

Sunday (June 14th)

# The Gospel of Individualism; Privilege & Power

## Questions for Dialogue on the Gospel of Individualism:

1. Dr. Cleveland critiques the church, saying,

“The faith and theology that we are introduced to is so individualistic that people see their own personal resurrection as separate from, as distinct from, everyone else’s resurrection.”

*How can our individualistic views about our faith contrary to the actual Christian faith?*

*What might it mean to live our faith through a context of others and community rather than individualistically?*

2. Dr. Cleveland adds,

“People are not introduced to a Gospel that means something for how they relate to the world.”

*How can we move from a Gospel of ideology and individuality into a Gospel that is relevant to what people are doing in the entire world?*

*How do we often make “salvation” about our own lives rather than the salvation of the world?*

3. Dr. Cleveland describes what she calls “trickle down Christianity,” similar to what is called “Reaganomics”:

“We introduce people to Jesus and we just assume that this is going to transform their social relationship, but we’re not taking into account greed or selfishness.”

*In what ways do some churches practice this type of faith formation?*

*What is the danger of believing that Jesus would immediately transform someone after they are introduced to the Gospel?*

*What are the things in which people need to be accountable if they are going to call themselves a Christian?*

4. Dr. Cleveland talks about how the “Johns” are already in the church. How are many Christians actually contributing to the injustice and oppression in the world?

“Jesus was the example of cross- cultural relationships, everything he did was cross-cultural, while he was on the earth, and the cross was the epicenter of cross-cultural

## To Become One: A Study of Unity and Racism in the Church

relationships, cross-cultural transformations. The cross was all about sticking your neck out for people who have issues like your own.”

*How was Jesus an example of cross-cultural relationships?*

*How was the cross a display of advocating for others and not just for one's self?*

5. Dr. Cleveland remarks,

“I’ve never met one pastor, one leader, who went down that journey, no matter what that cost him, no matter how many people left his or her church, no matter how much smaller the giving became.”

*Why is this the case with those who lead the church?*

*Why are very few practicing the way of leadership that is described in the New Testament?*

6. Dr. Cleveland describes how she encouraged someone “to be mentored by a person of color” in order to understand cross-cultural leadership.” She encouraged this person “be the person who does not have the answer.” After the person moved her family to live among a different culture, she said, “I feel that for the first time in my life, I have blood coursing through my veins.”

*How might this kind move be transformative for us?*

7. Dr. Cleveland comments, “Because Jesus was so cross-cultural, there is something especially spiritually explosive about us being cross-cultural...the Holy Spirit shows up when we move out our spaces, when we move out of our comfort zones, and when we go and be with people who are different from us.” Cleveland then references the festival of Pentecost (Acts 1) that shows “The Holy Spirit empowering the disciples to get out of their upper room and get with people who did not speak their language.”

*What might be the “intangible benefit” of this type of moving out of “our comfort zones”?*

## Theological Reflection

American Theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, had severe critiques of Billy Graham’s evangelistic project. Niebuhr once described how some Chinese Christians were hesitant to hear Graham preach to them “as they feared that his shallow type of a selfish, personal, possessive salvation would not solve but increase their problem however many of his hearers or his converts he ‘saved’ to his type of religion.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, Niebuhr stressed the importance of a gospel that had both personal and social dimensions.

American, Evangelical Christianity is a reflection of the broader culture: individualistic, rationalistic, and personalized. It is not that God does not care about the individual, but it is the community that God seeks to bring together. Healthy communities will provide wellbeing for individuals. God’s covenant to Abraham was not only for Abraham, but it was for his children

---

<sup>1</sup> “Reinhold Niebuhr Timeline: Critiques Billy Graham’s Evangelical Fundamentalism,” Correspondence from Sherwood Eddy, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/moral-man-and-immoral-society-rediscovering-reinhold-niebuhr/extra/reinhold-niebuhr-timeline-38>, (accessed November 30, 2014) from Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Reading Room.

## To Become One: A Study of Unity and Racism in the Church

and the world. Jesus's covenant with his disciples is not only for them, but it is for the church. Again, it seems counter-intuitive to seek the health of others before our own, but in contributing to a much larger interest than ourselves, we will find wholeness.

Reconciliation is not only between God and the individual. It involves the whole community of humanity. Jesus did not bathe in the waters of the Jordan for his sins; it was for the sins of the whole world that he was baptized as the "Son of Man." In the same way, the dividing wall is not between the individual and God, it is more often between ourselves. As long as I see the "other" as "those people," rather than as my sisters and brothers, the church will continue to be divided and Paul's letter to the Corinthians was only rhetoric. Reconciliation requires seeing through another's eyes. It is not privatized salvation.

Salvation that is about other worldly deliverance is a dream of escape. This kind of salvation is not about the re-integration of the self. It is not God's vision of wholeness and restoration, described by the prophets and by Jesus. However, when we speak of salvation apart from reconciliation, a bringing together of who we are as people, then it becomes a myth about the otherworld.

When Black slaves sung negro spirituals, the words "heaven" and "home" did not mean the yearning for the after life, but code words to talk about escaping slavery and oppression in order to find a safe haven. In twenty-first century America, a haven of safety can only be created when our communities come to understand each other, and the struggles that each face. It is being together at the same table and sharing each of our brokenness, that we find wholeness. It is in belonging to this greater community that Christians can understand what it means to be free.

## Questions for Dialogue on Privilege & Power

1. Dr. Cleveland says,

"I think that part of the reason why the body of Christ is so dysfunctional is because the people who have more voice, more power, are not abdicating that power. We look so much like the empire... there is not a lot of equity."

*How do people in power tend to hold on to that power?*

*What would it be like to have an equitable distribution of power?*

2. Dr. Cleveland observes,

"The church has become so much like the empire that we value the people who...look culturally right, speak culturally right, who have the opportunities and the capital." She adds, "Jesus spent all of his time standing in solidarity with the oppressed."

*In what ways has the church become like the empire?*

*Why has the church more often taken sides with the powerful than with the oppressed?*

3. Cleveland refers to the "seven signs" that are depicted in John's Gospel. Cleveland comments that Jesus performs these seven signs for those who are the marginalized in society. For example, in John 2, Jesus's first miracle at Cana of Galilee was witnessed by the attendants at the wedding rather than the wedding host. Cleveland says,

## To Become One: A Study of Unity and Racism in the Church

“If you want to know who Christ is, pay attention to these miracles. Every single time it is Jesus showing it to women, showing it to cripples, showing it to hungry people.” Another example is when Jesus feeds the five thousand; it is the boy who offered the fish and the loaves, the one who witnessed the miracle.<sup>2</sup>

*What do these examples say about God’s presence in the world?*

4. The Gospels depict how Jesus rebukes those in power and dominance in his culture. Dr. Cleveland says that “It is not that [Jesus] is against people in power, but Jesus has very strong words for people in power.”

*How would you answer Cleveland’s questions if you were someone with power and authority: “What are you supposed to do with that power? How are you supposed to follow Jesus in abdicating it...?”*

5. Cleveland adds “...Jesus was the most powerful person that walked on the earth, but he redistributed his power in a way that lead to his death, but it changed the world. And it lead to his resurrection and resurrection for all of us.”

*What would be the results, both negative and positive in redistributing our power?*

6. Dr. Cleveland refers to the “hymn” of Philippians 2 (vs. 6-11). She comments,

“A lot of us...have some sort of power we have to give up.” Cleveland talks about her own access and privilege. However she talks about living in a neighborhood “full of people who never went to high school. Their perspectives on race and division in society are ten times more brilliant than mine, but no one is inviting them to speak at conferences...”

Read the hymn in Philippians.

*What does this early Christian liturgy say about Christ’s view of power and privilege?*

*What does this say about our emphasis on status, professionalism, and being credentialed?*

*How might we listen and learn from these voices?*

*What might it mean in regard to protecting our power that we would listen to other voices?*

7. Cleveland asks,

“Can you be a privileged person in our society who does not stand in solidarity with the oppressed and who actually knows Jesus? No, you can’t. There is nothing to your faith if your not standing in solidarity with the oppressed because Jesus is with the oppressed.”

*Why can’t it be the case that a person can claim to know Jesus but not stand with those who have no power?*

*How is faith formed by “standing with the oppressed”?*

---

<sup>2</sup> John 16:1–14. In Matthew’s version, which was perhaps written earlier, there is the omission of the boy in the story. It is likely that John’s intention was in portraying Jesus as God’s presence among those who were not deemed important in his society.

# To Become One: A Study of Unity and Racism in the Church

## Theological Reflection

In 1 Corinthians, Paul re-defines the notion of “power”: For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1:23–24)

The notion of a “crucified god” was preposterous for many Greeks to comprehend, for it was a symbol of weakness. In Greek and Roman mythology (the Romans simply borrowed the Greek gods and changed their names), a god who could be hung from a cross was a mockery of strength. For the Jews, those who were hung on a tree received a curse from God.<sup>3</sup> What was perceived from the dominant culture from which the Christian faith was born was that of self-sacrifice, surrender, obedience, and suffering were all marks of weakness.

Too often, our conception of what God should look like comes from a place of our own fears and insecurities. Many of us want God to be strong and powerful so that our fortress and estates can be defended. The more insecure we are the bigger our god needs to be, to a point that “Christian” crusades and empires are justifiable. This is the paradox of strength. Those who seek it the most are the weakest.

In the Gospels we have a God who does not hoard power, but one who becomes vulnerable, first becoming an infant, then a friend to the needy and oppressed, and a victim of injustice on the cross. Jesus did not need a show of military might or spectacular miracles.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it was in humility, presence, and openness that Jesus drew others to him. This is a conception of Jesus that we see as the “power of God”: But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 27–29)

For the apostle Paul, unity came through the emptying of oneself. The Greeks used the word *kenosis* to denote this type of self-purging. It is making one’s self “nothing.” However, it was not the annihilation of the self, but is the willingness to let God pour God’s Spirit and life into the self. It is when we give up power, that power is restored. It is when we give up self, when self is renewed. Those who go through addiction-recovery know this process all too well. They have seen what the power of their addictions can do and find strength in surrender. In the same way, if Christians are to find unity in the church and live as kingdom citizens, then there needs to be a surrender to the addiction of power. The truly powerful are the ones who give of themselves for the sake of others. Those who do not do this know that they have too much to lose, and they turn out to be the weakest. In other words, power kept speaks of our insecurities, yet power shared testifies to our faith.

---

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 21:31. Galatians 3:13 attempts to explain the cross as absorption of the curse.

<sup>4</sup> It could be even argued that when Jesus performed miracles, he asked his disciples to keep it a secret so that it would not expose Jesus as the Messiah.