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Race Relations in the Post-Obama Era

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In considering the title for this talk, some may think it's far too soon to evaluate the post-Obama era. After all, it's only a month and a day old!

With passions regarding the past eight years of the Obama presidency still high on both sides of the political aisle, it's fair to assume that any verdict we render now will have the rough edges smoothed, or be thrown out altogether as time and distance bring hopefully greater objectivity and academic rigor to the study of his time in office.

That said, history, whatever its verdict, cannot take away the significance of Barack Obama's ascendancy to the White House. Whether you wished him well or ill, he was the first black person to become president of the United States. As we observe Black History Month, his achievement is arguably the culmination of a tortured history between Americans of European and African descent dating back to 1526, when Spanish settlers brought, among others, a group of African slaves to establish and inhabit San Miguel de Guadalupe, the first European settlement on what is now the continental United States.

To understand the gravity of where we are today with race relations in America, we must travel back in time to nearly a decade ago, May 10, 2007, when Senator Barack Obama, barely more than two years into his six-year term in the U.S. Senate, announced his candidacy for the office of President of the United States. No one outside of the state of Illinois had heard of Barack Obama prior to his electrifying speech to the Democratic National Convention in 2004 and other than being the junior U.S. Senator from Illinois, the only other public office he had held was that of state senator. Few of us remember how audacious the pundits thought he was for throwing his hat into the ring with the likes of Joe Biden, Chris

Dodd, John Edwards, Dennis Kucinich, Bill Richardson, Tom Vilsack and Hillary Rodham Clinton.

In fact, national polls leading up to the Iowa caucus showed Senator Clinton with a significant advantage among black voters over Senator Obama; in a CNN/Opinion Research poll, she garnered 57 percent of the black vote compared to just 33 percent for Senator Obama. Most black voters were skeptical that a political system dominated by white people would allow a black person to become president; some even said they wouldn't vote for him out of fear that if he was ever deemed a viable contender for the office, he would be assassinated. According to a *New York Times* report, "his advisers worried that some black voters might not support his candidacy out of a fierce desire to protect him."

All that changed after the Iowa caucus in 2008, when a state that is almost 90 percent white signaled to black voters and the rest of the nation that he was electable despite his race. He went on to make history on November 4, 2008, when he was elected the 44th President of the United States.

I have a couple of vivid memories of that night. The first is watching the reaction of Juan Williams, a black journalist and one of the liberals in residence at Fox News, when the election was called for Senator Obama. It was remarkable to me to witness this seasoned journalist brought to tears, overcome by the magnitude of what his home country had just done.

The second moment was President-elect Obama's victory speech at Grant Park in Chicago. The speech itself was masterful; his penchant for soaring rhetoric that appeals to our better angels was well established by that time. What moved me the most, however, were the images of Oprah Winfrey and the Reverend

Jesse Jackson, two faces in the immense crowd, openly weeping at what they were witnessing.

Here you have arguably the most powerful woman of color in entertainment and an icon of the 1960s civil rights movement, a man who marched with the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. and who was at Dr. King's side as he lay dying from an assassin's bullet, and they are unleashing waves of emotion rooted in centuries of racial strife.

Elderly black people who had been denied the right to vote because of the color of their skin lived to cast their ballots for a black man and to see him become President of the United States. The symbolism of his election was powerful, and the hope it represented palpable.

President-elect Obama spoke into the hearts of all Americans, but especially black Americans, when he declared, "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer."

A Gallup Poll taken immediately after the election showed that 67% of Americans "say a solution to relations between blacks and whites will eventually be worked out, the highest value Gallup has measured on this question." The poll results reflected some of the most optimistic beliefs on race in decades.

"...[T]he data show an increased positivity on the basic trend question about the future of race relations, a question Gallup has been asking off and on for over four decades. Only 30% of Americans now say race relations will 'always be a problem for the United States,' while two-thirds say 'a solution will

eventually be worked out'. The narrative goes on to say, "Further, 7 out of 10 Americans believe that race relations in this country will get at least a little better as a result of Obama's election, including 28% who say they will get a lot better."

Pundits and journalists were swept up in the euphoria of this historic event, declaring the beginning of a "post-racial America". There were a few cautious voices out there attempting to lower everyone's expectations, but they weren't being heard. Even Ta-Nehisi Coates, the black writer and social critic, was compelled to exclaim, "Those of us who overestimated racism would be smart to think about why we were so wrong." Raina Kelly, a writer for Newsweek, penned a letter to her infant son in which she said, "With Obama's election, I can mean it when I tell you that the world is available to you."

That is where we were in 2008. Let's hit the fast-forward button to July 2016, when a New York Times/CBS News poll revealed that 69 percent of adult Americans said race relations were generally bad, and 6 in 10 believed they were getting worse. A similar Washington Post/ABC News poll taken at the same time frame revealed that 63 percent of adults overall said race relations were generally bad and 55 percent believed race relations were getting worse. Other national polls taken throughout 2016 mirrored these trends, and in a Pew Research Center poll, 4 in 10 black Americans said they doubt they will ever achieve racial equality.

Because of his historic achievement, Barack Obama entered the office bearing the extraordinary weight of expectations from black and white Americans that he would make a difference when it came to the question of race in America. For black people, his election gave them hope for a leader who was more attuned to their plight because he is one of them, and I think most of them believed their

lives would get better under a black president. While black Americans saw him as their salvation, whites looked to him as a symbol of absolution, someone who by his ascension to the office demonstrated America's triumph over racism and, by implication, the end of racially-motivated policies and politics. While he insisted that "My election did not create a post-racial society", that didn't dampen the hopes of a nation begging for redemption from the besetting sin of racism.

Whether he desired it or not, President Obama was more than a politician; he was a living symbol of the nation's goal of liberation from racial strife. Regrettably, the racial tensions which bedevil us today occurred under his watch, and it will be impossible for historians to assess his presidency without considering its impact on race relations. In my opinion, this is not fair because it is a lot to ask of one man to be a nation's deliverer from the scourge of more than 400 years of slavery, institutionalized discrimination and racism.

We now know that white Americans were not pardoned for the nation's sin of racism. Instead, they were painted with the broad brush of "white privilege", thereby making all of them unwitting accomplices in sustaining systemic racism nationwide. Some willingly accepted the tag and acted out their guilt in various ways, while others railed against it and decried being subjected to the same tactic of stereotyping that black Americans fought against for centuries. Furthermore, whites who opposed President Obama were pummeled by his surrogates and allies as racists and bigots despite their insistence that their objections were due to differences in ideology or execution, and not racism.

Some observers have speculated that the unanticipated rise of Donald J. Trump to the presidency occurred, not wholly but in part, due to his implicit

appeal to disaffected white Americans weary of having their motivations and actions constantly ascribed to racism, or their labors and achievements in life attributed to “white privilege”.

While whites did not get the absolution they sought, the fact that blacks during the Obama presidency regressed by most objective economic measures meant they didn’t realize the recovery for which they’d hoped. Many blacks are frustrated that President Obama didn’t speak out more forcefully on their behalf during his eight years in office. As Fredrick Cornelius Harris, director of the Center on African American Politics and Society at Columbia University exclaimed, “In eight years, this is the best you can do?”

These frustrations are reflected in the polls I cited previously, and the widening racial divide makes it clear that we as a nation are far from the grace and forgiveness we need to wash away the stain of racism. Salvation and absolution have given way to resignation and accusation. But it’s not just the polls that indicate how far we’ve fallen.

Even disinterested millennials can probably tell you who Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray and Walter Scott are. Except for Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis, who were gunned down during public confrontations with private citizens who were Hispanic and white respectively, these young black males, among them a 12-year old boy in Tamir Rice, were killed by white police officers, and these cases were very highly publicized nationwide. In 2016, we added Alton B. Sterling, Philando Castile and Terence Crutcher to that sad list of black people whose lives ended

much too soon after encounters with white police officers, and whose deaths received nationwide attention.

I am not reciting this list to rehash the individual cases, because people who are interested in the specifics of each case can find ample arguments on both sides to fuel whatever they believe. The competing narratives have played out on social media to depressing effect, with both sides reducing the other to cartoon characters rather than human beings with a mind, body, soul and spirit. I am sure the Lord grieves, not only for those lives lost, but for the police officers and their families who will suffer forever for what they've done, even if the legal system vindicates them.

The greater social impact has been to bring the animus in the black community toward local law enforcement, a hostility born of centuries of abuse and mistrust, back into the spotlight. You must understand that this tension has some history behind it. Local law enforcement was often used in the past as an instrument of black subjugation, and federal law enforcement or military forces often intervened to protect black citizens from the local police, or from the white citizens who violated their rights and even took their lives while the local police looked the other way. The studies I have read suggest that it's these highly publicized shootings more than any other factor that have contributed to the rapid decline in race relations.

I know there's a temptation in these hyper-partisan times to try and find blame in the "others" camp. Some would say that the decline in racial harmony coincided with the presidency of Barack Obama and his emphasis on "identity

politics”, the segmentation of society by race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, sexual orientation and so on, to advance his personal and political objectives.

Others would counter that his presidency stirred up latent racism which was already present but had lain dormant until his ascension, and that racists are more emboldened today than ever before.

Based on a review of available information addressing the topic, neither of these assertions can be proven with certainty and, in my opinion, even objective research would not dissuade one side or the other from their beliefs. Each holds to their position as gospel, and rejects the other out of hand.

For what it’s worth, I’ve read every answer President Obama himself has given to the question of whether he believes opposition to him or his policies was primarily racially motivated, and he has always denied that was a primary motivator, although he didn’t dismiss it as a factor.

Of the opposition to his policies, he once said, “It’s an argument that’s gone on for the history of this republic, and that is, ‘What’s the right role of government? How do we balance freedom with our need to look out for one another?’... This is not a new argument, and it always evokes passions.”

Frankly, assessing blame is a waste of time, and time runs out every day for young black lives in the crossfire of family breakdown, substandard education, joblessness, poverty and violence.

One of the advantages of living in central Virginia is our proximity to some of the great historical sites where our nation’s path was forged. Not far from here is the city of Appomattox, which in 2015 celebrated the Civil War

Sesquicentennial, the 150th anniversary of General Robert E. Lee's surrender to General Ulysses S. Grant, effectively ending the Civil War. The city and county proudly declared themselves as the place "Where our Nation Reunited."

Last summer, I went to Appomattox Court House National Historical Park with my wife and parents-in-law, who were visiting from France. The park sits across from the fields where the armies led by Generals Lee and Grant clashed for the last time. As I watched the brief historical account of that time and toured the grounds, I was struck by a feeling of melancholy. As I viewed the McLean House and gazed upon the room where General Grant drafted the generous terms of surrender that General Lee accepted, I thought back to the gravity of that moment, and it saddened me.

By the time the Civil War was officially declared over by President Andrew Johnson on August 20, 1866, over 678,000 dead and over 469,000 wounded lay in its wake. Families were decimated, cities and towns destroyed, farmlands torched – the nation paid a heavy price for its inability to reconcile the vile practice of slavery with its creed that "all men are created equal." I was struck by the magnanimity, as described during the tour, of General Grant and his soldiers toward their defeated foes. It was clear that they were doing their best to carry out President Lincoln's promise of "malice toward none, with charity for all."

Five days after the surrender at Appomattox, however, the architect of this gracious peace was gunned down at Ford's Theater in Washington, DC by a deranged Confederate sympathizer, and the goodwill he had hoped to engender was shattered. Everything that followed those fateful days of the surrender and the assassination – Reconstruction, the reign of terror for blacks which followed,

especially in the South, the civil rights movement of the late 20th century, and the racial conflicts of today are all byproducts of that fateful moment in history.

As we stand right now, I cannot help but ask why, after such incredible sacrifices, we are still struggling with the issue of race in America. This modern-day surge of racial tension compels us to confront racial division once and for all, lest our national cohesion evaporate altogether.

But what individuals or institutions are designed to take on such a monumental task?

If we can get the answer to that question right, we can finally lay the ghosts of Appomattox to rest, and make a “Nation Reunited”, the theme of the sesquicentennial, a reality.

I never like to end a discussion on a difficult topic without offering hope, and as Captain Kirk declared in one of my favorite Star Trek movies, *The Wrath of Khan*, “I don’t believe in the no-win scenario”. After all, as a Christian, I know that "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

As I watch our nation once again at loggerheads over the issue of race, I am reminded of Jesus' encounter with the sick man at the pool in Jerusalem named Bethesda. According to Scripture, this man had been ill for 38 years, and he was at the pool along with many other sick people who waited for the waters to stir in the belief that, if they immersed themselves in the disturbed waters, they might be healed. How many people came to this pool in anticipation of healing and left disappointed?

This sick man in particular was too ill to even go into the waters without help, yet no one ever helped him. Still, he kept coming back to the same place, expecting a miracle.

When Jesus comes upon the scene, He zeroes in on this sick man, out of all the other sick people present, and this is what happened:

“When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, ‘Do you want to get well?’” ~ John 5:6

That, then, is the central question we must ask before we begin: "Do you want to get well?"

I am convinced there are many who have no real desire to get well. Perhaps they believe they have more influence in their aggrieved state than they would otherwise, or they find validation in their outrage. Perhaps they have built a reputation or an entire institution on a foundation of racial conflict. Perhaps they are too proud to let go of their racial identity, and it has become an idol for them.

Booker T. Washington spoke of people like this as far back at 1911 when he wrote:

“I am afraid that there is a certain class of race-problem solvers who don't want the patient to get well, because as long as the disease holds out they have not only an easy means of making a living, but also an easy medium through which to make themselves prominent before the public.”

There are people on both sides of the racial divide of whom it can be said they don't want to get well. They like where they are, and they have no motivation to change.

These words aren't meant for them. Speaking for myself, I'm not wasting my time on people who define themselves primarily by the deification of their own race and the demonization of the other. As Jesus instructed his disciples in Matthew 10:14:

“If the house is worthy, give it your blessing of peace. But if it is not worthy, take back your blessing of peace. Whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet.”

The sick man at the pool named Bethesda was a desperate man who longed for healing, and he cried out that he had no one to help him. In his despair, he surrendered to Jesus, and Jesus healed him. If it's healing and restoration we seek rather than power over others, then our journey can begin.

First and foremost, we must cast our idols into the fire and return to our first love. Your idol may be your racial identity, it may be the political or cultural tribe with which you've aligned yourself, it may be a political figure, it may be your family, your heritage, even your nation. Anything that takes preeminence in your life over the Lord Jesus Christ is an idol and a violation of the first commandment in which the LORD declares, “You shall have no other gods before me.”

I believe idolatry is the great sin that separates black and white Christians from one another. We who call Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior are supposed to

have more in common with each other than anyone else, even our own families. When Jesus' mother and brothers came looking for him to speak with him, presumably out of concern for his well-being, he declared:

“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

Are you as a white Christian prepared to love your black Christian brother or sister more than your biological siblings? Are you as a black Christian ready to embrace your white fellow traveler in Christ more passionately than your blood relatives?

Let me put you to the test. We've known for decades about the plight of the inner cities of America – multigenerational poverty, fatherlessness and broken families, unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, drugs, violence, untimely death and the absence of hope. Most of these enclaves are populated by people of color, and they generate a lot of rhetoric in the political arena, although not a lot of change or improvement. These are the people who looked to President Obama as their savior.

This past election revealed to many of us for the first time the plight of rural America – multigenerational poverty, fatherlessness and broken families, unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, drugs, violence, untimely death and the absence of hope. Most of these enclaves are populated by white people, and they didn't generate a lot of rhetoric in the political arena until this year. These are the people who are looking to President Trump as their savior.

If you are a black Christian and your heart doesn't break for the plight of the men, women and children who are suffering and dying in rural America, if you are a white Christian and you feel no compassion for the black people trapped in the hell on earth that is the ghetto, then I gently, respectfully but firmly suggest that you examine yourself before the Lord, and if you have an idol that hinders you, you must tear it down and set it aflame today. Politics and racial identity are not big enough to empathize with both the black high-school dropout in Ferguson, Missouri and the white single mother in the hills of Jackson, Kentucky, but Jesus Christ is bigger than our petty politics and racial discord.

Eliminating racism in America requires a Savior, and that Savior is not Barack Obama, nor is it Donald Trump, but it is Jesus Christ, and he is manifested in our world in the thoughts and actions of those who call themselves by His name. The church is here on this planet for times such as this; the church should be all over this hot-button issue, and it is the church, not the government, that should be leading the nation to racial reconciliation.

In June 2015, a disturbed young white man walked into a house of God and murdered nine black Christians, including the pastor, with the expressed intention to start a race war. Had he chosen any other venue, perhaps he would have succeeded. The people of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, however, a denomination born out of segregation because white Methodists refused to worship with their black brothers and sisters, responded to this act of senseless violence with forgiveness and grace. Unlike other cities which were set ablaze after incidents of racial violence, the city of Charleston, South Carolina followed the example of "Mother Emmanuel", as the church is affectionately

called, and came together as one, regardless of race or any other identity which could have segmented them.

When black militants and white nationalists tried to import hate into the city, what emerged instead was the image of a black South Carolina state trooper helping an elderly white nationalist into the shade and seeking medical attention for him after he showed signs of suffering heat stroke. I'm not saying it's been easy or painless for them, but if you want to see what happens when the people of God put Him first and act accordingly, look to Emmanuel AME Church and how it led a city and a nation to grace and away from evil.

I believe with every fiber of my being that if we put God first, then racial reconciliation in the body of Christ is not only achievable but inevitable. All of us, black and white, must first dethrone the gods we have placed before Him in order to find healing. Micah 6:8 says:

"He has told you, O man, what is good;

And what does the LORD require of you

But to do justice, to love kindness,

And to walk humbly with your God?

Have a heart that seeks to right systemic and individual wrongs for everyone, regardless of race. That's doing justice.

Let the compassion of Christ toward the suffering take precedence over your political or personal agenda, and love the poor without exception. That's loving kindness.

Finally, when a fellow Christian shares their story of persecution, listen and value their perspective rather than trying to impose your own. That's walking humbly with your God.

The key to the Christian life is other-centeredness, in humility valuing others more than yourselves. If you do that, race relations in the post-Obama era can only get better, and they will get better, for nothing is impossible with God. We just need to ask ourselves, "Do you want to get well?"

Let me conclude with some personal reflections. When I published my book, *SELLOUT: Musings from Uncle Tom's Porch*, in 2010, I was unemployed, having been laid off for the third time in three years, and I had some time on my hands. For years, I'd been regaling friends at the dinner table with stories about how I was raised in a religious family with conservative values and liberal political allegiances, and how I became politically conservative in college because I was unable to reconcile the cognitive dissonance between the two. "You should write a book about it," they would exclaim, but as any writer knows, writing a book requires both time and inspiration, and rarely do the two occur at the same time! For whatever reason, I now had the time, and as inspiration came to me, I would write, and thus a book was born.

I thought I could make a living as an author, but I can tell you that I've probably lost more money than I've earned with the book. That's OK, because God used the book to bless me in other ways. Because of the book, I visited Liberty University for the first time in September 2010 as a guest speaker for a new campus organization, and I was amazed at what I saw happening here. Because of the book, I met Dr. Shawn Akers, the dean of the Helms School of

Government, in Washington, DC during one of his visits there. And because of the book, I came back to Liberty University in May 2011 for a book signing at the LU bookstore, and paid a courtesy visit to Dean Akers which led to me applying for and being hired in the position I now hold. My wife is an assistant professor here, and my two younger children received their college education here, so I may not have gotten rich from book sales, but my family and I have been blessed by Liberty University.

Just as an aside, for those people out there who are cynical about white people being able to grasp the plight of black Americans, I would love to introduce them to Dean Akers, a white attorney from Monroe, Louisiana, who grieves every time one of these shooting episodes occur. He tells me no matter how or why it happened, a young person died much too soon, and a mother has lost her baby, and that breaks his heart. It spurs his dedication to training our criminal justice and government students to go into law enforcement and public policy to make things better, and it's a blessing to serve under his leadership.

When I wrote the book, I thought I'd said all I needed to say about the topic of race. I have a broad spectrum of interests in the areas of faith, society and culture, and I didn't want to be typecast as the "race" guy when people came to seek my thoughts on the state of our nation and the world. As I wrote in my book and in several articles, race is a part of who I am, but it's not the totality of my being, nor is it the prime truth around which I order my life.

God has shown me, however, that while I briefly offered a divine solution to the troublesome problems of race in the last chapter of my book, I didn't go far enough. In order for me to carry out the good works He's planned for me, He's

had to take me out of my old environment and help me to see things from His point of view, not my own, and to look to the Bible rather than any person or political platform for answers.

He's also made it clear to me is that bridging the racial divide in the nation where he placed me is my mission field. In declaring racial reconciliation as my life's purpose, I am not saying there aren't others also called to be peacemakers and healers in this area. My unique and largely positive life experiences related to race, my temperament, and my ability to interact comfortably with people in just about any social circle due to my upbringing in interracial military communities, have equipped me to be a builder of bridges and a demolisher of walls. Moreover, the times in which we find ourselves call for peacemakers, not peacekeepers – there's a difference – and that is why the Lord designed me this way, taught me through knowledge and experience what I've learned, and placed me where I am.

I've had a lot of physical trials since we moved here that have given me more time than I desired for reflection and change, and I'm not the same person who wrote *SELLOUT* in 2010. I thought God was at the center of my world, but He's gently yet firmly placed me in a series of "timeouts" to help me discover I had further to go before I could honestly claim I had no other gods before Him. It's a work in progress, but it's given me new eyes through which to see everything, including the racial dynamic in America.

Would I change what I wrote in 2010? No, I wouldn't. It represents the person I was at the time, and I think it is a necessary touchpoint to highlight the journey I've taken. Ultimately, I will always believe in the power of moral agency that God has given us. Unlike any other creature in His creation, He has given us

the ability to choose how we will respond to our environment, and to surrender that ability is to surrender that which makes us human.

That said, I recognize that God has blessed me beyond anything I deserve, and that has made it easier for me to make my way through life. It is only by the grace of God that I was born into a two-parent family, with a married mother and father who will be celebrating their 58th wedding anniversary this May. It is only by the grace of God that I was raised in a military community that ensured I had a roof over my head, food on the table and clothes on my back, and where I could walk and play outside in total safety and security. It is only by the grace of God that I attended safe, clean schools that offered me a quality education. Statistics show that being in a home with two married parents and getting a good education make a greater difference in combating poverty and social dysfunction than any other factors, and I did nothing to earn those gifts. Had I been born to a single mother in West Baltimore, Maryland, my life could have turned out a whole lot differently, and that realization has given me a tender heart.

So that's why I'm here. I can't ignore the stirring in my heart as I watch the homeland where the Lord has placed me threaten to disintegrate over racial divisions, and while I don't expect to have the final word on this topic by any stretch of the imagination, I know silence is no longer an option for me. I recognize that God's perspective on race may not matter to everyone, and some will undoubtedly challenge my interpretation of what God's Word has to say on this controversial topic. So be it.

All I can say with certainty is that I can't run away from this issue – indeed, I no longer want to – and politics offers no solutions because the rules of

the game are if someone wins, someone else has to lose, and that is a no-win scenario for racial reconciliation. I know when all else fails, God still stands, waiting for us to turn back to Him, the One for whom all things are possible.