

How to be better neighbors

In honor of black history month the next three week's bulletin article will summarize the essay I wrote and presented at the American Academy of Religion conference last November, because the essay addresses the issue and problem of how well-meaning white folks still often get in the way of justice and the broader good of people of color. This first part will set up the problem. The second and third parts will elaborate on some ways to navigate the issues and practical ways we can be better neighbors to one another.

In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Jr. criticized what he called the "white moderate" saying that he felt they were more damaging to his cause than those who outright and explicitly were against it. Why would that be? It is because, he suggests, that white moderates attempted to play both sides, and when there is a power imbalance, playing both sides ends up giving advantage to the powerful.

More recently the black theologian, James Cone, who taught at Union Theological Seminary not far from here, has centered his writing career on similar terms. Throughout his many books he more frequently and vehemently criticizes what he calls the "white liberal" (a functional equivalent of King's "white moderate") for similar reasons. So in one of his earlier books he defines the white liberal as, "One who sees "both sides" of the issue and shies away from "extremism" in any form. He wants to change the heart of the racist without ceasing to be his friend; he wants progress without conflict. . . The liberal wants to be a friend, that is, enjoy the rights and privileges pertaining to whiteness and also work for the "Negro" [sic]. He wants change without risk, victory without blood.

Cone extends the criticism made by MLK that not only is playing both sides impractical, but it reveals something more inherently problematic about the whole ordeal. White folks--good-hearted, well-meaning, white folks who empathize with the trials and tribulations that people of color experience in this country (both in the 60's and today)--will embrace causes like Civil Rights or Black Lives Matter as a way of getting the best of both worlds. Granted, he is painting with a broad brush, but there is some legitimacy to this idea. By glossing over our privileges and paying lip service to social justice or going on marches and patting ourselves on the back, we end up working more for ourselves than for the people we ostensibly are trying to support.

In a later interview Cone would summarize the problem nicely. He says, "I find that the white-skinned person is worried too much about his own salvation, rather than about the liberation of the black community." All of us well-meaning white folks ought to at least be able to admit that this is true of us to one degree or another. We know exactly what he is talking about, even if someone else is more guilty of this than we are.

So what do we do about that? How do we become "allies" and neighbors to people without accidentally exploiting or undercutting their cause for our own implicit gain? I think this is probably one of the more important questions that white folks ought to wrestle with if we want to work for and contribute to a more equitable society--a society that somehow better reflects the kingdom of God which does not give privilege to one person over another for any reason, much less melanin content in our skins.

Over the next two weeks I am going to explore some of the biblical, theological, and practical ways that we can navigate this problem effectively. I don't think it is a hopeless cause, nor do I think this problem is particular to white folks, and so it becomes an issue for us all to work together and find a better way forward. More next week...