

Last week I introduced a series during Black History Month where I address the question of how well-meaning white can be better, more constructive friends, neighbors, and allies to people of color or other marginalized groups. This was the focus of an academic paper I had presented at a conference back in November.

Last week I began the series laying out the problem. Isn't it possible that the rather dramatic switch of white sentiment from the pre-civil rights era to the post-civil rights era—from outright hatred or reserved segregation to open minds and open hearts—could have more to do with the preservation of a people who see the writing on the wall than actual care and concern for their fellow person of color? The black theologian, James Cone, has argued as much, and suggests that not only does supporting civil rights, black lives matter, etc. help white folks maintain their positions of power and privilege, it also undercuts the struggle of people of color for real equality. There may be ways that you or I would quibble with this general narrative, but for the sake of the argument let's grant that this could be the case. What do we do about it? Does Cone want white folks to stop trying to do the right thing? I don't think so. And if not, then what can be done? That is what I will start to address in this week's article.

In my paper I compare James Cone to the 19th century Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is someone who fascinates me. If you've been in my office you will notice that I have an entire bookshelf dedicated to him—his books, biographies, journals, books about him, and commentaries and studies on his writings. I initially found Kierkegaard intriguing because in his later life he became a notorious critic of Christianity and the church. But not just any critic, he found himself to be a critic from within the church. Unlike those militant atheists like Richard Dawkins or some twenty-something who read a little bit of Nietzsche and a bunch of interesting Wikipedia articles and all of a sudden hates religion, Kierkegaard is someone with profound love for the church, and devotion to Christ, and precisely because of that found it necessary to call out the corruptions and hypocrisies of the church such as he saw them.

His last writings were a series of articles in various newspapers and journals that are compiled today under the title *The Attack upon Christendom*. To give a bit of a sample, here's one of his more volatile blurbs:

“I might be tempted to make to Christendom a proposal different from that of the Bible society. Let us collect all the New Testaments we have, let us bring them out to an open square or up to the summit of a mountain, and while we all kneel let one man speak to God thus: 'Take this book back again; we men, such as we now are, are not fit to go in for this sort of thing, it only makes us unhappy,' This is my proposal, that like those inhabitants in Gerasa we beseech Christ to depart from our borders. This would be an honest and human way of talking -- rather different from the disgusting hypocritical priestly fudge...”

I compare Kierkegaard to Cone because in their own ways and relative to their own contexts they both exhibit a similar style or method or insight. They use radical, often hyperbolic, often offensive manners of speech to wake people up to a reality that they are unaware of, or perhaps unwilling to realize. There is another, more substantive, way that Kierkegaard and Cone compare and that is where we start making ground in finding a solution to the problems of being good, white neighbors.

Kierkegaard saw Christianity in his 19th century Copenhagen, Denmark as corrupt, but corrupt in a specific way. It was not that the priests and bishops were outright villains, it was that they bought into a particular way of thinking about the world that messed with the ways they understood their faith and ultimately made Christianity out to be something it's not.

To save everyone from a long series of names and citations, the gist of this (bad) view of the world is that someone noticed that as time passes humanity tends to improve. We learn more about our world and ourselves. He even noticed that there was a sort of logic to that progression in history to the point that he posited a force that guided history to its present state and ostensibly progressing to its culmination. He suggested, and I'm oversimplifying here, that this "guiding force" was God working in and through human history and drawing it to himself.

That probably sounds reasonable in general. It is only when we understand some of the consequences of this view, and the real contradictions it has with the New Testament, that things start to become problematic. Essentially, if you view history as a process of human progression and development then in profound ways we must believe that we are superior even to Christ. We may still be sinners and Christ sinless, but many of his teachings and norms we can rightly disregard as either belonging to his time and place or the products of a person who speaks from a much smaller vantage point than we do. In essence, this allowed the Christendom of Kierkegaard's day to fully support the many, primarily ethical, ways in which they have diverted from the kind of life and beliefs that Christ and his followers lived and preached. The church could be wealthy, indulgent, politically and socially powerful—most of the things that Christ suggested was the opposite of faith—and still preach from the Bible on Sundays because God has moved the church over the past two millennia past all those antiquated values.

To be a Christian, Kierkegaard retorted, is to be a follower of Christ. And, above all, Christ typified the life of self-giving sacrifice. If there is a theme to Christ's life and teachings it is to "deny yourself" or "lose one's life" so that you may find it or "to lay down one's life" for another. So in his *Attack upon Christendom*, Kierkegaard suggested that the way to turn things around for the church is to stop all this churchly, religious activity that is just a cover for gaining advantage in the world, and learn to share in the sufferings of Christ—to let one's life revolve around sharing in the sufferings of Christ. He was not advocating for a macabre, sado-masochistic sort of life or piety, but rather the pouring out of one's life for others—a process laden with no small suffering.

Bringing this conversation back to the question of race relations. My suggestion is that it is easy to slip into ways of thinking similar to those of the 19th century Danish Christians that too easily marry Christianity to worldly power. This allows us to engage in trivial or superficial acts of "solidarity" with those on the margins. Or it allows us to keep up appearances as enlightened non-racists when in reality we are unwilling to go so far as to really share in the sufferings of our neighbors of color.

At the end of the day, Christ is with the suffering and broken. He is with those on the margins in more profound and real ways than he is with those who do everything in their power to avoid suffering. For white folks to learn to be good neighbors to other social groups who experience prejudice and marginalization not only throughout their history but on an everyday basis, it is not enough to say "I'm with you" and be done with it. We must learn what it means to share in the sufferings of Christ, to share in the sufferings of others, to sacrifice time and resources and reputation in order to more fully be "with" our neighbors.