

***"Does BSU Make a Difference
In Race Relations"***

by

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When I was asked to write this article my first thought was that this was not a subject that I had researched or dedicated a great deal of time studying to produce a scholarly paper. My response to the question of racism and how it has impacted ministry to students is based solely on my experiences working at a historically black institution in the South. The question caused me to reflect on my life as an undergraduate during the 70's at a historically black institution in the South. There was a BSU there and my roommate was president during my junior year. Each week she invited me to Bible study. The Gospel Choir and students who could afford it went to the National BSU Retreat every year. They did not have a campus minister or a student center and were always raising money for whatever they needed. I considered where that same institution is today in student ministry.

A historically black campus that had an organized BSU in 1970 meeting in classrooms or wherever they could find space and under the volunteer leadership a Christian staff member who had a heart for ministry to students has just in recent years been assigned a campus minister. Does the process of placing a campus minister take twenty plus years on all senior college campuses where interest in student ministry has been demonstrated? What does this bit of recollection have to do with how BSU has affected race relations?

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I am excited that my alma mater finally has a campus minister who I trust will lead students in their spiritual growth and development; nurture them to become church leaders, missionaries, practicing Christian citizens; who will take them on mission trips and lead them in community ministry; and who will lead them to evangelize and disciple the campus community. I am a little dismayed, however, that the process took so long. What impact does such a move have on race relations? It is a wonderful demonstration of Christian outreach and ministry when an association and state convention moves to begin an organized BSU on a college campus. However, in the case of the historically African-American campus the college/university administration, the community, and local black churches are often skeptical and hesitant to welcome such an organization sponsored by Southern Baptist. They are usually wondering about the intentions, especially when they see that it is the white church that is leading the effort Christianize young African-Americans.

One thing that should be considered in the planning stages of starting BSU on historically black campuses or even in an attempt to reach African-American students on the historically white campuses is the race relations that already exist in the area. If the Southern Baptist Convention and local Southern Baptist associations are perceived as having a good relationship with the targeted college community, it could be easier to get the support of the school and the community for implementing the program. Without that relationship, it is difficult to get support or involvement from the African-American community and just placing

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an African-American campus minister on that campus does not solve the problems. Those problems are usually deeply rooted and go back for generations, but as long as they are in the hearts and minds of the people, they become potential stumbling blocks for that ministry rather than a foundation on which something great can be built.

Anytime the question of racism can be asked or even implied in relation to how and where BSU is implemented, there is a risk of hindering the positive affects that the ministry can have on the campus, in the church, in the community, and around the world. BSU has played a major role in demonstrating and fostering good race relations. But even when we think we have done our best, there is always one more thing that can be done to help the process along. There are many things that can, and perhaps are, being done to hinder the advancement of good race relations in BSU, the history of race relations being one major hinderance.

Learning about that history takes time. The study of the history of African-Americans takes longer than a month. That history will reveal the source of and the answers to some of the questions about the pain and the anger of the African American. If time is not given to the study of that history that gave birth to the pain and the hatred that exist among the races we could find ourselves taking three steps forward in race relations only to fall two steps back during times of racial tension as we are experiencing in response to the church burnings that we are reading about and seeing in the news today. Those burnings remind me of some of the incidents in the Civil Rights era. It is almost like a bad era of history

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is repeating itself. Perhaps this time the wrongs will not go unpunished. Reconciliation of the racial woes and differences that plague our society/the church can only be reached when the source or nature of the problem is identified. Racial problems came to America with our forefathers who are not here today to explain or defend their actions, apologize or repent for the pain and suffering they caused. That pain and hatred, however, was not buried with our forefathers, but was passed from one generation to the next and is still being passed along.

Why Recall The Past?

Recalling our history of race relations does not mean that we have to relive that history. Knowing the history helps with understanding why African-Americans and other people of color think and feel the way they do about European-Americans, in general. The history that I studied in high school and college recounted how America was built by the sweat of the brow of all of her people. I recall that the Native-American lived off the land until a group of settlers came to American in search of religious freedom and freedom from a dictatorial government. As those early settlers discovered the value of the land and her resources they began to expand their settlements, their fields, and their hunting grounds.

Those European settlers were free in a land of plenty that was theirs for the taking, and take they did. The freedom of these European-Americans came at a great cost to the Native-Americans who lost their freedom and were pushed as far as they could be pushed before they were pushed onto reservations. Instead of living

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off the land as they had been accustomed, they had to live off the hand-outs of the very people who had taken their land, their freedom, their dignity. The Native-Americans became enslaved by the very people who their forefathers had welcomed at Plymouth and taught how to live off the land. The Indians, however, did not make good slaves. They did not understand the white man's thinking and his way of doing things, besides the fact that they were not immune to the white man's diseases, therefore, many died. Other sources of cheap labor were needed.

As the natural resources of the land were discovered, workers were needed. Other people groups like the Chinese, Japanese, Irish, who found their way to American in search of opportunity found themselves in mining camps, railroad camps, and other labor camps either as slaves or cheap labor. The history of oppression at the hands of European-Americans was repeated over and over again as American grew. Many of those who came to American, the land of plenty, after those early settlers came from lands where they were suffering and oppressed. They came in search of freedom and prosperity. Often they found hardship, suffering, and more oppression at the hands of those who would employ/use them to their advantage. But they were permitted to scratch out a meager living and many eventually became land owners or businessmen.

The African, on the other hand, did not come to this land looking for freedom or prosperity. Africa was rich in natural resources and her natives were content in this beautiful land of their fathers and forefathers. Although during tribal wars many weaker

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tribes were sometimes captured and enslaved by their rivals, they remained in the land they knew and loved and experienced no hardship like that inflicted upon them by the slave traders and later by their owners in America. They lived free until the Europeans discovered a new source of labor and a new trade. They began to either capture the Africans or purchase them from chiefs of tribes who had captured them.

In his book, The Slave Community,¹ John W. Blassingame tells how the Africans were captured, chained together and herded onto ships where they were then shackled together on boards in the cargo holds so close together that they could not sit upright. Many of these men, women, and children endured ocean voyages which sometimes took months under the horrible conditions in those cargo holds as they were brought to America to be sold on the auction block to the highest bidder. They were usually bought by white plantation owners in the south who did not care about family values, morals, education, equality or any other qualities of life for those who worked their fields, cleaned their houses, prepared their meals, cared for their children and made them wealthy and highly respected among their peers at a time when a white man's wealth was determined by the number of slaves he owned.

The fiercest and most deadly battle in the history of America was fought over freedom from slavery for the African-American.

¹ The Slave Community: Plantation Life In The Antebellum South, John W. Blassingame, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. See Also Dismantling Racism, Joseph Brandt, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991.

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After the battle was fought and the slaves were declared free by the Emancipation Proclamation they were still held captive by a society who had deprived them of the right to be educated, to vote, to own property, to participate as equals in society or in the church. Even when African-Americans, slave or free, were allowed to become members of white churches (in the south) they were not given all the rights and privileges of full membership.

Although most African-Americans were accepted into the church on the same terms as whites (after making a profession of faith in Jesus Christ and sharing their religious experience) they usually attended worship in segregated sanctuaries or at separate services. The black members were not allowed to vote on policies and programs of the church or to participate in the business sessions. Though some black congregations were formed in the South at the beginning of the nineteenth century, by the 1830's white fears, racial prejudice and state legislation had eliminated the black church in the south. However, African-Americans in the North and South were prompted to form separate congregations because of racial discrimination and because they wanted to conduct their own worship services.

During the first half of the nineteenth century slave members could be found in all the major denominations with the largest numbers in the Baptist and Methodist churches. Many prominent clergymen defended slavery as part of God's plan. They described slavery as an institution that was ordained by God to permit the more advanced race to civilize and Christianize a helpless people. There were some clergymen, however, in the North and in the

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South who believed slavery to be wrong.

In the 1830's there was very little discussion of the slavery issue in the major denominations, but by the end of that decade and the emergence of a new generation of clergy, the issue could no longer be ignored. Discussions both pro and con of the Christian merits of slavery were frequent in sermons, denominational papers, and ecclesiastical gatherings. The division of the two largest denominations in the nation, the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Baptist Church, was precipitated by the tensions resulting from these discussions. By the end of the Civil War, southern churchmen advocated minimal reforms in the slave system, but never espoused emancipation.²

How Does The Past Affect The Present?

A study of the attitudes and actions of the southern church in response to slavery and the membership of blacks in the church could serve as a lesson to white Southern Baptists. Chances are that the average white Southern Baptist church will not take the time to study this early history of blacks in the church. However, such a study can be conducted as a part of the training of BSU outreach teams to help them understand why they will encounter African-

² Encyclopedia of Black America, edited by W. Augustus Low and Virgil A. Clift, "Slavery: The Churches," New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981.

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Americans who are not eager to welcome or accept their efforts to reach out.

Sometime and somewhere in the process of establishing good race relations both black and white students need to know that a terrible wrong was committed by the church. It is a wrong that needs to be acknowledged. It is a wrong that needs to be forgiven. Although it occurred over a century ago, the affects are still being felt in the church today. There are reports of churches that have successfully grown as multi-racial/multi-cultural. But more often than not we hear of new churches being started to meet a racial or cultural need. This is not a bad thing, however, it hinders the building of good race relations. Separation is seldom the answer to building relationships. Unless, of course, there are opportunities to come together from time to time to celebrate unity in diversity.

Just as the preferred styles of worship is different from that of the traditional white church for the early black church members, black and white Christians today sometimes feel the need to worship in a style that they are accustomed. The reality is that black and white Christians serve the same God who sees each as equal to the other. And, thought the church does not always afford black and white Christians to worship together, BSU is so uniquely designed that it can do all this and more. Not only can students of all races be reached through BSU, but they can also be involved in service, spiritual growth and development, leadership growth and development, and in training to be good churchpersons. Students of all races can not only be reached through BSU, but they can have the opportunity to be extended equal rights and equal opportunities

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for leadership positions. The preference of worship styles of students may be different, but their spiritual, physical and emotional needs are the same.

African-Americans should not be just reached by the church or BSU. Africans were a proud people with a tribal (community) spirit and took care of their own. When they were brought, nearly naked, to America they were stripped of what little tribal garb they were left wearing as well as their pride as they were separated from family and tribesmen in a strange and cruel land. The stories that were told by those who lived during this era and recorded by scholars and researchers is cruel, painful, frightening, bewildering, almost unbelievable to read or even imagine. Every time I read the agonizing history of my African ancestors or see it depicted on television or in movies there is a sorrow and a sadness that is stirred deep within my being. That sorrow was once played out as hatred and resentment of a people who inflicted such pain on my people.

During my Christian pilgrimage I learned and am still learning acceptance and forgiveness. The learning began during the years that I was employed at the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and it carried over into the years of working with Campus Ministry, Woman's Missionary Union, and local churches and associations. I met people, both black and white, that I had to move away from because their minds were closed to understanding the need and the importance of building good race relations. But there were others who shared the pain and understood the need for healing and who were interested in being a part of the healing process.

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As good as life is in America, the African-American people still experience pain, suffering, injustice, inequality at the hands of European-Americans. I am old enough to remember some of that pain and suffering first hand. I still see history repeating itself, not as blatantly brutal, but just as cruel, just as painful, and sometimes just as unbelievable. Do I expect an apology? No! I do, however, expect change. I expect a modern, educated, democratic society to learn from the past and work to build a better future. Even more, I expect a society who professes to be Christian to exemplify Christ in their relationship with one another.

The Apostle Paul says to those who have found Christ, "Do not lie to one another, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all (Col. 3:9-11, NIV). That is the kind of change that I expect from my brothers and sisters in Christ. The change that is needed to improve race relations comes with a change of heart; a change of mind; a change in attitude. The change that is needed to improve our race relations in America cannot be legislated. The change that we need to improve our race relations in America can only be found in Jesus Christ. The change that is needed to improve race relations begins in the church, BSU, the people of God.

The work begins with Christian leadership, both black and white, that goes beyond merely discussing a strategy for improved race relations. Improved race relations cannot be detailed on paper.

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It must be lived out in the hearts and minds and through the actions of the people. As those who lead God's people--pastors, religious educators, campus ministers, etc.-- come together in workshops and retreats, ample time needs to be given to the discussion of reaching a multi-cultural/multi-racial society. Beyond the discussions must go the extra time and energy needed to build relationships with persons who are not among the normal circle of friends and acquaintances. Most leaders, campus ministers included, do not have all these extras, therefore, team building is an important element in the strategy to reach people across cultural and racial lines.

Leadership in the white churches and on historically white campuses should keep in mind that they are trying to reach a people who have a negative image of white America. That negative image is kept alive by the media, and by those who want race to be a major and deciding factor in relationships. The image is kept alive as more and more African-Americans are studying the history of the African-American peoples. A study of African American History reveals unbelievable suffering and hardship that is seldom detailed in the high school and college American History textbooks. The painful memories go so far back in the history of the African in American and are so deeply rooted in who we are as African-Americans today that it cannot and should not be ignored. It will not go away. It can, however, be soothed by love. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the

truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (I Cor. 13:4-7, NIV).

When brothers and sisters in Christ work together, serve together, pray together, worship together, praise God together, fellowship together, rejoice together, feel sorrow together they demonstrate the true love of Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world. It is this spirit of togetherness that will cause Jesus to be lifted up and magnified to draw men unto himself. This kind of love takes time talking and listening to one another as in any relationship. It requires a lot of energy. The discussion of racism in Christian ministry has always been a very sensitive subject. The issue is often painful to discuss among black and white colleagues. It is sometimes embarrassing. There are even times when it is thought to be unnecessary because we now live in the 90's and racism does not exist. It is an issue, however, that cannot be tabled if we have any intention of living out our commitment to reach all students.

How Does The Past Affect Our Future?

Writing about advancement in race relations is not easy in light of the recent church burnings, mostly in the South, and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and of other white supremacist groups. It is during this time of crises in race relations, however, that student ministry can play a vital role to dispel the anger and hostility that some people of color may be experiencing. African-American students who are involved in BSU have the opportunity to meet and know white Americans who are Christian and who speak and act out in opposition of the wrongs committed against

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their people. The fellowship that takes place in BSU helps all students in the forming of their views about people in general. They have an opportunity to interact with other people groups and gain awareness and understanding of who they are as people of God and what they believe and practice. I think it is only after we get to know people that we are able to accept them, warts and all. This is the big challenge.

As Christian students grow and develop spiritually, they can begin to understand the importance of good race relations to the future of Christianity. Evangelizing the world requires all of God's people working together for the common cause. Part of the task of BSU is that of equipping future church leaders. That equipping demands that the leaders of tomorrow have an understanding and an acceptance of multi-cultural and multi-racial society.

My personal prefer is to have cultural diversity in my circle of friends. Cultural diversity among my friends helps me to better understand racial and cultural differences as well as likenesses. This diversity enables me to have friends who will answer questions concerning racial issues without feeling intimidated and I in turn can answer questions or clarify matters of concern about African-Americans, in general.

Although I do not feel that I can speak or state an opinion for all African-Americans, I do feel that it helps to remind others that we do not all think, act, and look alike. I did not think cultural diversity by the time I completed undergraduate studies. I wanted all of my associates to be black like me. It did not take me long to

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learn that my thinking was unrealistic and that it is people--of all colors--who make up this world. As I stated earlier, it takes time, effort, and energy to build positive race relations. More than this, it takes a desire and a commitment to make the relationship happen.

I am thankful that during a time when I was hurting and hating, there were people who were patient and understanding of what I was feeling as a result of the way I had been treated by a group of people that they did not know. I was a young adult before I discovered white Christians who exemplified the true love of Christ. The white Christians that I knew growing up were hateful, mean-spirited and did not hesitate to let us (blacks) know that our place was not in the mainstream. There are some who still think this way. There is joy in knowing that as a minister to students, as well as through involvement in my church and community, I have the opportunity to influence the thinking of young people. That influence goes beyond just helping them form their understanding of who God is, but, extends to helping them understand who His children are and the plan that He has for all His children for an abundant life.