

The Bondage of Fear and United Mission

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When we are united in God's mission, Our United Mission will grow.

On one of his missionary trips, the Apostle Paul spoke to the people of Athens and made this remarkable statement, found in Acts 17:26: "From one ancestor [blood] God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth." Human beings derive from one common stock. We are related. Indeed, most scientists today view racial classifications as artificial, not based on scientific data. I agree with this.

Fifty years ago this month, on August 28, 1963, and 100 years after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington D.C. It was an historic speech that fueled the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Excerpts of that speech remind us of the words of the Apostle Paul and the Prophet Isaiah.

"I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

This year, on July 13, 2013, in a circuit court in Sanford County Courthouse in Sanford, Florida, a jury of six women found defendant George Zimmerman "not guilty" on the charge of second-degree murder in the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin on February 12, 2012. The victim, Trayvon Martin, was African American.

The racial identity of George Zimmerman is more difficult. Is George Zimmerman white, white (Hispanic), mixed race, or other? Even within the category of "Hispanic," Hispanic people can be black, white, Asian, or mixed. Some 18 million Latinos checked the "some other race" category on their 2010 Census forms – which admonished in bold letters that Hispanic is not a race.

Indeed, most scientists view any racial classification as artificial, not based on scientific data. I agree with this. However, in my view, *racism* is real. Racism deals with one's perception of others based on superficial characteristics and cultural differences.

Racism has been termed the "original American sin." With a history of slavery and Jim Crow laws, this description is hard to refute. Nor would I want to make an attempt.

The 1960 novel by Harper Lee and the subsequent 1962 film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, set in a small, racially segregated town in Alabama in 1935, tells the story of a white lawyer who is defending an African American man. The defendant, though innocent, has been charged with raping a young white woman. The jury is all white, and the spectators on the main floor are also all white. All African American spectators sit in the balcony, along with the young son and daughter of Atticus Finch, the defending attorney. During the trial, Atticus Finch mounts a vigorous and spirited defense, but to no avail. His words to the jury, "In the name of God, do your duty!" fall on deaf ears. The defendant is found guilty. The main floor of the courtroom clears as Atticus gathers his papers. In the balcony the people wait. As Atticus turns and leaves the courtroom, all the people in the balcony, except the young daughter of Atticus, rise in silent salute. The pastor, there with his people, says quietly to her: "Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father's passin'." Atticus' passion for justice commanded their respect, even though, in this case, justice was not done.

I was born and grew up in a state where Jim Crow laws were in full force and effect. Being white, I did not suffer from it, but I did observe how those laws meted out pain and injustice.

Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country*, first published in 1948, is an impassioned novel about a black man's country, South Africa, under white man's law – *apartheid*. The novel is the deeply moving story of Zulu Pastor Stephen Kumalo and his son, Absalom, set against the background of a land and a people torn apart by racial injustice. In Absalom's murder trial, the judge explains that he must uphold the law, even if that law was made by an unjust society. Absalom is convicted of murdering a white man and is sentenced to death by hanging. His father, Pastor Kumalo, has climbed a mountain to wait for the dawn, the time of the execution. These excerpts from the last two paragraphs of the book describe the night and the arrival of dawn:

He looked out of his clouded eyes at the faint steady lightening in the east. But he calmed himself, and took out the heavy maize cakes and the tea, and put them upon a stone. And he gave thanks, and broke the cakes and ate them, and drank of the tea. Then he gave himself over to deep and earnest prayer, and after each petition he raised his eyes and looked to the east. And the east lightened and lightened, till he knew that the time was not far off. And when he expected it, he rose to his feet and took off his hat and laid it down on the earth, and clasped his hands before him. And while he stood there the sun rose in the east.

Yes, it is the dawn that has come. The titihoya [plover-like bird] wakes from sleep, and goes about its work of forlorn crying. The sun tips with light the mountains of Ingeli and East Griqualand. The great valley of the Umzimkulu is still in darkness, but the light will come there. Ndotsheni is still in darkness, but the light will come there also. For it is the dawn that has come, as it has come for a thousand centuries, never failing. But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, that is a secret.

Today, in America and in other countries, many people live in the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear. Our ministries as American Baptists can help reduce the numbers of human beings who live in the fear of bondage, imprisonment, slavery, or being caught in the trap of human trafficking. Likewise, our ministries can help those who live in the bondage of fear – the fear of persons who seem different – who are not “one of us.”

Our gifts to American Baptist United Mission support all these ministries, and even more.