

An Answer to Ethnic Identity

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A word particularly for the black community (adapted from a letter written to a sister)

Our identity in God is an enormously significant subject. I understand (in measure) the terrible depletion of the Black Man in America and the great need for a self-esteem, dignity and identity in the very area in which he has been robbed. But to predicate that identity on some supposed virtue inherent in race is unhappily reminiscent of that theme exploited by the Black Muslims and even by Farrakhan today. The issue is not whether history verifies it so much as to whether it should be employed.

God's answer is founded on altogether other lines. We are to find our identity, not on the basis of any natural factor, but rather on a spiritual one, that is to say, "in Christ"! To be a servant and a son are for me ultimate calling. This is the very identity of Christ Himself in His earthly tenure. Ought it not be ours? Is not this the appeal of the great Apostle himself in Philippians 2:5-12? Though he was himself a "Hebrew of the Hebrews," did he not cast aside his every earthly distinction as dung in order to win Christ?

Ironically, the greatest Christ-like figure in all American literature is the black slave of Uncle Tom's Cabin. How transcendent his uncomplaining suffering; not once taking issue with the lowliness of his servanthood, but rather glorifying God in it. I do not know of a figure more compelling, more heroic, yet how derogatory today to be called an "Uncle Tom"! It would be commendable if the whole Church in America would take to itself this image. But who will model this for us? Where are the actual examples of this servanthood demonstrated before us by black men and women? Where are those who would voluntarily forsake upward mobility in the "white man's world" in order to demonstrate the timelessness of God's own character in meekness. What a call! Who would have the courage to embrace it?

This is not to negate "blackness," but perhaps to identify, in part, the very wisdom of God in bestowing it! It is no accident that the servant who succeeds in saving the prophet Jeremiah out of the death of the miry pit is a black eunuch! Though the king ordered Jeremiah's execution, this man recognized the value of the prophet, and risked his own life to propose saving him! His fashioning of a harness of ropes made by rags completes the picture of "lowliness" incorporate not only in a servant, but a black servant, not only a servant but a eunuch robbed of his own sexuality!

Can it be that God reserves for the socially "lowest," and even despised, the greatest honor of a last days' heroic salvation of the remnant of Israel by that servant people who cannot allow our "dungeon-death" even at the risk of their own life? Great and unimaginable honor and distinction will be theirs eternally in the Kingdom.

No doubt such a line of consideration to drifting, aimless black youth would seem a vapor. "How impractical can you get?" Aggressive self-assertion, not servanthood, is the theme of the hour. Millions of dollars in product endorsement and salaries await the successful black athlete or rap star. A crown of thorns has no honor or riches. Who dares propose such an alternative? Who has in measure himself appropriated it?