NALC Atlantic Mission Region Theological Conference 2021

Is it Really Black and White? Gospel in the Face of Chaos and Division

On February 11, 2021, the Rev. Dr. Victor Belton and the Rev. Dr. Maurice Lee joined several dozen pastors and lay members of the Atlantic Mission Region in a conversation regarding the current unrest in our nation and our church over race relations, the “original sin” of racism, and its impact on life and ministry in the United States. Under the leadership of AMR Dean David McGettigan and the capable moderation of the Rev. K. Craig Moorman, Belton and Lee helped the participants to explore four points of impact.

First, both setting the foundation for the discussion and pointing to the framework giving it shape, Belton repeatedly asked the questions: “We are Christian, aren’t we?” “We are Lutherans, aren’t we?” If this is so, Belton and Lee affirmed, then, according to our confessions, the scriptures, the Word of God, are the sole rule and norm for our faith and life. And this goes too for our notions of who and what human beings are, that is, our anthropology. The Bible sees all humankind as having one source: the creative hand of God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — in whose image we are formed. Discrimination on the basis of racial differences is, for Lutheran members of the Body of Christ, simply to embrace falsehood, to reject the truth that we are one, made and meant to be joined to Christ, the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:20).

Second, Belton and Lee discussed the need for believers to hear the voice of the Father, as opposed to the other voices, wolves’ voices, clamoring for our attention and allegiance. Our culture is steeped in self-obsession and self-accumulation, but, as Lee noted, a key Lutheran insight is that everything good for us and good about us human beings originates *extra nos*, outside us, coming from the God who created us and loves us. Culture, family, friends, philosophies, ideologies, social and natural sciences, all claim to be able to tell us what we are, where we are going, how we should act. But Jesus said: “A stranger they [his sheep] will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers” (John 10:5). “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27).

Third was thinking about the inescapable spiritual dimension. At root, racism is not a problem that can be solved by finances, legislation, politics, or bloodshed, because the forces sowing division and hatred are not mere flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12). Ironically, Belton observed, “powers and principalities do not care about race. The enemy would love to have us all deceived and keeping him company in hell.” As unfashionable as it may be, Lee remarked, this Biblical and theological language — of unseen “powers and principalities” and “spiritual warfare” — gets us closer to the reality than can pop psychology or sociology, reductionist economic or class-conflict explanations, or glib talk of “systemic” -isms. Fundamental to Christian thinking about spiritual warfare is the realization that the victory belongs to Christ, and that, having been given a glimpse of that final truth, we may struggle in the present, with the strength God gives, on behalf of our fellow human beings made in his image.

Fourth, Belton and Lee suggested potential actions for participants in order to be agents of change and voices of justice among family and friends and in congregations. These included: (1) intentionally making new friends of different races and cultures; (2) reading material from the perspective of the “other”; (3) listening to new authors and artists; and even (4) pressing and calling for congregational and denominational leaders to consider making behavioral and policy changes in light of our Christian and Lutheran understanding.

In our thinking about race, as Belton pointed out, it is easy to find ourselves, and certainly to find our society, in the position of the unfortunate rustic described by Martin Luther in his *Table Talk*: “The world is like a drunken peasant. If you lift him into the saddle on one side, he will fall off again on the other side. One can’t help him, no matter how one tries. He wants to be the devil’s” (#630, 1533; Luther’s Works, vol. 54, p. 111). Extremes on both sides fail to come to grips with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and give open season for the devil’s work. But we are not of the devil. We are drawn through the waters of baptism and saved alive for the Kingdom of our Father. We will seek to represent him in all that we say and do.

The “conversational theology” that Belton and Lee were enjoying in the main presentation continued with questions from participants. Several of these brought up current matters of concern, like critical race theory, intersectionality, and cancel culture. But painting with a broad brush can be unhelpful, as Belton reminded us, recalling Paul’s experience in a riot in Ephesus: “Some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together” (Acts 19:32). Just because people walked in a Black Lives Matter rally does not mean that they have a thorough understanding of the entire formal Marxist, deconstructionist philosophy of the group. They may have been there simply to support the fact that *black lives matter*, which is a true statement on its face. Again, it can be tempting in our time to ignore the spiritual dimension for the sake of being culturally relevant — and theologically irrelevant.

The church has had to deal with issues of accommodation to cultural pressures from the beginning. Paul “called out” Peter for refusing to associate in public with believing Gentiles, and so behaving “not in step with the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:14). But the question, having to do with culture, tradition, and heritage, is not a simple one. It was likely not easy for Peter or indeed for Paul to buck those conventions. It was not easy for the new church, and it will not be easy for us.

Another question was asked regarding how we are to address our brothers and sisters in Christ who support particular ideological or political positions which stand at cross-purposes with the gospel. As Belton reminded us: “We are Christians, are we not?” We begin prayerfully, listening to concerns, asking questions that my help shed the light of  Christ on the issues in question. We are called to be patient, kind, forgiving, and long-suffering with compassion for the pain our brothers and sisters have experienced. We resist the urge to fix people and their philosophy on our own resources, and we appeal to God to put us and keep us in the saddle, for otherwise we will simply fall out.

Belton and Lee provided a reading list pointing to articles, books, and videos that might help participants to think from the perspective of the gospel and to walk in the shoes of the “other.” The presentation was recorded, and will soon be available for the church to review and incorporate in further study and discussion.