

# The Local Church and Problems of Identity in a Multi-Racial Country

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## PART I.

The question of identity lies at the heart of the culture of our country, for the whole structure of our way of life revolves around the racial identity of each person. "Identity" is a useful concept integral to all interpersonal and intergroup relationships, for it refers to the way in which a person or a group of persons understand themselves, the way in which they understand others, and, the way in which others understand them.

In order that the prophetic witness of the Churches become incarnate in the life and ministry of the local churches, each local church must inevitably face the question of its identity in terms of the culture of our land and the Word of God. The questions which are raised are these: how do we understand ourselves? How do we relate to the community where we are situated? How does the community understand us? The first and the last questions will be considered in the last article in this series, the second will be our main consideration in this and the next two articles.

There are few local churches which are not set in the midst of a multi-racial environment, especially churches whose membership is dominantly or exclusively white. However, seldom do we find a church that is to any extent representative of the community in which it is set, especially in terms of the racial structure of the community. The reasons for this racial segregation in the churches are obvious, whether they are simply practical, social or directly political, but the fact of the segregation raises the fundamental question of the basis upon which the church relates to the men and women of the community. Is the fundamental basis a socio-political one, or is it a theological one? Is the fundamental question related to a person's racial identity, or to an identity that arises out of the Christian revelation? The Scriptures certainly do not deny the fact of racial identity, but at the same time they go beyond ethnology and speak of a racial identity that includes all men in relationship to Adam and Christ, an identity that is at once more fundamental and theological. What is this basic identity of each man?(1).

## THE BASIC IDENTITY OF EVERY MAN

It is our belief that man cannot be understood apart from Jesus Christ for in Him we are shown the way in which God relates to man — it is in terms of this relationship that man's basic identity is seen. How does God relate to man? Let us consider some of the basic ways implicit in the Incarnation. First, at the heart of the Incarnation is the fact that **God identifies Himself with real, sinful man** to the extent of taking that humanity upon Himself. Second, in Christ **God accepts man as he is**, for "God's love toward man does not lie in man but solely in God Himself." (2). Third, God identifies with and accepts man **in Christ**, and thereby an historical person rather than an idea or a value becomes the truth of existence, and **each man by virtue of Christ becomes historically unique**. (3). Man's basic identity is not to be defined in terms of static values or abstract principles, but in terms of man's historical uniqueness in relation to the living and acting God. (4). When we therefore speak of man's basic identity we simply mean that each man is important in himself and as he is because he is a man.

The importance of this becomes clear when we consider what it means to destroy this "manhood" which is man's identity. This destruction can be accomplished either by despising or idolizing man.

We despise man when we deny that he is a man, whether the denial is in word, attitude or action. Kyle Haselden, writing about the race situation in the U.S.A., reminds us that "the error of the white man in his relationship to the Negro cannot be thoroughly corrected until he accepts the Negro as man." (5).

Likewise, we despise man when we deny any man his uniqueness, which happens when we stereotype man, put them in superficial categories or depersonalize them in an idea. Bonhoeffer expresses this well when he refers to the "scorner":

"He thinks people stupid, and they become stupid.

He thinks them weak, and they become weak.

He thinks them criminal, and they become criminal." (6).

We despise man when we lay down conditions for his acceptance by us, as distinct from his being accepted into the membership of the Church. As regards his acceptance into the Church, we despise man when we make the ground of his acceptance dependent upon his racial identity.

But we also destroy man's manhood when we idolize him. This danger confronts both those who defy themselves or elevate their race as of ultimate significance, and, those who fail to see that real man is sinful man whatever his racial identity may be. Once again Haselden illuminates this when he writes about those who, in seeking the good of the Negro in the U.S.A. romanticise him, and in disregard of the plain facts present a glamorized picture of the Negro. (7). Thus failure to let a man be a man is sinful, (8) indeed, it is an attack on Christ, (9) for in denying the manhood of men we deny and despise the manhood of Jesus Christ.

The Incarnation includes the Cross. There is much that could be said about the meaning of the Cross for man's basic identity, but the two factors that are of paramount importance for us are, first, that the Cross challenges every human standard whereby men are judged, and second, that the Cross is the judgment of God on every effort to give manhood ultimate significance apart from Christ. Regarding the first factor, we find God's "NO" to any doctrine of race superiority which may be the criterion for relating to men. The second factor, reminds us that while man is important in himself because he is a man, this is only true because of



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Christ, and there can be no glorying in humanity which would make man the measure of all things.

The Incarnation culminates in the Resurrection of Christ and the subsequent birth of the Church, which brings us further in our attempt to discover the basic identity of man. Here we wish to make use of the Pauline concept of the "New Humanity" which comes into being in Christ, and in which man's relationship to God is more clearly defined. *Not only are all men identified with each other in their manhood, or in the death of Christ, they are likewise identified with Christ in His Resurrection.* "The man whom God has taken to himself, sentenced and awakened to new life, this is Jesus Christ. In Him it is all mankind. It is ourselves." (10). We cannot define man's basic identity unless we see that all men are part of a new creation, even though this new creation "is embodied amid the alienations of a particular society." (11). Where then, is the New Humanity manifest in the world of empirical reality?

### THE NEW HUMANITY

Visser T'Hooft provides us with a starting point, when, writing about the general consensus of opinion amongst biblical theologians today about certain central aspects of the doctrine of the Church, he says: "This agreement can be formulated as follows: 'The Church is the people of God, gathered together by Jesus Christ, so as to represent the new humanity!'" (12). This does not mean that the New Humanity is not manifest in places other than the empirical Church, for many "affirm this New Mankind without full awareness of its source", (13) but that the Church is the conscious witness to it, it is "a section of humanity in which Christ has really taken form." (14). If this be true, then the Church

exists to affirm God's acceptance of every man with all the implications of his existence, man in his wholeness, and it does so when it relates to man as man, man as sinful, man as unique, and more especially, man as part of the New Humanity to which the Church gives expression in the world. Not all men are aware of their identity, nor do all live in terms of their identity, on the contrary, but the Church sees the identity of every man with Paul: "From now on we regard **no one** from a human point of view" (15), but only in terms of Christ in whom God reconciled the world to himself and "entrusted to us the message of reconciliation." (16).

### THE INCARNATION AND THE "NATURAL RIGHTS OF MAN"

It is in the light of all this that we can proceed to discuss the meaning of the "natural rights of man" which is so important in any discussion of man's relationship with man. Bonhoeffer seeks to understand the concept of the natural in terms of Christ when he writes:

"Natural life must be understood simply as a preliminary to life with Christ. It is only from Christ himself that it receives its validation. Christ himself entered into the natural life, and it is only through the incarnation of Christ that the natural life becomes the penultimate which is directed towards the ultimate." (17).

In egalitarian doctrines of man, man's rights are given ultimacy; in orthodox Protestantism they are seen as penultimate, and therefore often disregarded simply because they are penultimate. But to lose the natural, as that which is penultimate and yet directed towards the ultimate, is to lose life. The natural is God's method of preserving life within human society, in order that society may be renewed through Christ.

The implications of this for understanding the rights of man are seen as follows. **First**, natural life stands between the extremes of vitalism and mechanization, between life as an end and life as a means. The individual is never an end in himself, neither is society, nor is he or society to be understood in terms of utility pure and simple. **Second**,

natural rights are to be regarded as a gift of God to man, not as man's inalienable right, which implies the need not only to be aware of the rights which God has given to oneself but also of the rights God has given to every other man by virtue of his manhood. "One can have a natural right of one's own only if one respects the natural rights of others." (18) This means that natural rights always imply responsibility in relationship between persons and groups. **Finally**, we mean by natural rights the "right to bodily life". (19). As Bonhoeffer puts it:

"The human body must never become a thing, an object, such as might fall under the unrestricted power of another man and be used by him solely as a means to his own ends. The living human body is always the man in himself. Rape, exploitation, torture and arbitrary confinement of the human body are serious violations of the right which is given with the creation of man, and what is more, like all violations of natural life, they must sooner or later entail their own punishment." (20).

In an unfinished section of his "Ethics" Bonhoeffer has further notes on various other aspects of man's natural rights, such as the rights of mind, work, property, and so forth. Each of these is important and arises out of seeing man's basic identity in terms of the natural.

In subsequent articles we will consider two major problems that confront us in attempting to relate to all men in terms of this basic identity, namely, the problem of prejudice and the problem of anxiety. In the final article we will develop the concept of the Church as the manifestation of the New Humanity, and what it means for a local church to manifest its identity where it is situated. We conclude this introductory statement on man's basic identity, by restating that a theological understanding of man in terms of God become man points to an identity which all men have as men, as real, sinful men, as unique in their historicity, and as participants in the reality of the New Humanity. Arising out of this identity every man has been given natural rights and concomitant responsibilities in his relationship to other men in society.

(To be continued)