

GOD, RACE, & AMERICA TODAY

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

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This Thinksheet looks toward, day after tomorrow, a newspaper interview of John Burton (African-American with early-life experience in the AMA tradition--the American Missionary Association, which started some 500 schools for freed slaves immediately after the Civil War), Gabriel Fackre (former president, American Theological Society), & I; & a sermon we three are to preach together in our church this coming Sunday--both on the theme of this Thinksheet, in the immediate aftermath of the O.J.Simpson trial.

1 A few weeks ago I stood alone in a 300-mile deep, roadless wood & bethought myself, "Not one step farther without a guide." When the O.J. decision was announced & blacks danced for joy in the streets & whites called for revising the jury system, America became--moreso than at any time since the Watts riots of thirty years ago--aware that our country is in a racial deep wood without any **guide** we can agree on unless it is God. We three believe, unambiguously, that God, the biblical God, the God & Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, can be our Guide as we believe he was our forebears' Guide in the founding of our nation & the freeing of its peoples.

2 A **guide** goes with you to lead you somewhere. The Bible says "Immanuel," God is with us, calling upon us to "Be holy, for I am holy," & through his own suffering for us in Jesus Christ makes possible our in-faith obedience to that command. So we are to be like God the Father, who in the Son makes this possible & in the Spirit makes it actual (a process theology earmarks with the words creation, command, justification, sanctification, glorification).

3 Now observe that this Guide, who is trying to lead us somewhere, cannot do so unless we become like him as we are being led. Yes, most peculiar this guide: he leads us to become like himself so that when we get to where he's leading us we'll do what he wants us to, which is by then what we want to do.

4 Well, what does he want done? We Christians believe that this is most clearly & poignantly seen in Jesus, whom we call Christ and Savior and Lord and God the Son. Accordingly, we daily seek, as disciples (followers) to learn from him by exposing ourselves to him in the Spirit through prayer (including the Lord's Prayer), Bible study (especially the Gospels), & meditation toward Christian action in all the concentric circles of our lives (family, church, community, the wider church, nation, world).

5 So what does Jesus say God wants done? He preached "the Kingdom of God as radical egalitarianism" (J.D.Crossan, THE ESSENTIAL JESUS [HarperSF/94], 159). To use an analogy from math: if B & C are equally related to A (here, God), they are to relate to each other as equals. We human beings equally derive from (& here Luke in Ac.17 quotes two pre-Christian Greeks) "one ancestor" (NRSVmg, "blood"), from whom/which God "made all nations...so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him....," for "'In him we live and move and have our being,'" "'For we too are his offspring.'" (More naturally, Paul-Luke would have referenced the Hebrew-Jewish tradition: God as creator of heaven & of earth with all its flora and fauna, including humanity.) The more seriously we take our common creatureliness, the less seriously will we take our given differences (gender, race, national origin, parental-home status).

Through biblical eyes, that is our human situation vis-a-vis the **Creator**.

6 Through biblical eyes, what is our human situation vis-a-vis the **Redeemer**? Christ the Savior-Redeemer died to win salvation for all, but not all have appropriated the gift of grace through faith. This teaching is complex & nuanced in many ways, & its exposition need not detain us for our purpose in this Thinksheet.

We found that inasmuch as creation was for all, the doctrine of creation is an **equalizer**, a leveler of the playing field; thus now also is the doctrine of redemption, in that it also is for all: "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith" (Gal.3.26), so "no longer" (v.28) do the adversarial chasms of race ("Jew or Greek"), class ("slave or free"), or gender ("male and female") obtain. We are to

be (to use a metaphor M.L.King, Jr liked) "**blind**": in the Gal.3.28 order, race-blind (including color-blind), class-blind, & gender-blind (echoing Gn.1.27). (Gal.3.28, may be a baptismal formula, ending "for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Here the unity is not, as in 3.16, by nature, but [v.29] by promise/grace.)

By **logic** we see that the Creator wills human unity: by **love**, divine love become visible supremely in Jesus' life-death-resurrection, we see that the Redeemer wills Christian unity, which witnesses & works toward human unity through persuasion & therefore must not be politicized (ie, transposed into the coercive mode).

7 Back to this Thinksheet's title: *What does God want me/you to do about it?* First we must ask who I am / we are. On this grid, I am a human being, a creature of God (**A**); a political being, a citizen (**C**); & a Christian, a redeemed member of the "new creation" (Gal.6.15; cp. Ro.8.19-23; 2Cor.5.17-19; Rev.21.5; &, as primary source, Is.65.17-25) (**E**). In each of those three roles, what does God want me to do about race in America today?

As a human being / citizen / churchman, I am a person-in-community: I can't be "I" if "we" aren't, ie, apart from my social existence. Thus the upper storey on the grid asks what we are to do together, collectively, as human beings (**B**), as citizens (**D**), & as a/the church (local & larger) (**F**).

In these boxes distributively, I/we should/not feel

		creature	citizen	Christian
ashamed & guilty & determined to act toward	collective	B	D	F
change. Crucial here is the <u>negative</u> :	personal	A	C	E

(1) I'm not to feel ashamed where I've nothing to be ashamed of; (2) I'm not to feel guilty where I've nothing to feel guilty for; (3) I'm not to try to change what I conclude can't be changed (the Serenity Prayer: "...accept the things that cannot be changed"). (Obviously, the flipsides are the positives.)

8 What's the **race situation** in America today? How you define it contains what you think we can/should/can't do about it. Historically, it's been called "the Negro problem," "the race problem," "the black problem," & THE WHITE PROBLEM. We're in the undertow of the O.J.Simpson decision. Almost thirty years ago, when we were in the undertow of an explosion signaled by the phrase "the Watts riots," several of us, each as representative of one American denomination, got together & decided on the phrase I've capitalized above--& we published THE WHITE PROBLEM, in which my chapter was titled "The Christian Thinks About Racism," an extended Bible/theology study. Said I, if we take time to think theologically about "civil rights and racial justice," we'll overcome our "battle fatigue" & be "refreshed to continue the struggle, the Spirit [of God] overcoming our spirit's fatigue and empowering us with both strength and joy." Our primary tools for thinking both compassionately & intelligently--"thinking Christianly"--about race here & now are the "Biblical images, categories, and convictions," in a "Word/world dialectic." If we expose ourselves to the Word, the Spirit will abide with us on "the hard but joyful journey of bringing every thought into captivity to Jesus Christ (2Cor.10.5)" as we aim at "doing everything for the glory of God" (1Cor.10.31). And we won't bellyup with burnout.

9 The essence of America's white problem is that we whites have failed to accommodate/assimilate two peoples, viz those we **found** here (the reds) & those we **dragged** here (the blacks). It's not just a matter of color: we're doing better with the yellows. We are suffering from "a learned blindness, a selective seeing that the godlike box, your TV, is increasingly defeating" (as I said in TWP, 29; p.34: "True sensitivity is dulled in the over-race and inflamed in the under-race. Truth is distorted above and below.").

10 Like the Watts riots, the O.J.Simpson verdict's public response, revealing that we are what the Kerner Report said long ago, "two nations," is a **wake-up call**. What can you **do**? Especially if you're white, you should watch Jesse Jackson's "Both Sides" (CNN 12.30pm Sundays). We're all sinners, betraying our lights & exceeding our limits (Ro.5.8). Because in this Thinksheet I want to encourage foundational thinking on its subject, I've avoided--hard as it's been!--toting out a bundle of specifics as to what's wrong with, & what can be done about, whites, blacks, reds, & the rest of us. But as 911 says, "Help is on the way!" We're becoming shocked into listening across the chasms. And the Kingdom of God is coming!