Tearing Down the Walls of our Own House: Theological Reflections on Structural Racism

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> You hammer against the walls of your house. You tap the walls, lightly, everywhere... you know what to listen for. Some of the walls are bearing walls; they have to stay, or everything will fall down. Other walls can go with impunity; you can hear the difference. Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go... Knock it out. Duck. Courage utterly opposes the bold hope that this is such fine stuff that the work needs it, or the world.   --Annie Dillard

"LOOK, WHAT MAGNIFICENT STRUCTURES!" (Mk 13:1). Jesus' disciples cower, fascinated, before the Jerusalem Temple edifice. It is indeed a magnificent structure, bigger than life, architectural symbol of their social project. But Mark's Jesus refuses to be impressed, for he understands what they do not. This House must be deconstructed in order to make possible a more human society that will be pleasing to the true "owner of the House" (Mk 13:35).

"If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand" (Mk 3:25). The master political metaphor Jesus uses to describe his messianic mission is that of a struggle over a "House divided." He introduces it in his very first parable in Mark, which narrates an act of breaking into and entering a "strong man's house" in order to "loot his goods" (3:25*).* Later in Mark's story, this "divided House" is revealed to be none other than the Jerusalem Temple itself. Intended as "a home for all peoples" (11:17a), this House has instead become a "den" where criminal authorities practice exploitation (11:17b). Jesus there performs his most dramatic exorcism, symbolically "looting" those who have looted the people (11:15f). Shortly thereafter he predicts the dismantling of this House.

"Do you see these great structures? There will be not one stone left on top of another which will not be overthrown!" (13:2). This remarkable call to overthrow *(Gk katalythee)* the Temple system will—understandably, from the authorities' point of view—be used to convict Jesus in court for treason/blasphemy (14:58), and earns the scorn of those who preside at Jesus' execution (15:29). Yet as Jesus expires on the cross, "the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (15:38). Sometimes, writes Annie Dillard, it is bearing walls that must go.

"Christ has made us one, having broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2:15f). The conviction that socially dividing walls had been torn down by Jesus lay at the heart of the earliest church's message. Mark's sign of the torn curtain at the apocalyptic moment of the cross was later reiterated by one of the apostle Paul's disciples: "Christ abolished in his flesh the law with its commands and ordinances in order that he might create in himself one new humanity from two, so making

peace, reconciling both in one body to God through the cross, thereby killing the enmity" (Eph 2:16). Indeed Paul himself, like Jesus, wagered his entire ministry on this double task of *deconstructing* the divided House and *reconstructing* it on a foundation of race, class, and gender equality: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; all of you are one in Christ" (Gal 3:28).

"A house divided cannot stand." So warned the great American president Abraham Lincoln, appropriating the ancient verdict of Jesus to describe the economic, social and political crisis of slavery that led to the War Between the States in the 1860s. The image has haunted the American political unconscious ever since. This historical ultimatum was felt again during the 1992 Los Angeles uprising—the largest "domestic disturbance" in the U.S. since the Civil War. A House constructed upon social and economic division will either collapse because of its internal structural contradictions, or be burned down by those whose disenfranchisement gives them no reason to feel a stake in its maintenance. Or, as the popular slogan of the L.A. rebellion put it: "No justice, no peace." This judgment applies equally well to another building collapse recently heard 'round the world: the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in September, 2001.

When Annie Dillard wrote about the difficult business of tearing down the walls of one's own house, she was referring to the writer's struggle to improve her work. But her metaphor strikes me as descriptive of the task facing First World Christians today, for we live in a world constructed upon a social architecture of division that threatens the structural integrity of the "House," whether this metaphor is understood in terms of a local city, an institution (such as our churches!), a nation, or our globalized but increasingly rickety civilization as a whole. The question is, do we have the courage to take down walls that divide—even if they are bearing walls—in order to save the house?

SOCIAL GROUPS AND PERSONS VARY ACCORDING TO MANY FACTORS: age, cultural or linguistic background, physical ability or "beauty," sexual expression, religious belief, economic practice, and so on. But we must not confuse how groups are *different* with what *divides* them. It is when differences are used by some to exercise domination over others that they become divisions. In capitalist modernity, social divisions have been constructed according to gender, race, and/or class differences—usually by some combination of the three. Obviously other groups— such as gays and lesbians, youth and the elderly, and mentally or physically disabled persons—have also suffered discrimination and oppression. But gender, race, and class have been the historically determinative indices of structural oppression.

These reflections focus upon the endemic division of race, and because as I write we are approaching the tenth anniversary of the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, I will reference that event often. I have watched my city burn twice in my lifetime because of the persistent violence and dehumanization of racism and our refusal to have a public conversation about it. History shows repeatedly that the "cold war" of frozen race relations inevitably erupts into the heat of built-up rage. As James Baldwin

famously put it, if we cannot end the racial nightmare, "the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: 'God gave Noah the rainbow sign; no more water, the fire next time!'"

Racism has its origins deep in history, particularly in the European colonization of most of the rest of the world. The blueprints of U.S. society may have promised "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" to all, but the foundations of our national house were poured in the ideological concrete of oligarchy, patriarchy, and white supremacy (the same can be said of the United Kingdom). These actualities severely constrained the efficacy of the Enlightenment ideals of the framers of the U.S. Constitution, which originally enfranchised neither women nor non-Europeans nor those who did not own land. These exclusions have been mitigated over two centuries but never fully eradicated. This explains the dominant culture's ambivalence about racial, sexual, and economic justice: We believe in the ideal of equality and justice for all, yet routinely ignore the practical demands of realizing it. So we live with incongruity - and with the resulting anxieties about the instability of a House divided.

Despite decades of civil rights activism, there continue to be patterns of discrimination against people of color (particularly those who are working class or poor) in every aspect of American and British society: in health care, housing, education, employment, recreation, religion, commerce, politics, and criminal justice. It is impossible to characterize concisely the oppression resulting from the incessant violations small and large that take place; we must speak instead of an overall *system* of oppression. The exceptions found within that system—anomalies in the local distribution of power such as a Pakistani-owned bank or a predominately black local union—only prove the rule. Non-white persons must overcome extraordinary political, social, and economic barriers, working much harder to compete while constantly having to accommodate the dominant culture just to be nominally included within it. All this happens against a backdrop of routine marginalization, scapegoating, and even criminalization (such as the notorious phenomenon of "DWB" ("driving while black"). As a result of the wear and tear of racism in daily life, people of color face a host of psychological and physiological problems, such as identity confusion and alienation, self-destructive behavior, and a variety of health issues.

The walls of division are as tangible to those who routinely confront them in the classroom, at the store, or on the job as they are invisible to those who benefit from these same social patterns. Conversely, white privilege is usually apparent only to those who can't assume it. Racism trainer Peggy McIntosh has identified some of the everyday effects of the "unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks." Her list of special conditions includes the following examples:

- I can arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time;

- I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented;

- When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization" I am shown that people of my color made it what it is;

- Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial responsibility;

- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race;

- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group;

- I can remain oblivious to the language and customs of person of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion;

- I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.

In all these ways whites remain ignorant of how racism actually functions in everyday life—unless and until those who endure it bring it to our attention.

Whites typically recognize racism with clarity directly proportionate to its distance from our own time or place. All Americans today condemn 19th century slavery, for example, but 21st century efforts at redress by African Americans are profoundly marginalized. After the Los Angeles uprising, churches and peace groups (like mainstream politicians) from around the U.S. scrambled to dispatch "fact- finding" tours to L.A. rather than examining the very same conditions in their own cities. Throughout the 1980s there were more Christian groups in Britain and the U.S. working on anti-apartheid issues as they pertained to Southern Africa than on racism in their home communities.

Only people of color can describe and analyze the realities of their oppression and the rage that results from it. But are whites listening? Whites are forever recruiting a select few minorities in order to give multiracial legitimation to organizations and churches we control. Rarely, however, do we join *their* groups, where we would quickly discover how ambiguous and painful the dynamics of "integration" are. Suddenly we would experience first hand the host of small and large difficulties associated with being the "minority": what it feels like to be ignored or invisible; to be talked "about" or caricatured; to be surrounded by cultural discourses and practices that are not our own; to be treated with awkwardness or hostility or reserve. While such experiences can never approximate the ordeal of systemic racism, they can cause us to reflect on the suffering, patience, and fortitude of those who live under this reality all the time.

INSOFAR AS WE LIVE AT PEACE WITH THE social architecture of segregation and privilege, we continue to reinforce its power in and over us. While few whites are positively committed to an ideology of supremacy, most of us cooperate with the

legitimating rationalizations of white privilege. I want to note four basic ways in which we consciously or (more likely) unconsciously obfuscate structural racism.

i) *Reducing racism to the realm of individual attitude.* Theologian Theo Witvliet explains the "personalist" fallacy:

> In bourgeois societies, people are inclined to concentrate on the attitude and the mentality of individuals and groups in society and to lose sight of the fact that racism is above all a problem of the complex relationship of economic, political and ideological power structures...of exploitation and dependence. So it is still quite common today to find racism defined in terms of attitude, prejudice and behavior.

Many whites seek to personally dissociate from the problem: *I am not racist toward anyone.* But how can any of us in a racist system not be affected by it? Or, for those who do "own" the problem, the solution is often seen as a matter of character reform: *I'm going to be more sensitive to Indians.* Or we think that institutions will change by the conversion of the powerful: *If there were only more people of color in middle management then race problems would disappear in this company.* This same personalist ideology drives most white charitable work among the "disadvantaged." Overcoming personal prejudice or doing volunteer work is desirable, but it cannot undo a system. For that, relations of power throughout society must be transformed.

The flip side of the personalizing tendency is to argue from exception. Minorities who have become "successful" in the mainstream (business leaders, entertainment stars, athletes and politicians) are lauded by the dominant culture as proof that systemic racism no longer exists. The implication is that barriers can and should be surmounted through individual hard work (not torn down through political organizing). Unfortunately these "exceptional" persons only prove the rule, and sadly often use their success to prosper in the system rather than to challenge it.

ii) *Universalizing the problem.* Another rationalization is to attribute racism to all groups equally. Thus blacks can be equally racist against whites or Koreans, or Arabs can be racist against south Asians, etc. Structures of racial power and privilege thus disappear, replaced by moralizing about "good" and "bad" people of all races. We saw this after the Los Angeles uprising, as the media and politicians sermonized that most of those in the neighborhoods affected by the rioting were "good citizens who didn't riot," and blamed the violence on a small minority of "thugs and hooligans." This discourse functions to redeem our faith in the viability of the social contract while obscuring patterns of injustice. But assertions that every group has its "bad apples" conveniently ignore the fact that every group does *not* play on a level field in society.

Persons of color can of course be racially prejudicial toward other groups. Post-uprising Los Angeles has certainly revealed how much mutual suspicion exists between the Asian, black, and Latino communities, for example. This is not, however, "reverse" racism, because these groups do not hold power in the overall system. As black rapper Sistah Souljah pointed out in her infamous squabble with candidate Bill Clinton during the 1992 presidential campaign, the most repressive

black African dictator does not have the power to force Europeans everywhere to learn only African history in school. Racism is best defined *as prejudice plus power.* Nevertheless, white America has in the last decade vigorously bought into the concept of "reverse discrimination," and the result has been a variety of efforts to undo one of the few structural adjustments the system has made: policies of affirmative action.

iii) Resignation.   A third avoidance seeks refuge in a kind of "natural theology" that laments: *Injustice is tragic, but the world has always been this way.* Such pessimism usually lies beneath feelings of impotence (*But what can one person do?)* The liberal tradition, of course, acknowledges that there is room for social improvement—but on the condition that change must come gradually, and only in ways essentially continuous with the system itself. The system works, so change agents should work within the system. Tensions of social diversity must be effectively managed through assimilation, and discrimination against minorities must be overcome through more rational social engineering.

Stokely Carmichael long ago pointed out that these powerful fictions of inclusion prevent minorities from being able to define clearly the structures of their oppression. They blind us to the fact that disenfranchised people have *always* had to contest the dominant culture for recognition. What racial justice there is in the U.S. was forged only through protracted social and political struggle; it was not granted magnanimously by those in power.   Fair housing statutes, non-harassment laws, equal opportunity, the desegregation of public institutions and schools—all the civil rights we take for granted—are the result of long-term organizing initiatives by exploited groups. Resignation to the status quo has always been an expression of white privilege.

iv) *Backlash.* There have been real gains in racial democracy in both the U.S. and Britain in the wake of Civil Rights movements, but newfound access to the mainstream by persons of color has limits and comes not without cost. Though now generally welcomed into the workplace, marketplace and public square, minorities are still constrained by glass ceilings and pressures to conform. Their *presence* is tolerated, but their distinct *perspectives* are marginalized. Relationships are tenuous between whites who acquiesce to but do not welcome affirmative action and minorities who are reserved and defensive (an African American therapist describes this as a "climate of micro-aggression" that feels like "persistent acid rain"). Of course, the psychological cost to those doing the assimilating is invisible to whites preoccupied with their own inclusive nobility.

Throughout the 20th century racial progress was due not to political enlightenment but to forces of economic prosperity that needed the labor of minorities. But such gains have also been threatened whenever economic growth declines. In the recessionary 1980s and 90s, liberal attitudes of inclusion were eclipsed by resurgent conservative ideologies of "limited social good." These implied that any upward mobility by people of color came at the expense of the white working and middle-classes, and this came at a time when the latter were finally beginning to feel the economic squeeze. Racism trainer Tim Wise calls this "the politics of white resentment," which revolves around three myths:

- affirmative action discriminates against qualified whites and violates the principle of meritocracy (hence Republican denunciations of "quota systems");

- affirmative action is unjust "punishment" of whites for the racism of past generations;

- there is no need for continuing structural adjustments today because serious discrimination is a thing of the past.

Economic hard times have thus ushered in a stunning reversion to victim blaming. American culture has a long and notorious history of projecting responsibility for problems on marginalized groups (Native Americans, freed slaves, immigrants). Today this discourse continues in caricatures of "welfare queens" and "illegal aliens."

If we understand racism as a problem of personal ignorance, or of human nature, or of historical inevitability, or of the inflated expectations of "uppity" minorities, we will focus our response on changing personal perception, or on "adjusting" institutions that are essentially sound, or we will simply despair that anything can change. If, however, we understand with Witvliet that racism is "embedded in the economic, political-juridical and ideological structures of society, and deeply rooted in the collective unconsciousness associated with them," we will see that structural problems demand structural solutions. The distinction is crucial: It will determine whether we aim merely to redecorate the "House," or whether we mean to remodel it comprehensively—bearing walls and all.

"LIES CAN MAKE YOU CRAZY FASTER THAN ANYTHING ELSE," writes poet Christina Pacosz. "The dictionary tells us the root for *craze* is *krasa,* Old Norse meaning to *shatter.* Living with lies is a shattering experience." The lies of racism continue to make us all "crazy," whether we are privileged by or disadvantaged by our skin color, whether we have spoken up or kept silent, whether we imagine ourselves innocent or victimized. Our society and our churches have been "shattered" by these lies. The truth alone can put us together again.

For whites perhaps the biggest lie is that we have not ourselves been disfigured by racism. Wendell Berry wrote three decades ago:

> If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself. As the master, or as a member of the dominant race, he has felt little compulsion to acknowledge it or speak of it; the more painful it has grown the more deeply he has hidden it within himself. But the wound is there, and it is a profound disorder, as great a damage in his mind as it is in his society.

Only recognition that we are *all* victims of racism will motivate us to undertake the journey of healing. "This wound is in me, as complex and deep in my flesh as blood and nerves," writes Berry; "and I do not want to pass it onto my children."

To ignore or to treat this wound only cosmetically is to ensure it will fester—surely the twentieth century proved that. We must learn to speak and hear the truth about both the past and the present of racism—in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods and especially in our churches—if the future is to be different. If we Christians can't reflect critically on our own experiences of privilege and violation, ambivalence and passion, denial and liberation, how can we expect to nurture a public conversation? And if there is no public conversation, how can we hope for social reconciliation? Reconstruction in our ecclesial life can, on the other hand, animate a broader political imagination for the rest of our society. The courageous experience of the Truth and Reconciliation commission in post-apartheid South Africa (under the leadership of the churches) shows the dramatic transformational power of public truth-telling.

The evil genius of the social architecture of racism is its ability to keep groups in such different universes. It is precisely the efficacy of these dividing walls that makes them so difficult to tear down. The key issue is not so much our consciousness of these walls, but our actual practice in dismantling them. To be sure, few North Atlantic Christians have understood their vocation to be one of "demolition." Quite the contrary: we have endeavored to fill the House with a good spirit, rarely questioning its construction. Indeed, the church's own social architecture bears a close resemblance to that of the dominant culture. Churches have among been the last to integrate, and Sunday morning is still "the most segregated hour." All this is true. But it is also true that historically Christians have been on the forefront of social movements to confront racism and to embody integration and justice. And today our churches might be one of the few places left in civil society where an honest conversation about race could be possible.

We Christians must, therefore, learn to "hammer against the walls" of *our* house. If we heed the gospel, we will, as Dillard says, "know what to listen for." And when a bearing wall has to go, and our fears of collapse paralyze us, let us recall Jesus' promise that "the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" of a new structure (Mk 12:10), in which those of "every tribe and tongue and people and nation" are welcomed as equals (Rev 5:9; 7:9).