

# JESSICA

A Theological Analysis of Racism by Kathy Waters

*The world tells you that you that you are all alone,  
Only animal, only image, that evil is good and good is evil,  
Don't listen!!  
You are made in God's image for joy.<sup>1</sup>*

My mother's love of sports remains a constant joy in her life. Eighty-five and crippled by scoliosis she attends most sporting events held at the nearby university. The group dearest to her heart is the women's basketball team. Along with several other retired and still teaching – but elderly – female professors, she follows the Lady Buccaneers on their endless trail of wins and losses. Somewhere along the way, she met and 'adopted' Jessica. As a part of our family, Jessica's pictures mix in with my mother's photos of her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. This array of family pictures startles people who don't know us well. We are, for the most part, a short, blonde pale people who give away an undeniable Scandinavian heritage. The much loved Jessica is African American, six-four and wears a size thirteen shoe. Despite that, it seems that she has been with us always.



Figure 1 JESSICA

My mother loves shopping for clothes. When Jessica entered a beauty contest, Mom coordinated her wardrobe. (I can just imagine those two touring the malls. What a picture they must make!) Their appearance at the Methodist mother-daughter dinner last year also startled a few people. Mom loves to entertain. Two years ago Jessica moved into what was once my room where she studies for tests and gets away from dorm life. Naturally, she also invites her friends over. Naturally my mother feeds them. You might ask, "What does one feed four or five or six female African American teen-agers, especially when one is six' ten" and the rest are over six feet tall?"<sup>2</sup> Since I fed them several times, I answer, "Lots of junk food." The six' ten" Tiffani's intense shyness interests me. She makes herself near invisible by blending into the background. When I hugged her and told her she had a home away from home with us, she felt wooden. I hope the poised Kayha serves as the role model Tiffani needs.

Ballgames themselves are noteworthy. When the team emerges, they look for and find their parents. My mother and her friends sit with them. Since they are close, my mother occasionally phones Jessica's mother. When Jessica got a speeding ticket on her way home

to southern Georgia, her mother called my mother to discuss it. Summing it up, we add



Figure 3 Tiffani scores

something to the lives of these beautiful young women and they give us much more joy than we ever expected.

My mother spends many of her days at a local Methodist church. My entry into seminary, especially at such a prestigious institution, has added at least ten good years to her life. Jessica's father is an ordained Methodist pastor. Her brother recently graduated from Candler Seminary at Emory University and is a newly ordained Methodist minister. I occasionally encourage Jessica to consider the ministry. I invited her to visit me at BU hoping she might enroll here and live with me. All these events, these relationships, all this love and joy have been played out on the stage that is the church. This manifests the Christian love and joy that Christ expects from the church – from the body of Christ – Christianity lived in joy and laughter. This love offers healing for a small bit of the wound inflicted on us all by slavery. I will approach this as an evangelical because I am an evangelical from a highly evangelical culture and that is all I know.

## EXAMINATION OF BLACK EXPERIENCES IN A RACIALIZED SOCIETY

In the book, *Divided By Faith*, authors Michael Emerson and Christian Smith use the term *racialized* to define a society wherein race matters profoundly in life experiences, life chance, and social relationships. Intermarriage rates are low, residential separation and socioeconomic inequalities are the norm. Definitions of personal identity and choices of intimate associations reveal racial distinctiveness. People are aware of the race of the person they are interacting with. A racialized society can also be said to be a society that rewards people along racial lines that are socially constructed,<sup>3</sup> but are not obvious. These practices are invisible to most whites because they avoid racial terminology and are embedded in the normal operations of institutions.<sup>4</sup>

While blacks advocate pride of race, being black in the United States must be grim. In *A Black Theology of Religion*, James Cone writes of the shame of the American churches - racism, lynchings, humiliation, harsh economic oppression, bleak, crumbling schools<sup>5</sup> to name a few of the barriers blacks have historically faced when attempting to live a decent life in the country of their birth and citizenship.<sup>6</sup> I know Tiffani, Jessica's teammate, who is six' ten", and can almost make herself invisible. Although I have not lived black, I have seen their suffering and know that it must be unbearable. As a Christian I cannot stand by while

my brothers and sisters suffer, yet what reasoned response, what action that Christ would approve of is available to me?

## THESIS

I believe the Evangelical Christian's role is to imitate Christ, to love as The Lord loves. Among other tasks, Evangelical Christians are to end racism and create a truly equitable and free society. The question is: How might an evangelical make a difference in race relations in white suburbia? What can the evangelical church do to make a difference in race relations?

## DEFINITIONS

**Evangelicals** – My home community is evangelical. Diverse by denomination, evangelicals believe all truth comes from the Bible. Christ died to save us. Anyone who is 'born again' will have a spiritually transformed life. We go to the Bible, to our preachers and evangelical friends for answers and strategies. It is not unusual for a southern evangelical to attend church four or five times a week.<sup>7</sup> To me, evangelical congregations appear homogeneous making it is easy to tell who is in and who is out. We make friends, especially close friends, at church. We believe in engaged orthodoxy or taking the conservative faith beyond the boundaries of the evangelical subculture to engage the larger culture and society or praxis. To us, praxis emphasizes the importance of action in relation to thinking. Our preachers tell us to witness and to act, to serve as skin for Jesus, to be His hands in this world.

**Race** - Positive physical and cultural anthropology that define race scientifically as a major division of humankind with distinctive hereditary, transmissible physical characteristics. Scientifically, race is a breeding group with gene organization different from that of the other intraspecific groups.<sup>8</sup>

**Racism** - The false consciousness of a dominant race concerning itself and races they dominate. It is not about scientific concern with human races, their differences, interrelationships and conflicts, but a very emotional and passionate ideology. Racism is the rationalization of the irrational power structure in which one race instrumentalizes, and even annihilates others; it is the mere appearance necessary for the equilibration of race superiority in contradictory liberal and advanced capitalistic and socialistic societies.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, racism distorts truth. Racism was the violent reaction when James Meredith enrolled at the University of Mississippi. Racism created the need for federal marshals to escort young black girls to primary school in New Orleans (to protect them from mobs). Racism is acted out when a white bank teller is rude to a black missionary visiting a missions conference in Knoxville, TN or when a waiter takes two hours to serve four black men in a restaurant in Anytown, USA.

## CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION IN THE BLACK STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY



The Bible message is that we are to act as the body of Christ. We are to treat our neighbor as we would like to be treated. That includes economic justice and equality. We are to remember what it means to be human, that we are created in the image of The Lord. We have a responsibility to The Lord that includes standing against gross evil, like racism. As long as racism exists the body of Christ is broken. We are called to heal this body that we belong to.

### DIVIDED BY FAITH

Emerson and Smith explored evangelical religion and black-white relations. They conducted their own studies and surveyed the research of others. They believe American churches cater to existing members' preferences rather than challenging their prejudices. Furthermore, they know of nothing that will change that. Congregations often look to religion not as an external force that places radical demands on their lives, but as a way to fulfill their needs. Those who are successful in the world rarely come to church to have their social and economic positions altered. They expect the minister to do nothing which would interfere with the harmony and growth of the membership.<sup>10</sup> Evangelical preachers confront their congregations about wrong behaviors including adultery, cheating others in business and character assassinations – the easy sins, socially acceptable topics for pastors. We never, in fact, move out of our cocoons of gentility. Racism is rarely attacked from the pulpit.

Emerson and Smith examine individual and corporate strategies for racial reconciliation that have been proposed by blacks. Plans offered to whites include establishment of primary relationships across race, challenging social systems of injustice and inequality, and confession of historical, social, and personal sin by whites. Blacks can accept apologies and move past bitterness. Emerson and Smith found that as the message of racial reconciliation spread from blacks to white grassroots evangelicals, the message was popularized, individualized, and watered down, coming to mean only that whites should make a friend across racial lines and blacks should express forgiveness.

## RESIDENT ALIENS

If one agrees with this theological statement, it follows that the church is an alien community which is to make a difference because of what Christ has done. It is to live life at odds with an unchristian world. The cover of *Resident Aliens* describes the book as "A provocative Christian assessment of culture and ministry for people who know that something is wrong." Inside, the authors ask, "What sort of community would we have to be in order to be the sort of people who live by our convictions?"<sup>11</sup>

In *Resident Aliens*, authors Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon assert that Christians are part of the larger story of Christ and the church. Our post Enlightenment culture teaches we are individuals, isolated heroes traveling alone, and that detaches us from *any* family, community, history and story. (Italics mine.) Christ gave us an ethic and tradition to become our story, to transform us into resident aliens. His ethics are social ethics that begin in the church – a social, communal, political starting point,<sup>12</sup> a primal reference point, a north star that leads us home. As this reference, the church is to be an alien community that shows a way different from that of the world.

The Sermon on the Mount implies that as isolated individuals we lack the ethical and theological resources to be faithful disciples.<sup>13</sup> The church is the only community formed around the truth, which is Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. Only on the basis of his story, which reveals to us who we are and what has happened in the world is true community possible.<sup>14</sup> The church is the only community formed around the truth, which is Jesus Christ. Only on the basis of his story, which reveals to us who we are and what has happened in the world is true community possible.<sup>15</sup>

## SOLUTIONS

Both Emerson and Smith along with other investigators report similar findings concerning how interracial perspectives change. Changes occur mainly in the context of interracial *networks* rather than by merely having an intimate friendship. They found that intimacy is less important than having a variety of contacts, such as having black acquaintances and living in mixed neighborhoods.<sup>16</sup>

In my community, local ministers meet for lunch one a month. Our minister met a black minister and became close friends with him. We eventually joined as sister churches. The black church owned twenty-three acres of land. Our church built them a church facility, and, going through Habitat for the Humanities, we are building a subdivision on the rest of the property. Their choir comes to our church to sing and we have several joint services each year. Sometime we go there. Sometimes they come to us. I spoke to my pastor because I was sad because we were not one church. My pastor explained that it was better that we not unite because two communities are being served through the two churches, and did I not see that was better?

I visited our sister church but did not go back because I did not like the way they 'did church'. At that church, they focused more on worship than on Bible study. My church, where I went sometimes as many as five times a week, offered numerous opportunities to

study and had an extensive library bulging at the seams. I saw that what my pastor left unsaid, that the two communities were too different to meld into one church because they had very different needs was what he did not say. My preacher did not preach about racism. Instead, he constructed this network, and drew us into it. That was far more effective than 1,000 sermons and demonstrates a way the white evangelical church can bridge racial division. The sister church concept is an example of networking on a larger scale. Our pastor's careful construction of the network and his leadership in reaching out to supply resources provides healing for one part of the broken body of Christ.

So, what *is* the solution? How can we repair the broken body of Christ? I agree with Emerson and Smith's assertion concerning networking and point to my mother, her friends and their relationship with the basketball team. They know the players and invite them to their homes for meals. They attend almost every game including away games. They are friends with the parents. The team relies on them for support. The first time Jessica brought Tiffani to our house, she would not get out of Jessica's car because she had never before been a guest in a white home. Once inside, she vanished into the woodwork and could barely be heard when she spoke. Yet, I believe her experience as a black basketball player with white friends and supporters will change her life. She will be more at ease with whites and that will become a valuable tool for her as she moves into the work world. My mother took Jessica with her to a mother daughter banquet at her church – an alien act, one small step toward healing the broken body of Christ that is ours to tend.

## CONCLUSION

We *ALL* suffer because of racism. When one part of the body suffers, all suffer. I suffer for blacks. The Evangelical Christian's role is to imitate Christ, to love as The Lord loves. Among other tasks, Evangelical Christians are to end racism. One method that could succeed is networking – a group of whites becomes friends with a group of blacks through a common interest that sustains the relationship. In the south, that is easy because sports are popular and many athletes are black. My pastor's initiative – assisting a black congregation with facility construction is another form of networking. I believe the relationship between the two churches will last for many years. Just as my pastor led the way for our church, my mother led the way for her family.

I have come to consider Jessica my little sister; if anyone bothers her, they bother me. My church has come to consider our sister church as – well - our sister. For me, race relations are personal. Yet, my visit to black church did not work because I was one person alone in a church that did not meet my particular need for in depth Bible study. Although I wished members of that church would join my church, I did



not want to join their church. I suspect they would not like the way we do church either – that they would react to my church just as I reacted to theirs.

For further study, I would like to study facility sharing. We have contemporary service – why not a black service? Although Jessica and I have very different needs, we sometimes share a room. We could also share a church.

---

<sup>1</sup> Finding God at Harvard, p 9.

<sup>2</sup> In my limited experience, I find that older, shorter white female athletes avoid junk food. Most stick to health food. Jessica and her friends think this is silly.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson & Smith, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Emerson & Smith, p 9.

<sup>5</sup> A Black Theology of Liberation, Cone, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> The author apologizes in advance for any statements that do not properly convey the Black experience. I am but a white witness and can only tell what I know. Since there is much I do not know, this is my best, although poor, effort.

<sup>7</sup> Reasons for being at church so many times include Sunday morning, evening, and Wednesday services, Bible study, small group meetings, volunteer activities, and using the church library.

<sup>8</sup> *The Church and Racism*, Baum and Coleman. *The Phenomenon of Racism*, Rudolf Siebert, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Emerson & Smith, pp. 116-7.

<sup>10</sup> Emerson & Smith, p. 164.

<sup>11</sup> Emerson & Smith, p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> Emerson & Smith, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Hauerwas & Willimon, p 80.

<sup>14</sup> Hauerwas & Willimon, p 77.

<sup>15</sup> Hauerwas & Willimon, p 77.

<sup>16</sup> Emerson p 131