

ANDERSON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

# Cultivating Justice

---

A RESPONSE TO SCOTT SCHOMBURG'S PAPER:  
AN INTRODUCTORY ANALYSIS OF PEACE,  
RECONCILIATION, AND WHITE PRIVILEGE FOR  
THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

James W. Lewis, PhD  
Professor of Theology and Ethics  
Anderson University School of Theology  
11/18/2009

Presented at the Forum  
"Peacemaking: Thoughts on Reconciliation:"  
Anderson University School of Theology

## CULTIVATING JUSTICE:

A Response to Scott Schomburg's Paper:

An Introductory Analysis of Peace, Reconciliation, and White Privilege for the Christian Church

I am encouraged by our seminary's initiative to address a critical issue that faces our nation, but more importantly, that challenges the Church and the heart of the gospel. In these times it is never an easy undertaking to address issues of difference, especially when that difference highlights race relations. Therefore, I am honored to respond to Mr. Schomburg's provocative and well written paper. My comments address the contents of his paper, which he chose to deliver here only in summary form.

Mr. Shomburg [hereinafter Scott] is to be commended, in my opinion, for his willingness to come at this issue from a perspective generally seen as a least desirable approach. His "analysis" of peace and reconciliation takes him through the mine field of addressing head on the notion of "white privilege" – which he does define in his paper. A drawback of this approach is the increased probability of alienating many hearers who might view this as another case of liberal rhetoric. Dr. MaryAnn Hawkins reminded us early on that there are many incarnations of legitimate "differences" among humans. However, as a seminary community, we thought it necessary to focus on the most obvious difference—at least in the Western mindset—of race/ethnicity in this first forum. Again our desire is that this discussion will serve as a prism of sorts to make appropriate connections to other forms of difference, like gender, socio-economic status, body type, nationality, political party affiliation, and many other forms of difference.

For the church's life and the life of disciples of Jesus, our session today in this seminary context reminds us that "racism" is nonsensical within the logic and practices of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Scott brings his experiences as a young Christian thinker to bear on this always relevant topic. First, Scott challenges us to resist the tendency to equate our celebrations of diversity as an end in themselves. While diversities ought to be celebrated, celebration can be a mile wide and an inch deep. Superficialities may reduce tensions, but do little in transforming lives and institutions. Instead, Scott invites us into a lifestyle much more substantial. He wonders "if the call to be radical disciples of the slain lamb...is the call to instead *celebrate* in the *midst* of struggle." I believe Scott pitches the tone of his paper in just the right way: celebration and struggle are partners in getting at the kind of transformative relationships consistent with the call to be the *people of God*.

Scott's stated purpose in the paper is "to engage in imagining and becoming a truly multi-cultural, transnational Christian Church." I sensed from reading the paper that he seeks to give us an interpretive strategy that unearths and possibly remove the entrenched assumptions that numbs the Christian imagination to see the Church – the Kingdom rather—that the triune God ushers into the world. He unearths alternative readings of history and texts that rock our world—not simply to tear down but to re-build on foundations that are spiritually more secure. They are spiritually more secure because they are grounded in the truths about God, about us, and about the world we inhabit. He helps us to analyze the role that "oppressive" power plays in promoting and sustaining sinful relations and institutions. His analysis raises certain questions that prick us—at least they had that effect on me: He asks, "How do we derive *meaning* from the text? Furthermore, he asks, "How does our own social location affect our interpretation of the text and how does that interpretation transform or legitimize our presuppositions about God, our world,

and ourselves?” What about this hopeful question, pointing us forward? “What must happen . . . when we are awakened to our own deeply embedded internalized Racism?” I found the notion of “internalized racism”—while not necessarily new—a helpful way for Christians and others to be reminded how our otherwise good behaviors may serve only to mask our hidden prejudices and racist attitudes. The upshot of this for me is that to the extent our prejudices and feelings of superiority and inferiority are hidden, we are rendered less able to confess them as sins to God and to one another. Hence, we would remain bound to the demons that cause us to be “legion”—i.e., to be divided from one another. That which refuses to stand in the light of truth inevitably stands to wreck and undermine authentic relationships. Scott’s discussion in these areas attempt to make this point. For that I am grateful and encouraged.

Thank you, Scott, for the serious thoughts you raised in this paper and how you invited us to struggle along with you about confessing our active or passive participation in racism. But thank you for not leaving us there, but pointing a way forward to authentic reconciliation and strategies of peacemaking. It is here that I would like to identify some of my observations where I believe Scott might say more or where he might have said something better to clarify his positions.

In the paper, Scott referred to “marginalized” communities or “marginalized” community, assuming the reader/hearer knows what this means. Perhaps we do, but I would want him to help us imagine or see real faces and situations in these communities of marginalization. Is he referring to aliens/immigrants, widows, the homeless, children, women, etc.? In his section, *Whiteness and Blackness: A Brief History*, he depends on the interpretation of Robert Hood’s *Begrimed and Black*. His use of this source is legitimate. I would recommend that he acknowledge this reading as one telling of this history of the genesis of “whiteness” and

“blackness.” Winthrop Jordan’s classic, *White over Black*, is another example. There certainly are other credible tellers of this history. I consider this dimension of his analysis as a critical one for shedding a laser light on the coming-to-be of the categories of “whiteness” and “blackness” that undergird notions of inherent superiority of one race and the inherent inferiority of others. Along these lines, I confess I felt great discomfort in Scott’s discussion about the dichotomy of *whiteness* and *blackness* pervading “our faith stories.” I guess this is my knee-jerk reaction to protect the authority of the Bible, but this really is not my point. As he states this point in the paper, I believe that he imports our modern notions of race into the Bible and reads them back into the creation accounts. I believe this is just the kind of move that warrants our due diligence in biblical interpretation. I would feel more comfortable had he said something like this: “Though the overarching Biblical narrative will speak strongly against oppression, this dichotomy of *whiteness* and *blackness* permeates *the interpretation of* [my addition] our faith stories.”

While I know that Scott is aware of human imperfections in general—regardless of race or ethnicity, I believe there were points where he could have been more explicit in service to a fuller account of human behavior. There is a danger in my saying this, for it might play easily into the logic of those who rather not talk about race or who are threatened about unearthing human falsehoods and deception. In his section on *Reinterpreting Privileged Readings of the Text*, Scott says that “wherever you fall on the spectrum [of interpretation of texts], however, we can all agree – I hope – that our cultural context deeply affects our tendency to understand Scripture through *white privileged eyes*. I concur with his hope and with his diagnosis that too often we internalize scriptural interpretations grounded in the life experiences and perspectives of whites or others in power. Yet, he also can acknowledge that such a tendency to make

absolute our own experiences and ways of being in the world is not just a white problem or a male problem, but a human problem.

A final observation has to do with Scripture. To Scott's great credit, he does identify scriptures in his paper to which alternative readings could very well transform the brokenness of the church's collective life. My point is what scriptures are missing: I Corinthians 12-13; Ephesians 2:11-22; Ephesians 4:1-6; Philippians 2:6-11, etc. Focus on some of these passages would again remind us as Christians of the unity that the Holy Spirit brings in us and among us, but also the requirement of our will to exert the effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. These passages help us to name our brokenness and the fracturing of the unity of God's new people for what it truly is – Sin. For example, Philippians 2:6-11, the Christ Hymn, reminds us that our differences are real and need not be denied. Yet, to maintain the reconciled community of the Spirit we live into the pattern of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Paul in the Christ Hymn reminds us that without surrendering ourselves for the sake of others [“self-emptying”], being obedient like a slave, and offering our lives, even to death, there is no reconciled community of the Spirit. Only as we live faithfully into these truths can we view our differences as the true wealth and gift God intends them to be.

Again, thank you, Scott, for your efforts at challenging us to conform to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and to be the kind of reconciled, peaceful, harmonious community to which the triune God is calling us. Scott, your call for the church to embody the virtues of hope and patience strikes just the kind of conclusion designed to leave us as people full of the hope that God's reconciled community of the Holy Spirit is indeed possible in the midst of human brokenness. Reading what Stanley Hauerwas and Gloria Albrecht wrote strengthened your analysis, but believing what they wrote – as I believe you do – should validate to us your

commitment both to celebrate legitimate differences but also to struggle for their valued place in transforming our lives and our Christian communities. May it be so with all of us.