

*The HEART of  
RACIAL JUSTICE*



*How Soul Change Leads  
to Social Change*

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## IS THERE STILL A RACE PROBLEM?

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On July 2, 1999, Ricky Byrdsong, former head basketball coach at Northwestern University, was shot and killed in Skokie, Illinois, the quiet suburban community where he lived. Coach Byrdsong was walking home from a playground with two of his children when a young college student, a self-proclaimed white supremacist, fired from his car and fatally shot him. Ricky died in the hospital later that night—victim of a drive-by shooting by a person he didn't even know.

That same weekend the white supremacist wounded several Jewish people in Chicago, fired shots at Asian people in downstate Illinois, and killed a Korean doctoral student, Won Joon Yoon, who was standing in front of his Presbyterian church in Indiana. The shooting spree and the senseless loss of human life that resulted were moti-

vated by racial hatred, ethnocentrism and fear. The murders of Coach Ricky Byrdson and Won Joon Yoon shook up many Christians, but even more, they disturbed a nation that doesn't want to believe that people of color and ethnic Jews can still be vulnerable to such racial hatred and violence.

### **THE RACE PROBLEM**

Unfortunately, this story could be repeated many times over, because there is still a race problem in America. Since September 11, 2001, suspicion, hostility and violence have increased between people from different racial and religious groups. It is estimated that in the next twenty years white Americans will become a minority in the United States, and most of the nation's population will be Asian and Hispanic. The demographic shift deepens an atmosphere of increasing fear and contempt. People of other races, ethnicities and nationalities are often viewed as threats to mainstream Americans' opportunity and economic security. As a result, government programs such as affirmative action are being repealed, and many people speak out vehemently against allowing any more people—usually people of color—to immigrate to this country. In economically uncertain times and in the face of increased globalization, it is no surprise that hate groups, acts of terrorism and racially motivated violence have increased in our nation and around the world.

The tragic events of September 11 reminded us that we cannot continue pursuing our own national self-interest with indifference to other nations and peoples. We must wake up, discern the signs of the times and recognize that we must relate differently to people who are unlike us. September 11 also taught us that we are not able to control

the world or to keep ourselves safe. However hard we may try, our technological skills and military might cannot completely guard us from destructive forces. Although we know this to be true, we continue our desperate efforts to get back in control and feel powerful again. Many people grope for coping mechanisms—some legal, some illegal—in vain attempts to control their world and feel safe. Others are choosing the way of violence and isolation, stockpiling weapons and segregating themselves from other people. All of this is evidence of a spirit of fear that is endemic to our society and can be changed only by the Spirit of God.

Billy Graham, the famous international evangelist, recognizes the challenge. Toward the end of his public ministry, he said, “Racial and ethnic hostility is the foremost social problem facing our world today. From the systematic horror of ‘ethnic cleansing’ in Bosnia to the random violence ravaging our inner cities, our world seems caught up in a tidal wave of racial and ethnic tension. This hostility threatens the very foundations of modern society.”<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the Christian church seems woefully inadequate to rouse itself from apathy in the face of these deep-rooted global and social problems. We have failed to proactively declare and demonstrate the truth and power of the gospel to create unity across cultures, ethnicities and nationalities. There is a tremendous disparity between the vision God has for us and our current social reality, and Christians seem powerless to even begin bridging the gap.

Michael Emerson and Christian Smith help us understand our ineffectiveness in their seminal book *Divided by Faith*.<sup>2</sup> These Christian professors provide an outstanding historical and contemporary analysis of how and why the evangelical church has been racist through-

out its history. Their findings reveal that evangelical theology itself is partly to blame for the impotence of most Christians in dealing with racial and ethnic injustice. They discovered that most evangelicals view their faith, conversion and transformation as an individual matter that affects society one life at a time. Unfortunately, this theological individualism has rendered most evangelical Christians completely ill-equipped to deal with major social structures or grapple with corporate and institutional evil.

This blindness to the larger forces and institutional realities affects our ability to even see the racial problem in America. The blindness became painfully clear to Rick when he was driving his son and two other kids home from church recently. The conversation in the car focused on the sermon the pastor had preached calling for racial harmony and justice. One of the European American teenagers piped up: “I don’t see what the point of that sermon was. I could see it if our church were located in the inner city. But we don’t have a race problem in the suburbs of Chicago. Why was the pastor making such a big deal about it? I don’t see how it’s relevant.”

This teen is not alone in his perceptions. You may feel that way too. Although there is an immense interest in racial reconciliation among many young people today, many others manifest disinterest in and apathy about racial issues. Most whites really believe that we no longer have a race problem in our society. They’d like to think all that got solved with the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. Most whites really believe that the playing field has been leveled and equal opportunity has been made available to everybody. As a result, they think minority people should buck up, pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and quit complaining and whining and “playing the race

card” every time they want something.

On the other hand, we have observed that most people of color have no doubt that there is still a very significant race problem in America. Not long ago Willow Creek Community Church in Barington, Illinois, held a weekend service titled “Bridging the Racial Divide.” The service began with stories told by people of color who are Willow Creek members and have experienced discrimination.

An African American executive employee of the church told about how he was followed by a police officer after stopping to fill his car with gas. When he pulled over to ask what the problem was, he was told that being black, he fit the description of someone the police were looking for.

An Asian American woman told about going shopping for a coat at a local department store. She found one she wanted and asked an employee to put it aside while she continued shopping. When she returned to buy the jacket, she was shocked to find a white woman walking out with it. The store manager gave her no apology, and she never got the jacket.

Still another story came from a biracial woman who experienced a painful breakup with her boyfriend because his white family rejected her. They did not want him dating an African American and couldn’t stand the idea of having mixed-race grandchildren. The rejection left a deep scar on the young woman’s heart. She began to wonder whether she would ever find true acceptance at a predominantly white church.

The last story was a Latino man’s recounting of a painful memory from his childhood. He worked as a caddy at a golf course. On his day off he invited a friend to come and swim with him, since this was

one of the perks of the job. His friend was ordered out of the pool, and when he asked why he was told, “We don’t allow Hispanics in here.” Since the caddy had fair skin, they had assumed he himself was Anglo. They said they would make an exception for him, but instead he chose to quit his job that day.

These stories moved and shocked many of the white members of the Willow Creek congregation, who had assumed that those kinds of things just don’t happen anymore. But people of color in the congregation were not shocked at all. They know these kinds of things happen all the time.

If you think about it, it makes sense. Blacks live with the residual effects of four hundred years of unthinkable oppression at the hands of white people of northern European origin. Native Americans live with the past experience of an almost totally successful genocide campaign against them, again by whites of northern European background. Latino people experienced conquest by southern Europeans of Spanish background and then lost the whole of the Southwest United States to whites of northern European background. Asian Americans experienced hatred and resentment in the early years of immigration, during World War II after the Pearl Harbor attack when many were put into internment camps, and more recently because their economic and educational success has angered many whites who feel disempowered by the success of other groups. Most people of color are keenly aware of all the continuing interpersonal and systemic inequities in America.

## HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

What should the church’s response be in a world being torn apart by



prejudice, hatred and fear? We believe it is imperative that the Christian church regain its integrity to address injustice. This will require that we relinquish the individualism and isolation that have been prevalent among evangelical Christians in the past, so that we can develop new models of racial reconciliation, social justice and spiritual healing. Our unity and reconciliation efforts could be the greatest witness of the church to the power of the gospel in the twenty-first century.

So let's look at the mission of the church in the twenty-first century to bring reconciliation to a divided and wounded world. But first, let's pause and pray.

Each chapter in this book closes with our prayer about the themes of the chapter. Make this prayer your own and pray with us. Racial reconciliation is a spiritual issue, and we are called to prayer that moves us into action.

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*God, too often our hearts and eyes have been closed to the suffering of others in our racially divided world. Give us eyes to see and hearts that share your heart for the unity and reconciliation of all peoples. We pray in your name. Amen.*

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