

Script III

Accommodating Racism

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There is a link between Christian theology and Christian ethics. That is, there are relationships between the theology Christians profess and how Christians, as a body, have acted. Sometimes the link is one of omission. By that I mean that, in some instances, the theology is structured so that it offers no guidance for Christian ethics. In that case, the theology accommodates problematic ways of acting. Some might say that it accommodates sin. Let me show you one example using some well-known theology. At the same time, rest assured that not all churches that profess the theology below have made the unfortunate application that I will describe.

Credo are used in worship by many churches. These creeds, some of which are quite ancient and revered, provided particular answers to specific questions in a particular context. However, now the shape of the questions has shifted, and the answer may not offer full or even necessary meaning in our current context. I believe that this is the case with the problem of racism that confronts Christians today.

Many Christians use the Nicene Creed (first formulated in 325 C.E.) to profess faith in Jesus Christ as incarnate Savior. Historians tell us that the heart of this creed is in the statement that Jesus is "of one substance with the Father," or "one in being with the Father." In other words, the creed affirmed the deity of Jesus. Although not a creed, the phrase from the Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.), which states the two natures of Jesus, namely that he is "truly God and truly Human," has had the same revered status. For many people, the meaning of Jesus has been reduced to the content of these formulas.

It is often said that Jesus is a model for the Christian life. In my theology classes, I would show these important formulas to my students, and then pose a question: "Since Jesus is our model for life, what do these phrases, 'one substance with the Father' and 'truly God and truly Human,' or even the Nicene Creed as a whole, tell us about living like Jesus?" The question was always greeted with silence. It seemed like a trick question. Eventually, a hand would be raised and in a timid voice a student would suggest that it did not have anything to say about living like Jesus. And my answer of "That's right!" would bring a smile of relief to the student.

The student response in my class reflects the experience of womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas, as reported in her book *The Black Christ*. Douglas wrote that, although she learned about the tradition of Nicea and Chalcedon in seminary, she had long believed, herself, that "Jesus was Christ because of what he did for others, particularly the poor and oppressed." When the creed jumps from incarnation at birth to the crucifixion, she writes, "The implication is that what took place between Jesus' birth and resurrection—the bulk of the Gospels' reports of Jesus—is unrelated to what it means for Jesus to be the Christ" (111-113).

The Nicene Creed and the formula from Chalcedon define Jesus in ways that offer little about Jesus that would guide the life of a Christian. I could cite many scholars who have pointed to the problem of a Christian profession separated from what it means to live as a Christian. One such scholar is Joerg Rieger, in his book *Christ and Empire*. The Nicene Creed was developed after the Roman emperor had professed Christian faith and church authorities had begun to appeal to emperors for support against their opponents. Stated another way, this creed emerged and became authoritative in the epoch after the church had made peace with the emperor's sword. Thus, Rieger writes that it was "not an accident" that the creed includes nothing about the life of Christ, which reveals his rejection of the sword. "The challenge to empire posed by the life of Christ would have just been too great," says Rieger.

The formula that did not challenge the empire has also allowed Christians to misuse the creed by professing Christ as Savior while accommodating slavery and racism. James Cone, founder of the Black Theology movement, makes this point forcefully in his book, *God of the Oppressed*.

In Cone's analysis, the absence of a challenge to racism rests comfortably on Nicea's formula of Jesus as "one substance with the Father," and the formula from the Council of Chalcedon, which declared Jesus "truly God and truly Human." Cone says that these formulas have allowed the church to investigate "the meaning of Christ's relation to God and the divine and human natures in his person, [while] fail[ing] to relate these christological issues to the liberation of the slave and the poor in the society" (104).

Cone argues that the generic categories of "humanity" and "deity" of classic Nicene-Chalcedonian theology lack an explicit ethical content. This absence clearly set the stage for the development of a theology that supported the "church's position as the favored religion of the Roman State," as Joerg Rieger says, and did not address the conditions of the poor and the oppressed. Cone writes:

Few, if any, of the early Church Fathers grounded their christological arguments in the concrete history of Jesus of Nazareth. Consequently, little is said about the significance of his ministry to the poor as a definition of his person. The Nicene Fathers showed little interest in the christological significance of Jesus' deeds for the humiliated, because most of the discussion took place in the social context of the Church's position as the favored religion of the Roman State (107).

Consequently, "Christology is removed from history, and salvation becomes only peripherally related to this world." Cone locates this Nicene christology in the social and political context of the church at the time. The Nicene Fathers in the time of Emperor Constantine were not slaves. Thus, "it did not occur to them that God's revelation in Jesus Christ is identical with the Spirit of his presence in the slave community in the

struggle for the liberation of humanity. They viewed God in static terms and thus tended to overlook the political thrust of the gospel" (181). Stated another way, this theology clearly separated theology from ethics. White theologians could claim Jesus as defined by the abstract formulas of Nicea and Chalcedon, thus claiming—correctly—to stand in the orthodox theological tradition, but, at the same time, own slaves. The same disconnection between Christology and history would allow later generations to support legal segregation, and today, may lead to condoning white privilege while ignoring the systems that discriminate against people of color.

We met Willie James Jennings and J. Kameron Carter briefly in the previous lesson. Their books, *The Christian Imagination*, and *Race: A Theological Account*, locate the problem of a theology that accommodated racism earlier than did James Cone. They argue that the stage was set when the early church fathers separated Jesus from his Jewishness. The results of this separation were disastrous. It is Jesus' Jewishness, they point out, that located him in a particular history... in a particular place and time.

This separation is present and visible already in the standard christological definitions of Jesus as "one substance with the Father" and as "truly God and truly Human." These terms located Jesus above or outside of history. European theologians could then define him in generic, supposedly universal terms, but in ways that actually reflected their own racial and cultural context. Jesus was then assumed to be white, but in a way that made "European white" into the universal norm of what it meant to be fully human. When slaves from Africa entered the picture, the idea of "pure" blood developed, with European white as the norm of purity. Peoples encountered in European colonial endeavors were all deviations from this norm, in both color and in form of government. Thus, these colonized peoples were all assigned varying degrees of "lesser" or inferior. And the European colonizers gave to themselves a sense of superiority over and license to control the other ethnic peoples.

This sense of superiority characterized the Portuguese, Spanish, and later French and English colonization efforts in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. In other words, racism and a sense of white supremacy has been a part of the history of the United States (and of other places colonized by Europeans) since the beginning of the colonial era.

Not all Christians, by any means, have used the classic language to defend slavery and racism. There are a number of ways to respond to the analysis of Jennings and Carter and a number of ways to do theology. Some Christian traditions and some theologians will respond by inserting the stories of Jesus, such as those we saw in the previous lesson, into the classic formulas of “same substance with the Father” and “truly God and truly Human.” Since theology involves reflecting on and attempting to draw meaning from the story of Jesus, other traditions and their theologians may start with the narrative of Jesus and develop other ways of confessing that God is revealed in and present in his story.

Discussion Questions

1) How did you think about Jesus before studying this lesson? Does the viewpoint presented in this lesson differ from your tradition? If so, in what way?

2) What experiences have you had with different kinds of Christology, or different ways of understanding Jesus?

3) What aspects of racism have you seen that have not been challenged by our inherited theology?

4) What ways can the story of Jesus, and theology derived from it, challenge the racism in our society?

5) What is important about Jesus for you? Would you say that your faith creates barriers or breaks them down?