

MY STORY: Who Are You?

My spiritual journey began when I was a kid because my parents insisted that we went to church even if they didn't. When I was in fourth grade, we moved to Indianapolis and I started attending this fundamentalist church. My Sunday School teacher took an immediate liking to me. The class was full of a bunch of pastor's kids (PKs), and they were bad, and at least I paid attention. Plus, I liked comic books and he was a big fan.

So one day while hanging out with him, he led me down the "Romans Road," [for those who don't know what this is, it is a series of verses in Romans that outlines the condition of man, the consequences of his conditions, and what he can do about getting reconciled. The short version is Romans 3:23, 6:23, 10:9-10]. I prayed the "sinners prayer", I became saved, and lived happily ever after. Right, anyone who has been a Christian longer than five minutes knows the often bumpy journey that you set out on.

Now, before anyone gets the wrong idea, let me state emphatically that I liked the church that I attended. I grew up there and respect the people a lot. I think it was the right place for me to be at that time in my Christian walk. BUT, I was one of maybe three black people that attended. That was compounded by the fact that when we moved here, actually to the same area me and my folks still live, believe it or not, we were the only black family. Plus, after my fourth grade year, I was yanked out of the mainstream program at school and placed in the advanced program. On the upside, that was where I met Jon who would go on to become a lifelong friend. On the downside, however, the powers that be also decided that there were only two black students that fit their criteria. And for the most part, we moved as a group from fifth grade through high school.

(My wife didn't fully appreciate this part of the story until I took her to our family reunion in Jamaica. When she was there, especially being new to the family and wanting to just fit in, she ate what we ate, did what we did, listened to what we listened to. When we went out, and you're talking 200 of us strong, she was the only white person. When she turned on the television, she saw only black faces. When she went shopping or to the bank, it was only black faces there to help her. It was a wake up experience for her, and that was just one week.)

It's hard when it's just you, and you're a teenager, and you're just trying to fit in with everyone else, to maintain a sense of cultural identity. The black kids shun you cause they think you're trying to "act white." The white kids, the ones your trying to fit in with since that's your constant peer group, shun you because you're not one of them or worse, adopt you as some sort of mascot. Which you happily accept because you convince yourself that at least it was a form of acceptance. It's not a time I look back on too fondly.

Well, then came 1989. Here's where the story gets interesting.

By then, I was in college. I was still at my old church, ironically enough, I had started a singles ministry and called it Twenties. This was a watershed year for me, probably the second most important year in my life after my salvation. And it was because of a movie. I went to go

see a movie called Do the Right Thing. The movie was about life in a black neighborhood, an injustice occurs, and the people have to make a choice about what the proper course of action should be. I can't convey to you just how hard this movie hit me. By the end, I was left stunned; emotionally drained. It was like this voice was woken up in me that started whispering to me: "You've been brainwashed into thinking you're one of them. You ain't like them. They ain't ever going to accept you as one of them. You're always going to be an other. An outsider. You have to stick to your own."

And this happened while I was experiencing trouble in my walk with Christ. I had all this head knowledge, but I was worried about whether or not that was all there was to faith. I had this disconnect. No heart action. And I was having issues with my church. Like I said, it was the right church for the right time in my walk, but you know when you are starting to outgrow a place. The church was no longer speaking to me. I thought that there had to be more to being spiritual than a lot of theological head knowledge mixed with a bunch of rules to live by. What was worse was that the church had become irrelevant in my life because I wasn't seeing the love they talked about being lived out. They would always talk about being a neighborhood church, but would only reach out to the neighborhoods north, south and west of it. Two blocks east of it was a budding black neighborhood. So I left.

So I embark on this new journey, where I'm trying to figure out who I am. And let me tell you, it was black. EVERY THING. And if you were white, it wasn't easy to hang out with me.

"Maurice, you wanna go see a movie?"

"Yeah, I'll check out a movie, but it'll take a black one to move me."

Even the music I listened to wasn't just black, it was militant. My two favorite albums were It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back and Fear of a Black Planet. The classes I took? Black history. Black literature. Black music.

There is actually a sociological aspect to this. This process that I was undergoing was what some people call-- I'm serious, I actually have the paper--the Negro-to-Black Conversion experience. Where you are transformed from one mentality to another. My professor gave the paper to us because he knew that's why most of us were in the class and he knew it was easy to get stuck at the angry/so pro-black, you're anti-everyone else stage.

But that's also when I fell in with the Nation of Islam. It was the group that Malcolm X popularized, then left. For a reason. Louis Farrakhan leads them now. If you've ever driven down 38th street you may have seen them. The brothas in suits, with bow ties. That's them. I wanted a religion that spoke to me, but you have to know that the Nation of Islam is to Islam what the KKK is to Christianity, so you can just imagine where my head was at around this time. Even I didn't know how much built up resentment I had in me. Now they spoke to me.

"Black man" (yeah?) "You come from a proud race and you need to reclaim your pride."

"Black man" (yeah?) "You need to learn your culture, your history."

"Black man" (yeah?) "You need to pursue education and become self-sufficient."

Just so you understand the time line, I was with them right before I started coming to Teknon Theou (the singles ministry of College Park Church). So how did I end up here? I'd like to say I had this great spiritual revelation, a rekindling of my love of the Gospel truth. And I did, it just took a different form than one you might expect. You see, the Nation of Islam kept talking.

“Black man” (yeah?) “You need to take care of your body, to become strong.”
And how do you start?

Don't eat pork.

Again, allow me to quote from one of my other favorite movies, Pulp Fiction. “Pork tastes good.” You know what, Jesus wasn't trying to keep me from eating bacon. That was the start of me re-thinking where it was I was heading.

So I was at another crossroads in my journey. I wanted to focus on my walk. I knew I couldn't go back to my old church. I made a list of churches I wanted to go to and whittled it down to two: Eastern Star and College Park. They were basically the same church, except one was mostly black and the other mostly white. Two things tipped the scale in College Park's favor. One, Dr. Charles Ware (President of Crossroads Bible College and now head pastor of Crossroads Bible Church where my family and I now attend) had spoken at my old church a couple of times. And I was curious about the church that he called home. And two, and I swear this was my actual thought process, I said to myself that at College Park, I knew a bunch of white women wouldn't distract me.

Then I met Sally and God taught me something new about love and color.

Him and his kookie sense of humor.

Which brings me to my actual sermon:

The “Other” Brother
(Galatians 2:11-21)

I've had the privilege of having sat under some great teachers. Kimber Kauffman, Dr. Charles Ware. Rich Vincent. And now Shane Fuller. There was a sermon given by Tony Evans, from Dallas Seminary, I believe, that this sermon owes a lot to. I heard him speak at a Multi-racial conference held by College Park Church. I don't know if they still do, but College Park Church used to do these multi-racial church services, inviting in black churches, and calling it their taste of heaven services. That was the other thing that drew me to College Park Church. Because it bugs me that the 11 o'clock hour is the most segregated hour in America. That God's people can talk about the love of Christ, but they'll only do it among their own.

But this isn't a new problem to face the church. It was one of the first. That's why we're going to look at Galatians 2. For those of you who were at the retreat, Shane taught us the method of studying the Scriptures laid down by Ignatius, of putting yourself in the Scriptures as

if you were there. And that's what we'll do now, except, since I'm teaching, you have to enjoy the ride because it's gonna be as if I was there. We'll see how it works.

First let me set the scene. The book of Galatians was written to the churches in Galatia that Paul founded on his first missionary journey (Acts 13-14) around 48 - 49 AD. There were generally three factions in the early church: the left, the right, and the center:

- 1) the Hellenists, the Gentiles, were on the left - and were free with their liberties;
- 2) the Centrists (Paul, Peter) - were the burgeoning church;
- 3) the Conservatives, the Judaizers (on the right) - were those who came from a fundamentalist or, you could say, militant background.

The militants were a proud group and wanted to cling to their laws, traditions and culture. They didn't want people to just embrace the Messiah. They wanted people to prove it by embracing their culture. You have to be like us before we will accept you. Luckily, that's another problem that the church has licked. As far as they were concerned, Paul was dependent on Peter, James, and John for his authority. Kind of an apostle by proxy. Which is why Paul spends chapter one, and the better part of chapter two establishing who he is.

With the Ignatian method, you meditate on the Scriptures, picking a character and putting yourself in his position, try and see things from his point of view. So I want to shift to one of our favorites. Peter. You know why he's one of our favorites? Because as tempting as it sometimes is to think that if we were there, we wouldn't have made the same mistakes they did, in our hearts, we know we would have screwed up too. Big, Peter-sized mistakes. But you know what else? We also know that Peter makes it. The screw ups who make it give us hope.

Now, you have to love the centrists. They're the ones that usually try to be the peacemakers. The problem with being centrist, is that you are especially vulnerable to trying to please both sides. You see, Peter considered himself a Jew's Jew. Oh, he grew up in the hood from way back. He was committed to his heritage, his history, his lineage. He was so committed to the cause that it took God intervening to reveal to him in Acts 10, with the sheet coming down, to let him know that Gentiles were okay. You see, God was calling together a unique people, from all sorts of walks. So Peter's small world view was going to have to change. And you know what? It did.

Vs. 12. "For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles." You see, Peter, too, knew the truth in Pulp Fiction: Pork tastes good. He had bought his theology, made it his own, so it was okay for him to hang out with his Gentile brothers and sisters and break him off some pork. He was a free man. It was all good. But somewhere along the line, something went wrong, because when Paul showed up, he said that Peter stood condemned. So what went wrong?

Vs. 12 again. "For prior to the coming of certain men from James" These were the Judaizers, sometimes called the party of the circumcision. Apparently, some of his crew, his boys from back in the day, showed up and busted him while he was snacking on pig's feet. (Have you all ever had pig's feet. Nasty and greasy. My dad used to bring home some nasty old

hooves, nail still in it, and just have a good old time. I was never trying to eat no pig's feet or chitlins or any of that mess. But I digress.). I can see him there, hanging out with his new Gentile friends, eating their food, talking their talk, when these militant brothers come on the scene and are like

“Jewish man?” (Yeah?) “Don't you know who you are? Don't you remember where you came from?”

And Peter became afraid. More afraid about the thoughts of men than about the will of God. More afraid of his legitimacy being questioned, more afraid of losing his standing, more afraid of having his Jewish pass revoked, than about the truth that God had revealed and that he had already bought into.

Back to verse 12. “But when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision.” Peter gets caught up in a back to Jewishness movement and because he's a leader, others follow. Vs. 13. “The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.” Even Barnabas? Let's face it, we kind of have this view of (early) Peter such that we expect him to screw up. He's always been a little tempestuous. He means well, but sometimes, he just doesn't get it. He has the faith to jump out onto the water with Jesus, then decides to look around and lose it. In the garden, his first instinct is to protect Jesus, but the brother starts lopping off ears.

But Barney? Why was he singled out? Obviously he wasn't the only one. It says right in verse 13 “the rest of the Jews”, but Paul calls out Barnabas in particular. Barnabas was born in Cyprus (Acts 4:36). Cyprus was a Greek colony. In other words, he grew up with Gentiles, went to school with Gentiles, played with Gentiles. So he was a Hellenist from way back. So he was already free from his prejudice. But then along comes these militant brothers, and suddenly the racism of his own race--or if you want, his own political party--made him forget what God had already delivered him from.

(Man, I'm telling you, I don't know why I even bother reading the Scriptures anymore. This stuff isn't relevant today.)

Vs. 14. The uh-oh verse. “But when I saw” (stop). Uh-oh. Paul didn't say when I heard. No one had to come up and tell Paul about anything. This wasn't a hearsay situation. He was probably coming back through anyway because he heard about the rib fest or something. “But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel,” (stop).

There it is in the nutshell. The problem of racism is not that difficult, not that complicated:

For the church.

What we're dealing with is an issue of truth and an issue of sin.

We have God and Truth on one side. Sin and broken relationships on the other side. You can talk to me about the politics of racism, the economics of racism, the sociology of

racism, and believe me, I can talk about those too. But until we start talking about the sin of racism, we haven't gotten to the crux of the matter. We just blowing air.

Go back and study Acts 15. They already had their racial reconciliation meeting. Their multi-racial conference. They heard the truth, concluded that what God said was true, bought it as their own. There was no need for any further meetings. No need to plan special programs. There was just the need to go out and obey. Do you know what our problem is? We tend to pick the truths that we like and reject, or conveniently not hear, the truths we don't.

The other day, I was teaching my oldest son, Reese, to share with his brother, Malcolm. He had just celebrated his 3rd birthday and among his gifts, he had gotten these stupid little books. Some of you know the joy that is teaching a three year old to do the right thing. After I made him give one of his books to Malcolm, he looks me dead in the eye and says "I don't like you." Then throws a big fit. So I said "Guess what? You ain't always gonna like what I tell you to do. But you're gonna do it." (Yeah, it sounds good now. I'll leave out the part where I went all Old Testament dad on him: there was much smiting. (-:))

vs. 14 Paul then calls Peter out "in the presence of all". He didn't have a private meeting with Peter, because Peter didn't do a private sin. He was the teacher. He was more accountable. (Another reason why I've always been hesitant about teaching). You see, one of my personal heroes is Malcolm X. He defined what it meant to be black. Being black, despite what rap videos try and convince us, wasn't about sagging pants, drinking forties, and smoking weed. It was about knowing who you were, standing up and being proud. When Sally and I were first talking about having kids, I told her that when I dreamt about having boys, I'd always wanted to name one son after me and another after Malcolm X. (Who knew they'd both come out blonde haired and blue eyed. God and his kooky sense of humor again). But that's what Paul was to Peter. Peter couldn't tell Paul about being a Jew. Paul would just go all Philippians 3 on him "Do you know who I am?" I am the definition of a Jew. (Philippians 3:4-6)

You see, this wasn't about bacon or ham sandwiches. It was about making the Gospel look bad. The church is quick to jump on homosexuality, for example, as some sort of super sin, but here, much closer to where they live, Paul was quick to hold Peter accountable for making decisions based on race. God has called out a group of people, His coalition force, made up of black people, white people, yellow people, and brown people (we don't have any brown people here!). We talk about the oneness found in Christ, about being a community, but does it go beyond a bunch of good sounding ideas. In other words, does the theology we preach on Sunday apply itself on Monday?

I think half the time, the church has become so secularized, has so lost its focus, that we end up looking for the solutions to problems in the same places that non-Christians do. What's the government gonna do? You can't pass (enforceable) laws governing sins of the heart. You can't just throw money at the problem.

We have a different calling.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION POINTS:

(3 application points and we're done)

1) Unity means oneness of purpose.

Part of the problem is that we misunderstand the meaning of unity. Unity does not equal sameness. Unity does not mean that we all have to be the same before we can get along and work together. Tony Evans gave the example that if you are in a war you don't care about the color of the soldier next to you, as long as you're both firing in the same direction.

We talk a lot here in Teknon Theou about being a community of believers. Our ability to reach out of our comfort zones, across racial, cultural, and class lines, is about making the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ authentic. It's about starting kingdom living now.

2) Our identity has to be in Christ first. We have to first decide who we are in Christ.

No matter who or what we are, it is defined by Christ first. I may be a black man, but I'm a black man in Christ. Under Christ. His is the standard that sits in judgment of our culture. (The title of that Multi-racial conference I went to sums it up: One Lord, Over One People, in a Divided World)

(One of the things that I hated about teaching, I always felt a little hypocritical. I'm up here, I've got the truth, but I ain't there yet. I'm still working through this. Catch me on a bad day and there ain't but three white people that I have to love. One if I just want to sleep in my own bed. (-:))

3) We have to be a genuine people. We need to be a people of truth, not defined by this world's systems.

Peter was trying to have it both ways. Acting one way around his Gentile friends and another way around his militant friends. I feel for him, I really do. We're called to be bridge builders within our cultures. But, we're also called out to build bridges with all cultures.

I'm not talking about friendship evangelism. Agendas are sniffed out. If you come up to me and you have the stench of "I'm just trying to make a Negro friend" about you, I'm gonna boot you in your behind. It's a subtle difference, but I'm simply talking about being intentional in building relationships. About genuinely trying to reach out and getting to know people of other cultures. Beyond that, even people that challenge your world view.

I was talking to this cop the other day and he was telling me how racist cops develop. You start with a guy from a small town or who didn't have a lot of friendships with people outside his own race. You then drop him in the middle of a bigger city where he not only has to deal with people outside of his culture, but he has to deal with the worst of the people that culture has to offer. If he has no contact, no friendships with people of other cultures to balance out his view, he ends up developing a view of people based on the worst of them.

I got another example. I have a friend (Gaye Lynn) who grew up in a small town. All white. Came here, went to College Park. A long time member of Teknon. We became friends, so we have no trouble being real with one another. When she got married, her husband decided that they ought to go to Crossroads Bible Church, which is where I go on Sunday Mornings. Dr. Ware's church is specifically a multi-racial church. Well, she was sharing with me her struggles with going there. She simply wasn't used to the style of worship and frankly going to a mostly black church. Now, I love (Gaye Lynn), but the church is closer to 50% black, but I understood where she was coming from. When you used to one or two trees in your park, ten trees popping up makes it suddenly seem like a huge forest. But you know what? I loved her for her struggle. And for the fact that every Sunday, she's right there, still trying to reach out.

I'm not even saying that there isn't a place for mostly black or mostly white churches. In black and Asian communities, the church serves a bigger role than simply a worship home. The business of the community often gets done there. My main concern is how are we responding to the presence of "the other." We are a tribal nation: so has Christ transformed our tribalism or baptized our exclusivity? Are we being intentional about going forth and making disciples of all nations? If we live in a non-monochrome community, are we a part of that community making non-monochrome relationships?

Our main goal as a church is to be like Christ. Part of that means to cultivate friendships across all sorts of lines. Part of that means accepting people from all walks, some of which may make us uncomfortable. Stretch us a little. We're called out to build bridges with all cultures. And we're also called to be bridge builders within our cultures. This applies to our relationships among one another also. I may like different music than you. I may have differing political views than you.

But we have one thing in common: fellowship in Jesus Christ. I'm not saying that all Christians should like each other, (cause, frankly, some of you get on my nerves), BUT

- we should be able to accept one another in love, with our various quirks, our attitudes
- we should be able to speak to one another in love. We may need to develop thicker skins and not be easily offended because people may stumble as they learn to talk to one another
- we must be able to love one another.

(Ending prayer: read Philippians 2: 1-4. God, help this to apply to each of us in the context that we come from.)