the Catholic Church's liturgy. In the second "Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation" we pray: "In that new world, where the fullness of your peace will be revealed, gather people from every race, language, and way of life to share in the one eternal banquet with Jesus Christ the Lord." "*In that new world . . .*" Implicit in this prayer is a recognition that all of our human efforts at reconciling estranged racial groups will prove inadequate, incomplete, and lacking. To put it bluntly, we cannot save ourselves. Thus we confess that reconciliation is, ultimately, God's doing. It stems from God's initiative, and is brought to completion in the fullness of time known by God alone. The challenge given to Christian eschatology is that of grounding our halting yet resolute efforts of the present in the assurance of a Divinely given future. In this way, Christian eschatology can help believers to better understand, and become, that "alternative community" which proleptically anticipates the messianic banquet to come.⁴⁰

the society as a whole. Here racism appears in the form of **invisibility**. White theologians and ethicists simply ignore black people *by suggesting that the problem of racism and oppression is only one social expression of a larger ethical concern*" (*God of the Oppressed*, 201; bold in the original; italics added).

⁴⁰Desmond Tutu, cited in Battle, *Reconciliation*, 115.

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