

# Cooperative Ministries: A History of Racial Reconciliation

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Southern Baptists and the issues surrounding racial reconciliation have a varied and interesting history. Racial attitudes have been an essential or critical issue and at the heart of many debates from the very inception of the convention. Sid Smith writes,

When Norris Fulfer cast the tie-breaking vote, after death threats, to admit predominately African American Community Baptist Church in Santa Rosa, CA, into the Redwood Empire Southern Baptist Association, the courageous moderator had no idea he was unlocking a major door of progress for Southern Baptists. Since Washington Boyce led the church into the Southern Baptist Convention in 1951, the number of Black churches in the convention has grown to more than three thousand.<sup>1</sup>

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in a bold move awarded G. K. Offult, an African American, the Th.D. degree in 1948, although he was not allowed to matriculate in regular classroom settings or participate in graduation exercises. Seminary professors provided him private tutoring in their seminary offices. Later J. V. Bottoms Sr., B. J. Miller Sr., and Claude Taylor, other African Americans, continued advance studies through the seminary but had to sit in the hallways to listen to professors lecture. This practice was in keeping with a Kentucky ordinance, "Day Law," which prevented Blacks and Whites from being educated in the same classroom. In 1952, Bottoms, Miller, and Taylor became the first African American students to participate in

graduation ceremonies. It appears that certain Southern Seminary professors, as well as other individuals affiliated with the convention, became the leaders for the convention in the area of racial reconciliation long before the convention proper assumed any significant leadership role.

Nationally, racial attitudes were well entrenched. In southern states, particularly, moves toward racial reconciliation were spotty and minimal at best. There seems to be little evidence that the church, especially Southern Baptists, assumed any more progressive role in the issues of racial reconciliation than that found in secular society. As late as the 1960s Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was often quoted as having said "the eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in America." Of course there have always been individual believers who assumed positions in contrast to the prevailing social norms, but these found little demonstrated support. Many of the individuals likewise received little or no national recognition for their often unpopular and unwanted positions relative to race. However, their small voices began to ring more profoundly as society wrestled with the "race issue."

The civil rights era of the mid 1950s into the latter 1960s, although often bitter, violent, and bloody, yielded little progress toward genuine racial reconciliation from a Southern Baptist denominational standpoint. However, among and within individual convention institutions, agencies, and church congregations—and on

personal levels—signs of racial reconciliation began to emerge.

The editors of Beacon Press write in the jacket cover to Cornel West's fine work *Race Matters*, "Despite the increasing climate of racial hatred and violence in America, discussions of race seem to be mired in traditional liberal and conservative rhetoric. . . . Racial hierarchy, Cornel West warns, doom us as a nation to collective paranoia and hysteria—the unmaking of any democratic order."<sup>2</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, at the turn of the last century, in the *Souls of Black Folk* wrote, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line."<sup>3</sup> Down through the years, many have expressed concern that Christian denominational groups had not been more proactive in intuiting racial reconciliation remedies when the Bible contains more than adequate scriptural support for such endeavors.

Cornel West concludes, "Our truncated public discussions of race suppress the best of who and what we are as a people because they fail to confront the complexity of the issue in a candid and critical manner."<sup>4</sup> He further asserts, "The predictable pitting of liberals against conservatives, Great Society Democrats against self-help Republicans, reinforces intellectual parochialism and political paralysis."<sup>5</sup>

The liberal notion that more government programs can solve racial problems is simplistic—precisely because it focuses *solely* on the economic dimension. And the conservative idea that what is needed is a change in the moral behavior of poor black urban dwellers (especially poor black men, who, they say, should stay married, support their children, and stop committing so much crime) highlights immoral actions while ignoring public responsibility for the immoral circumstances that haunt our fellow citizens.<sup>6</sup>

There are those who are asking, "Why the church?" Why should denominational groups be the leaders, the initiators of change in our American Society? Vincent N. Parrillo writes that from the very beginning,

Religion played a major role in colonial life, from its importance as a force for initial colonization by many different Christian groups to its influence on the every day life of the settlers. Clergy were highly honored members of the community and their advice extended beyond spiritual matters to include economic and political concerns as well as gender relations.<sup>7</sup>

According to Parrillo,

Three separate cultures evolved in the South among (1) the nonslave-owning Whites primarily in the back country, (2) the plantation owners, and (3) the slaves. Even among the slaves some diversity existed. Most were field hands working from sunup to sundown, but a small number were domestic servants or skilled workers. Of the tens of thousands of skilled workers, some lived and worked on plantations, but many were artisans hired out in the cities. In some cities, notably New Orleans, these artisans were permitted a remarkable degree of free physical movement and personal behavior, but they were slaves nonetheless. . . .

Life as a slave was a blend of labor exploitation, sexual exploitations, illiteracy, limited diet, and primitive living conditions. Only in their private time of leisure in the evening or on Sundays and holidays could slaves find respite from the relentless demands of bondage. Then they could hunt, fish, gamble, visit, gossip, sing, dance, picnic, or attend church. Essentially, slave culture revolved around three elements: family, music, and religion.<sup>8</sup>

Religion was probably the most important outlet in which slaves could express their deep feelings, bind together, and

find hope. Traditional African cultures are rooted in a worldview of continuous interaction between spiritual forces and community. It was thus a logical step for slave religion to blend the spiritual and secular worlds, connecting themselves both to a glorious past and a more rewarding future. Converting mostly to the Baptist and Methodist faiths because they permitted Black clergy, African Americans used their Christian faith and depended on it to bring forth ultimately the reconciliation required with God and with all humanity. There has been, and still is, a trust in the Christian message to be the ultimate vehicle of reconciliation whether racial or otherwise. African Americans have been, and in some instances still are, dismayed and disappointed that the denominational bodies, both Black and White, have not made greater advancements in genuine reconciliation, especially in race affirmation, acceptance, and inclusion—rather than mere tolerance. For the African American, racial tolerance is a far cry from authentic racial reconciliation. Even racial recognition, with its subsequent programmatic components such as an acknowledgment of holidays, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Race Relations Day in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), does not get to the core of the racial reconciliation agenda. Many African American National Baptist churches and some Southern Baptist African American congregations rejected the notion of a Race Relations Day sponsored by the SBC. The prevailing view of these congregations was that it is actually an indictment on the progress toward reconciliation when a day was designated for such a purpose. There should be an ongoing commitment, 365 days every year, to Christian racial reconciliation that issues in modeling and

action, not simply rhetoric.

Cornel West believes,

To engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of black people but with the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes. How we set up the terms for discussing racial issues shapes our perception and response to these issues. West says that as long as black people are viewed as a “them,” the burden falls on blacks to do all the “cultural” and “moral” work necessary for healthy race relations. The implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American—and the rest must simply “fit in.”<sup>9</sup>

Around 1968 the Home Mission Board of the SBC began a Department of Work with National Baptists. The growth of Black Southern Baptist congregations was slow and in some regions of the country non-existent. According to Emmanuel L. McCall Sr. and others, the belief at that time was that a ministry of cooperation among the various Baptist denominational families offered the best hope for advancements relative to racial issues.

Admittedly, much of the approach from the SBC was paternal rather than fraternal. Southern Baptists were making most of the decisions, funding the projects, and setting the agenda. Then there was the issue of trust, or lack of trust, from the Baptists as to the real motives of those giving leadership in the SBC. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, John Kennedy, and Bobby Kennedy had all been assassinated. Klan activity was more open than it had been for a couple of decades. Those events, the Vietnam War, and violence in major urban centers and on college campuses in both the North and South, all contributed to an environment where little trust existed anywhere.

By 1972 Cooperative Ministries became an official programmatic component of the Home Mission Board. Emmanuel McCall and Sid Smith had assumed important SBC denominational positions. The work of racial reconciliation became the priority and focus of the Department of Cooperative Relations with National Baptists, and, at this time, some mutual planning by both SBC and National Baptist leaders began at national, state, and associational levels. During this period Henelee Barnett began lectures on racial reconciliation on the Southern Seminary campus. Emmanuel McCall was recruited with the support of Southern Seminary Dean William Hull to begin offering courses to inform clergy being prepared for ministry in an increasingly diverse society. Additionally, the improvement of training for African American clergy, who were increasingly selecting SBC seminaries as a viable option, became a priority. Many National Baptist denominational leaders were invited to Southern Seminary as guest lecturers. Individuals such as the late Frederick G. Sampson, Sandy Ray, and Thomas Kilgore as well as Otis Moss Jr., J. Deotis Roberts, and Ed Wheeler were invited to bring their expertise and perspective to the Louisville campus.

For a segment of the denomination, this period represents a "Golden Age" of racial reconciliation. Sid Smith made a major impact within the Sunday School Board as Emmanuel McCall did at the Home Mission Board. These two men were given tremendous exposure across the denomination and were often the first African Americans in SBC life to attend or address various SBC functions. They were truly pioneers in SBC racial reconciliation efforts. They were sometimes ostracized by their National Baptist brothers because

some assumed that they were traitors to the "authentic" Black church.

Late in the 1980s and until just recently, the work with National Baptists came under the area of Black Church Relations. Some efforts at cooperative ministries continued to progress especially in the state of Kentucky, but gradually the convention moved from working with National Baptists to a greater focus on church planting and emphasis on development of African American Southern Baptist Churches. Although a number of predominately African American congregations which are National Baptist have decided to unite with the SBC in a dual alignment with both denominations, an increasingly larger percentage of African American congregations, especially church plants, are only SBC affiliated. Only time will tell as to the long-term impact this will have on racial relations and reconciliation among Black and White Baptists.

Many in the SBC, both Black and White, saw the 1995 SBC statement of apology for the "demonic" institution of American slavery as a significant step toward true racial reconciliation. It is fair to say that the National Baptist response was cordial but far from enthusiastic. Even though the four National Baptist Convention groups consider themselves theologically conservative they often take positions that differ from the present SBC denominational leadership on various social-political issues, especially affirmative action and other similar agendas.

Some National Baptists view the elimination of the Black Church Relations area in the reorganization of the North American Mission Board as a lessening of focus on denominational racial reconciliation. Many National Baptists fear that an almost exclusive emphasis on church planting



will only serve to alienate and heighten tensions among SBC and National Baptist bodies and congregations. This has especially been the criticism from some National Baptists who have viewed the site selection of some African American SBC church plants as not having taken into consideration the prior existence of National Baptist congregations in those areas thus giving the impression that the SBC is more concerned about planting churches than that of denominational racial reconciliation.

In writing about the proliferation of African American Southern Baptist Churches, Sid Smith sees seven realities that have contributed to this increase. They are summarized as the following:

First, during the last fifty years the image of Southern Baptist has changed in the Black Community. As a result of its surprising record of inclusiveness, the Southern Baptist Convention is now viewed as a viable denominational option for many African American pastors. . . . Second, the changing mores in society due to the impact of the civil rights movement have contributed a different mindset on the concept of integration. . . . Third, a desire to participate in the benefits of Southern Baptist membership has motivated many pastors to lead their congregation to apply. . . . Fourth, the practicality of dual affiliation enables many African American churches to enjoy "the best of two worlds." . . . Fifth, there has been a generational shift in leadership in the SBC which has resulted in a greater openness to the inclusion of minorities in all areas of denominational life. . . . Sixth, the positive testimonies of African American pastors relative to their experiences in the SBC have contributed to a "satisfied customer effect" which makes membership in the Convention attractive. . . . Seventh, the impact of the Southern Baptist church planting movement in the Black community has accelerated the increase in predominately

African American churches.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, the denomination and its agencies and institutions have been more inclusive of persons of color throughout the rank and file. Many see the addition of Black professorships within SBC seminaries as significant in impacting generations of men and women who will serve in and out of the denomination. T. Vaughn Walker (the present author) in 1986 at Southern Seminary and Leroy Gainey in 1987 at Golden Gate Seminary were the first two of what is now several African Americans teaching full-time with full faculty rank within the SBC. These two men each have now nearly two decades of involvement in theological education in the denomination. Countless hundreds of new generational SBC and National Baptist clergy leadership have been influenced by their instruction.

Sid Smith reports that an increasing number of Southern Baptist Associations and State Conventions have embraced African Americans in top positions. The State Conventions have elected seventeen Blacks to the office of president. Three states have elected an African American president of their State Pastors Conference.<sup>11</sup>

Four African Americans have been elected as vice president of the SBC and two African Americans have been employed as vice president of denominational agencies. Southern Seminary has appointed Lawrence Smith as Vice President of Communications. According to Sid Smith, the reality of the African American vice presidents reflects the arrival of a new day of opportunity for Black professional leadership in the SBC.<sup>12</sup> Most recently, Ken Fentress has been appointed Dean of Intercultural Studies at Southern Seminary with the intended

purpose of bridging the gap on the campus and abroad racially and culturally.

The challenge for the denomination is at least six-fold. First, will the leadership of the denomination, which has decided to move away from an official posture of cooperative ministries with National Baptists, find new and creative ways to enhance and advance relationships with the largest gathering of Black Christians in the world? Second, will the denomination continue to recruit and meaningfully empower significant numbers of African Americans who can often bring a broader worldview on a number of issues? Third, will the denomination be successful in projecting an image of racial inclusiveness, affirmation, and reconciliation to overcome decades of Southern culture stereotyping, which often is perceived as anti-Black? Fourth, will the denomination continue down a path of fraternal, rather than paternal, relationships with Black Christians? Fifth, will the denomination work for positive racial reconciliation within and outside the denomination proper? This becomes a special challenge with a rapidly increasing membership of African Americans in the SBC. Will the denomination move from traditional approaches within the denomination to a posture of advocacy in areas of society promoting racial reconciliation? This may include supporting and in some instances lobbying for legislation at local, state, and national levels that coincide with the positions typically held by an oppressed populace. Sixth, will the denomination embrace a much more culturally diverse populace with the influx of persons in our society from all regions of the world? This may involve accepting and affirming many non-traditional, yet biblical, approaches to ministry, worship, and

“doing church.”

If the Christian community in all of its racial diversity cannot model authentic racial reconciliation, then what is the hope that our society can do so? Given the transforming power of the gospel which not only reconciles fallen sinners to God but also to one another in the church, we need to be on the forefront of serving as models of reconciliation in this racially divided, fallen order. Cooperative ministries (alongside church planting), whether as an official denominational program emphasis or not, must be the order of the day. If we are to defeat the “real” enemy, it will require that all believers learn to work together in love for the cause of Christ. We can no longer allow race to be the factor that divides the Christian community. The entire Baptist family, Southern Baptist and National Baptist, *must* find some creative ways to work together in an increasingly secular, anti-Christian society.

The Apostle Paul exhorts us as he writes under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in Romans 12:3-5,

As God’s messenger, I give each of you this warning. Be honest in your estimate of yourselves, measuring your value by how much faith God has given you. Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ’s body. We are all parts of his one body, and each of us has different work to do. And since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other, and each of us needs all the others (NLT).

Racial reconciliation will be realized not only when preachers have the courage to preach it on Sunday morning from the pulpit, but also when denominational resources, both personnel and economic, are appropriately focused toward reconciliation. But even more than this, racial

reconciliation will be realized when each of us decides to take the gospel seriously and realize that racial bias and prejudice have no place in our personal walks with God, in our individual congregations, or in our homes.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Sid Smith, "Southern Baptist Reaching African American," unpublished paper, 10.

<sup>2</sup>Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).

<sup>3</sup>W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1907).

<sup>4</sup>West, 2.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Vincent N. Parrillo, *Diversity in America* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 1996), 48.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 88. See also, Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

<sup>9</sup>West, 3.

<sup>10</sup>Smith, 10, 11.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.