

“Racism and Christianity in America (Part 13: 1965-1968)”

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After the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed, things began to quiet down in the South. There was still a significant amount of resistance to desegregation in some places, and some battles continued for years, but federal laws would now make *sure* that blacks could vote and that desegregation was happening in many areas of life. Racism was still very much alive, but it could no longer manifest itself in some of the primary ways it had ever since the Civil War ended. The protests began to draw to a close.

But in Los Angeles ... things were heating up. There were two issues. One was housing: many of the Los Angeles suburbs used redlining and other methods – some of them illegal – to prevent blacks from buying homes in new suburbs. More and more whites left the city for the suburbs, and more and more blacks became concentrated in the city itself. This was happening in many cities across the country, but it was exacerbated in California because an amendment to the state constitution had been adopted that repealed some anti-discrimination laws. The second issue was a change in the police department; a new Chief of Police ran the police department like a military operation, and recruited white officers from the South with racist attitudes. There were a series of outcries from black and Latino residents of Los Angeles about excessive police brutality. Things came to a head in August 1965, when a police officer pulled over a car for reckless driving. The driver was arrested. This led to an argument between the police and members of the driver’s family, which then turned into a fight. When word spread through the neighborhood that the police had injured a pregnant woman, blacks began rioting. The riots in the Watts neighborhood lasted six days; 34 people were killed (all black); more than a thousand were injured; property damage exceeded \$40 million. It was the worst unrest the city had ever seen. Martin Luther King flew out; he met with local black leaders who were saying that “the only way we can ever get anybody to listen to us is to start a riot.” King called President Johnson to discuss the situation; they both agreed that the fundamental issue was poverty – poverty that stemmed, to a large extent, from policies and practices that discriminated against blacks. King said: “The economic deprivation, social isolation, inadequate housing, and general despair of thousands of Negroes teeming in Northern and Western ghettos are the ready seeds which give birth to tragic expressions of violence.” He offered to mediate between local residents and officials. Johnson, for his part, kept looking for ways to alleviate the gap between whites and blacks in America, and signed an executive order that prohibited federal contractors from discriminating on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. It also reaffirmed an order that President Kennedy had issued in 1961, requiring contractors to “take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.” Dwight Eisenhower and Franklin Roosevelt had both issued similar orders; all four of those Presidents recognized that laws are *necessary* to protect blacks and other minorities from the excesses of racist or bigoted whites.

One response to the Watts riots was the creation of the festival called Kwanzaa. The name is

Swahili; it means “first fruits.” It was created by a black Ph.D. student who wanted to “give blacks an opportunity to celebrate themselves and their history, rather than simply imitate the practice of the dominant society.” The festival’s rituals involve fresh fruit, candles, and various forms of African art, clothing, music, and dance. Kwanzaa celebrations are based on seven principles: (1) *unity*: to strive for and to maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race; (2) *self-determination*: to define and name ourselves, as well as to create and speak for ourselves; (3) *collective work and responsibility*: to build and maintain our community together and make our brothers’ and sisters’ problems our problems and to solve them together; (4) *cooperative economics*: to build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses and to profit from them together; (5) *purpose*: to make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness; (6) *creativity*: to do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it; and (7) *faith*: to believe with all our hearts in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.

But the tensions that had exploded in Los Angeles were being felt elsewhere. A six-day riot erupted in Harlem after a police officer shot and killed a 15-year-old black student. Riots also broke out in Rochester, Philadelphia, and Chicago; then, in the long, hot summer of 1967, there were riots in over 150 cities. The worst were in Newark, where 26 people died, and Detroit, where 43 people died and more than 2,000 buildings were destroyed. President Johnson appointed a commission to investigate the causes of the riots and offer recommendations. Their report said the underlying causes of the riots were lack of economic opportunity, failed social service programs, police brutality, racism, and the white-oriented media. “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal,” it said. “What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.” The report called for the creation of new jobs, the construction of new housing, the end of practices that covertly continue segregation, new government services, more diverse and sensitive police forces, and billions of dollars in new housing programs to break up residential segregation. But Johnson – who was under a great deal of political pressure, because of the riots and the Vietnam War – did not act on the report’s recommendations.

in 1967, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America – that’s what the northern branch of our denomination was called back then – developed and adopted a new confessional statement. In the new confession we said this: “God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his reconciling love, he overcomes the barriers between brothers and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all men to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights. Therefore, the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it. Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their fellowmen, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess.” In short: we took a strong stand against racism. That paragraph remains in our Constitution to this day.

Near the end of March 1968, Martin Luther King arrived in Memphis, Tennessee. Black public works employees were on strike for higher wages and better treatment; in one incident, when street repairment were sent home early in the day due to bad weather, the white employees had received pay for the whole day, but the black employees had only been paid for two hours. King’s arrival in Memphis

had been delayed because of a bomb threat. On April 3, he spoke about the threats against his life at the world headquarters of the Church of God in Christ: “What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers? Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

The next day, he was shot and killed. He was 39 years old. President Johnson called King’s wife and called for a national day of mourning. Robert Kennedy was on the campaign trail, about to give a speech in a black neighborhood in Indianapolis. He reached out empathetically to the crowd, talking about the assassination of his brother, and urging them to continue King’s principles of nonviolence. Riots broke out that night in Washington, Chicago, Baltimore, Louisville, Kansas City, and dozens of other cities – but not in Indianapolis. Johnson was not surprised that the riots were happening: “What did you expect? ... When you put a foot on a man’s neck and hold him down for three hundred years, and then you let him up, what’s he going to do?” Johnson mobilized the Army and National Guard, and urged Congress to pass a fair housing act. Congress acted quickly; one week after King’s death, Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which banned discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing.

One unfortunate result of the riots was that they increased the tensions between whites and blacks in America. The white flight from urban areas increased; many elections in the fall of 1968 were won by whites running with platforms calling for “law and order”; and the Black Power movement gained momentum. For years there had been blacks – like Malcolm X and the members of the Black Panther Party – who had felt that Martin Luther King’s nonviolent protests were insufficient and that violence was sometimes necessary in the face of white supremacists and police brutality. Members of the party carried guns where allowed by law, and sometimes engaged in shoot-outs with police officers.

That fall, at the 1968 Olympics, after winning medals in the 200 meter event, two black athletes – Tommie Smith and John Carlos – each raised a black-gloved fist during the playing of the Star-Spangled Banner. The act was widely condemned. It was also misunderstood. They were wearing black socks, to symbolize black poverty. Smith wore a black scarf, to represent black pride. Carlos wore his track top unzipped, to show solidarity with black laborers, and a necklace of beads, which he said “were for those individuals that were lynched or killed and that no one has said a prayer for that were hung and tarred,” and “for those thrown off the sides of the boats in the Middle Passage,” referring to the ships that carried slaves from Africa to the New World. Both wore human rights badges on their jackets, and both were members of the Olympic Project for Human Rights, which advocated against racial segregation in the United States and South Africa, and racism in sports in general. Smith later said, “If I win, I am an American, not a black American. But if I did something bad, then they would say I am a Negro. We are black and we are proud of being black. Black America will understand what we did tonight.”

That is one of the fundamental problems in all of this: *a lack of understanding*. If we want an end to racial tensions in this country, we have to come to a greater *understanding* of what the issues are that are of concern to blacks, and other minorities. We have to know *why* people feel the way they do.

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