

# Atticus Finch

## The Ambiguities of Racism

### Introduction

When Atticus Finch walked out of the courtroom following the trial of Tom Robinson, and all the people in the black section of the courtroom rose to their feet, and Rev. Sykes whispered to Scout Finch, "...stand up. Your father's passin'," I cried, with pride, that a white man would be honored in such a way.<sup>1</sup> Atticus Finch was a boyhood hero of mine.

Apparently I am not the only one who holds Atticus Finch in high esteem. Those whose chosen profession is the law still admire him. "Atticus Finch is invoked as a guiding influence more frequently in essays for law school admission than any other factor by far."<sup>2</sup> In fact, Americans in general have long worshipped him, or at least the film ideal of him, as one of their greatest heroes. In 1963 Gregory Peck won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of Atticus, and in 2003 the American Film Institute listed Atticus Finch as the number one hero of American films in the last 100 years.<sup>3</sup> Given his national status, it is no wonder that when Go Set A Watchman, Harper Lee's second novel, portrayed Atticus Finch as a racist, many faithful readers were incensed.

By sheer happenstance, last winter, I decided to revisit the halls of ideal worship by reading again, To Kill a Mockingbird. Not long after I completed it, the first announcements that Harper Lee had agreed to the publication of the pre-sequel, Go Set a Watchman, began to hit the wires. The media coverage was unbearable. So, I acquired a copy to see for myself what had happened to my hero in his later years.

The two stories, taken together as a whole, are a compelling assessment of the ambiguities of racism. It is not always clear who harbors bias against another race, and how and why. The ambiguities to which the subtitle of this paper refers are not the harsh horrors abhorrent to most, but the more subtle inequalities that are equally harmful to all involved. With that in mind, and also with the knowledge that Atticus was, and is a hero to many, that the frenzy surrounding this new publication might have pierced the consciousness of you and/or your members, and further, that racism is, once again, a hot topic in our country, I determined to veer into the literary genre for this paper, in the sincere hope that some of you may stay awake long enough to gain something from it.

### I. Storyline Review

#### History of the development of the story lines

I suspect that many of you were required to read To Kill a Mockingbird somewhere during your high school career; a development that may or may not have proved enlightening, depending on the volume of hormones coursing through your veins during that particular period of your life. Assuming that some you have not read the stories, or due to the

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, Harper. To Kill a Mockingbird. Grand Central Publishing. New York. 1960 p. 283

<sup>2</sup> Rosenbaum, Thane. [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/jurisprudence/2015/02/atticus\\_finch\\_hero\\_worship\\_law\\_students\\_love\\_to\\_kill\\_a\\_mockingbird\\_anticipate.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2015/02/atticus_finch_hero_worship_law_students_love_to_kill_a_mockingbird_anticipate.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.afi.com/100Years/handv.aspx>

unkindnesses of time are struggling to recall what they are all about, allow me to summarize briefly.

In 1957, Harper Lee, an aspiring writer from Alabama, submitted the manuscript of her first novel to the publisher J. P. Lippincott. Her editor, Tay Hohoff, presumably appreciated the story, (which we now know as Go Set a Watchman), and the budding talent, but asked Ms. Lee to rewrite the story, focusing on Jean Louis Finch as a young girl. Two years later Ms. Lee returned with To Kill a Mockingbird. That novel went on to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1961. It was not until 2015 that Harper Lee agreed, (some say under coercion), to allow the publication of the unedited version of the first, but later in time, novel. The sequence of the writing of these works is significant when attempting to analyze their meaning.

#### To Kill a Mockingbird (A Review)

Jean Louise Finch narrates her own story of growing up in Maycomb County, Alabama in the late 1930s. Scout, as she is then known, is somewhere around 6 years old. She and her older brother, Jem, are being raised by their lawyer, father, Atticus, and, since his wife had died years earlier, a black nanny, by the name of Calpurnia. The story meanders through the daily lives and characters of small town Alabama. Scout, a precocious child, learns many lessons, primarily focusing on those who were underprivileged in some way: Dill- a boy who spent the summer with his aunt because his parents did not want him, the Cunninghams- a classmate and his family, who were poverty stricken, Boo Radley- a neighbor who was mentally ill, and Tom Robinson- a black man, unjustly accused of raping a white woman. In each case it is Atticus, with modest, muted wisdom who teaches the lesson; enduring Dill and his aunt, protecting the Cunningham's pride, sheltering Boo Radley, and at the expense of being called a "nigger lover," defending Tom Robinson in court.

Through humor, insight, and high drama we watch as Scout comes to admire and idolize her father. America followed suit. Always in search of heroes, and still in the mood to paint such heroes with broad strokes, we glommed onto a larger than life image of Atticus, (especially in the film), devoid of any subtleties that sin spawns even in fictional characters. That is why the revelations of the elder Atticus were so jarring to so many fans.

#### Go Set a Watchman (A Review)

Now twenty-six, Jean Louise Finch is on her way from New York to Maycomb to visit her elderly father. It is generally expected that she will marry her childhood friend, Henry Clinton, who is now working with Atticus in his law office. This relationship carries the first half of the story, until the bombshell explodes when Jean Louise follows Atticus and Henry to a town meeting where vile racist taunts are spewed and plans are laid to keep blacks in their place.

It is obvious to Jean Louise that her father approves all this. She is sick with confusion and anger. When she confronts him, he does not deny it. In fact he seeks to convince her of the reasonableness of his position. She angrily rejects him and everything he stands for. Later, with the help of her uncle Jack, Atticus' brother, Jean Louise surrenders to an uneasy peace with her father. He tells her that he is proud of her for standing up to him and holding her ground. She tells him that she loves him. She reaches the conclusion that it takes all kinds of people to populate a world. She cannot beat her father and she cannot join her father because "...they're (the racists) the drag and we're the thrust, together we make the thing fly."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lee, Harper. Go Set a Watchman. Harper Collins, New York. 2015. p. 277

## II. Theories on the Racism of Atticus Finch and our own.

### A. Atticus Finch should never have been seen as a hero.

A theory that was unable to gain traction was that Atticus Finch was not the paragon of virtue that Americans had made of him. "In fact, there is a well-established body of scholarship on *To Kill A Mockingbird* that draws attention to flaws in Atticus's character."<sup>5</sup> Chief among these flaws is that he did not defend Tom Robinson as a person but as a point of law. Atticus did not really get to know Tom or care for him.

This view holds that creating a hero out of Atticus Finch saved the collective conscience of white America. "Atticus Finch has, for more than 50 years, allowed white America to sleep at night. He embodied the heroism that white America believed would keep our criminal justice system clean of racial horrors. White America still believes that a few legal heroes will solve all the problems—will keep the racist wolves at bay. Atticus Finch enabled a lie."<sup>6</sup>

In actuality then, Atticus allowed whites to trust his efforts so that they could maintain their personal bias. Katie Pryal writes, "I noted Atticus Finch's "failure of empathy," and said that white readers could not—would not—empathize with black characters in the book because of a "fear of revelation." In other words, I was arguing, white people really don't want to know what it's like to walk around in the skin of a black person, despite what Atticus claimed in the book."<sup>7</sup>

### B. Atticus Finch should be seen as a hero that lost his ideal.

A second theory is that Atticus' age and the political developments of the day changed him. Specifically, Atticus became a racist in his old age due to the *Brown vs Board of Education* decision, which upset his perfect little world. "Atticus and Scout discuss an important Supreme Court case that has altered (Atticus would say gravely damaged) race relations throughout the South. This case would almost certainly have to be *Brown vs. Board of Education*..."<sup>8</sup>

This view is a caveat against the loss of ideals as a result of the weariness induced through the constant barrage of the realists, and the weakness of age.

### C. The heroism of Atticus Finch depends on who is looking.

This is my personal analysis and one of the lessons I think the books can teach us. Both stories are really about Jean Louise Finch, (Scout). It is significant that *Go Set a Watchman* was written first. When Harper Lee was told to rewrite *Go Set a Watchman* she set about describing how Jean Louise could not have known her father's position on race.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is about how Scout came to idolize her father to the point she could see none of his faults. The young Scout benefits from this view because it drives her to aspire, insofar as is humanly possible, toward a non-prejudicial life. *Go Set a Watchman* is about how Jean Louise, as an adult finally sees her father not as a monolithic character of heroic proportions, but as a complex mixture of wavering interests. The older Jean Louise

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<sup>5</sup> Marsh, Laura. <https://newrepublic.com/article/122295/these-scholars-have-been-pointing-out-atticus-finchs-racism-years>

<sup>6</sup> Pryal, Katie. <http://katierosegquestpryal.com/2015/07/16/atticus-finch-white-americas-worst-nightmare/>

<sup>7</sup> Op. Cit. <http://katierosegquestpryal.com/2015/07/16/atticus-finch-white-americas-worst-nightmare/>

<sup>8</sup> Barton, Fredrick. "Still a Work in Progress." *The Cresset*. Valparaiso University Press. September 2015. p. 17. Atticus to Jean Louise: "Jean Louise, what was your first reaction to the Supreme Court decision?" GSAW p. 238.

benefits from this view because taking Atticus off the pedestal allows her to learn how to love someone with whom she deeply disagrees. In a telling passage her uncle enlightens her, “As you grew up, when you were grown, totally unknown to yourself, you confused your father with God. You never saw him as a man with a man’s heart, and a man’s failings... You were an emotional cripple, leaning on him, getting the answers from him, assuming that your answers would always be his answers... You had to kill yourself, or he had to kill you to get you functioning as a separate entity...We wondered, sometimes, when your conscience and his would part company, and over what.”<sup>9</sup> In this relationship there is much for us to learn regarding our approach to racism.

#### D. The ambiguities of our racism

At its 1992 Synodical Convention The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod adopted a resolution titled, “To Combat All Racism.” The resolution said, in part, “Whereas, Racism, namely the mindset that considers one group of people to be superior to another, continues to hurt its victim and cause offense in the church and conflict in society... Therefore be it Resolved, that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod urge its members to repent of any attitude or practice of racism as individuals and congregations...by loving and serving all their fellow humans as they have been loved and served.”<sup>10</sup>

The resolution also encouraged the CTCR to complete its study on racism, and the Synod to make “maximum” use of it. Happily the CTCR complied, and issued its report in February 1994. After offering a sociological definition of racism, an overview of the positions various Lutheran bodies had taken, and a conclusion that a Lutheran response was necessary, the study noted that it may not be an easy road. “Few today will fail to recognize conspicuous oppression and enslavement of racial groupings as blatantly racist. Often more difficult to recognize are the subtle and varied forms by which the heritage of racism continues to disadvantage members of minority groups.”<sup>11</sup> Such subtleties are the *raison d’être* of this paper. Few of your people are overt racists, but it does not follow that we are thereby free from its more subtle ambiguities.

The report continued by listing various barriers to overcoming racism. Denial- “No matter what form it takes, denial is an age-old strategy that satan uses to blind people to the reality of their sins...”<sup>12</sup> Paternalism- “To the detriment of healthy intergroup relations, paternalism tends to trivialize minority group persons, portraying them as incapable of caring for themselves or functioning responsibly.”<sup>13</sup> Fear- “The fear of such change may immobilize some and lead others to fight desperately, perhaps even irrationally, to maintain the status quo.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Op. Cit. GSAW p. 265

<sup>10</sup> Convention Proceedings, 58<sup>th</sup> Regular Convention LCMS July 10-17, 1992. p. 113.

<sup>11</sup> Commission on Theology and Church Relations. Racism and the Church. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. February 1994. p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> Op. Cit. Racism and the Church. p. 47

<sup>13</sup> Op. Cit. Racism and the Church. p. 49

<sup>14</sup> Op. Cit. Racism and the Church. p. 51

The report concludes by commending ten “Guiding Principles” to the Church for responding to the evils of racism. Among those principles are:

2. The Scriptures require that the church confront moral evil in its midst, including the sin of racism.
3. The church will commit itself to respond to racism in both word and deed by showing love and respect to all for whom Christ died.
5. When a Christian congregation includes new members of differing backgrounds, it will do all in its power to create a healthy climate for them in order to make them feel that they are truly welcome as members of that family.
7. When the church decides to share the Gospel in a community which is made up of a racial or ethnic group different from the majority of the members of the church, its goal and firm commitment will be to carry out the ministry of Word and sacrament by making use of the cultural forms of that community.
8. The church will regard those groups it hopes to serve not as “objects” of its ministry but as those whom our Lord calls to be “full partners” in the Gospel.<sup>15</sup>

Analyzing our awareness of these barriers and our compliance to these guidelines will require some measure of introspection, something at which sinners are not particularly adept. We may have a sincere desire to treat everyone equally, but there is sin in us working in the opposite direction. Social researchers have tried to put their finger on the origin of this bias toward bias. They will not name it “sin,” but they may grant us some insights as to its methods. “Much research has found that humans are tribal creatures, showing strong bias against those we perceive as different from us and favoritism toward those we perceive as similar. In fact, we humans will divide ourselves into in-groups and out-groups even when the perceived differences between the specific groups are completely arbitrary.”<sup>16</sup>

Without access to a proper understanding of the nature of man the sociologist still hits close to home. Sinners are inclined to associate with those they perceive to be like them. Scientists call this inclination an implicit association. As the name suggests, experiments reveal that we tend to believe, even against our conscience, that those who are like us are safer than those who are not. You can find an Implied Association Test at: [UnderstandingPrejudice.org](http://UnderstandingPrejudice.org).

“As these experiments suggest, it is not that we are either prejudiced or unprejudiced, period. Rather, we are more and less prejudiced, based on our upbringings and experiences but also on a variety of temporary or situational prompts (like being told we're on the green team). [As opposed, arbitrarily to the red team.] One simple, evolutionary explanation for our innate tendency toward tribalism is safety in numbers. You're more likely to survive an attack from a marauding tribe if you join forces with your buddies.”<sup>17</sup>

We know, however, that sin, not an evolutionary vestige of our time on the savannah, causes us to hold people of a certain skin color, or ethnicity, or language, as more valuable than other people. The ambiguities of these implicit associations are difficult to ferret out. “Nonetheless, if prejudice has both a psychological side and a cultural side, we must address

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<sup>15</sup> Op. Cit. [Racism and the Church](#). pp. 51-57.

<sup>16</sup> Mooney, Chris. <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/11/science-of-racism-prejudice>

<sup>17</sup> Op. Cit. [Science of Racism](#).

both of these aspects. A good start may simply be making people aware of just how unconsciously biased they can be.”<sup>18</sup> This insight holds true even for Christians. How can I confess such sin if I am unaware of it? I have chosen a literary tool to help us do some thinking about the problem of racism.

### III. Lessons from Atticus Finch.

1. Atticus was a well ordered man. His sense of order was, perhaps the dominant characteristic of his personality. Threats to his sense of order were to be exterminated. His paternalistic attitude was his understanding of the order of the South and had to be maintained. “So far in my experience, white is white and black’s black.” GSAW p. 246 “You realize that our Negro population is backward, don’t you?... You realize that the vast majority of them here in the South are unable to share fully in the responsibilities of citizenship, and why?” GSAW p. 242

A. Our sense of order can threaten a healthy response to change. Christians have for much of the history of this country been the dominant socio/religious group. “We” have been in control of the culture. What happens when we lose control? If we respond by grasping for power, or, conversely, by shrinking into the shell of our own little tribe, what happens to the proclamation of the Gospel?

B. Whites are predicted to become a minority in the United States within thirty years.<sup>19</sup> How will we handle that upheaval? “We,” (all white males), have been in control. What will it feel like to be a minority? How will the largely white LCMS respond to proclaiming the Gospel to a majority that is not like us? Will our “whiteness” continue to define the LCMS into its extinction?

C. Muslims are perceived to be a threat to traditional values in the United States. The average citizen estimates that Muslims comprise about 15% of the population. The reality is that they are less than 1.5% of the population.<sup>20</sup> Why the disparity of this perception? Will this minority grow? How will the Church respond if it does?

D. Our sense of order may be upset by the growth any number of minorities, e.g. atheists, homosexuals, Native Americans, even the mega-rich. How will we lead people through these changes in a godly manner?

2. Atticus was afraid of loss of control. He could not abide upsetting the status quo which left whites firmly in control of the political setting of the South. Both he and his brother Jack seemed to assuage their consciences by implying that their real fear was that things were moving too rapidly. This seems a thin veneer. “...If the negro vote edged out the white you’d have Negroes in every county office.” GSAW p. 243 “Do you want Negroes by the carload in our schools and churches and theaters? Do you want them in our world?” GSAW p. 245

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<sup>18</sup> Op. Cit. Science of Racism.

<sup>19</sup> El Nasser, Haya. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/6/25/whites-on-target-to-become-a-us-minority.html>

<sup>20</sup> Whalen, Andrew. <http://www.digitaltimes.com/muslim-population-us-new-poll-shows-none-us-have-any-idea-392930>

A. Fear drives racism. “The fear of racial and cultural differences can be strongly counterproductive in human relationships.”<sup>21</sup> Which tribe, or ethnicity, or race is the greatest threat to your control of your world? Do you even want them in your world?

B. Fear is idolatry. The Scriptures teach us that we should fear, love and trust in God above all things. When our fears drive our actions we have created an idol in place of the true God. How can we as Pastors address the fears associated with racism? What happens to the proclamation of the Gospel if we refuse to confront this fear?

3. Atticus did not forthrightly convey his racial bias to his children. Scout was allowed to grow up thinking of her father as somehow above the sin of racism. “Atticus Finch is the same in his house as he is on the public streets.” TKAM p. 61 “Where most men had codes and tried to live up to them, Atticus lived his to the letter with no fuss, no fanfare, and no soul-searching. His private character was his public character.” GSAW p. 114 “Men tend to carry their honesty in pigeonholes, Jean Louise. They can be perfectly honest in some ways and fool themselves in other ways.” GSAW p. 237 “...I never knew what was in your mind. I only heard what you said. You neglected to tell me that we were naturally better than the Negroes...” GSAW p. 247

A. We can hide our bias from others. There may be holy reasons for doing this. If the implicit association theory is true, perhaps we are even unaware. Atticus hints at this in one of the quotes above. There may be other unwholesome motivations for hiding our bias. Did Atticus hide it, or did Scout refuse to see it? The point is that we are capable of harboring a sin to the degree that we coddle instead of confess it.

B. We can hide our bias from ourselves. Do we have an obligation to root around in our psyche to come up with some sort of prejudice with which we can beat ourselves up? (Frankly I am afraid of such a response to this paper.) I respond: if such bias is a sin that harms us and our neighbor perhaps it would be spiritually healthy to assess a few ambiguities, not for the sake of self- flagellation, but for the sake of our neighbor’s well-being.

4. Jean Louise struggles with giving up the hero image she had created of her father. “The one man I could say is a gentleman... You’re the only person I think I’ve ever fully trusted...” GSAW p. 252

A. Parents teach their children race relations, without even trying. Does racism receive mention in your catechetical instruction? Under which chief part should it appear? How can Pastors help parents of the congregation teach proper race relations?

B. We all have heroes that may impede our development. Like Scout, do we look the other way when our heroes exhibit signs of racism? Do we excuse unacceptable behavior with a good-ol-boy attitude? How can heroes stand in the way of the proclamation of the Gospel?

5. Jean Louise is taught that she had to separate herself from her hero, (the unrealistic picture of her father), in order to develop her own watchman. “You had to kill yourself, or he had to kill you to get you functioning as a separate entity...We wondered, sometimes, when your conscience and his would part company, and over what.” GSAW p. 265

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<sup>21</sup> Op. Cit. Racism and the Church. p. 50.

A. The reign of individualism is unchecked through the ages. To some degree we are still a “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” culture. How many graduation speeches have you heard directing young people to better themselves by following their own heart? The problem, of course, is that the human heart is a vile thing, wholly consumed by its own continued beating. How can we teach that racism is founded in the heart?

B. The Word of God can change lives. There is only one power that can change people’s hearts, faith in Jesus, which comes by the hearing of the Word. The CTCR developed a Bible Study in conjunction with its report on racism. This might be a good place to start for the Pastor who interested in taking this subject on with his people.

6. Specific sins may lie latent in us, unknown even to ourselves, until a specific threat wakens it. Satan is a master at exploiting those sins that we think we have under control. We conclude that we can afford to let sleeping dogs lie, until they become a threat. This attitude is reflected in the title of, and grants form to the first book. Since mockingbirds don’t do anything to hurt humans, but only sing sweetly, Atticus instructs his children, “It’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” TKAM p.119

A. If the premise, “You don’t kill what doesn’t harm you,” is true, is the reverse, “It is acceptable to kill what does harm you,” also true? When Muslims lived in Saudi Arabia they were acceptable, but now that they are building a mosque down the street they have become a threat. We shouldn’t let them come to our country. Now that homosexuals are out of the closet are they fair game for discrimination?

B. Violence is acceptable against violence. Atticus does not mention sin when he kills a mad dog that is a perceived threat to the entire town. TKAM p. 127 Some Christians seem to have adopted a “fight fire with fire” methodology. If abortionists kill babies, we can kill abortionists. If Muslims kill Christians, Christians can kill Muslims. If police kill black people, black people can kill police. How can Pastors help end this vicious cycle? Will it take words or actions?

7. Our day is not much different than that of Atticus’. We want to avoid the clear teaching of the Scripture and substitute in its place the dictates of our conscience. Such a fickle authority as conscience can ultimately justify almost any behavior. “Every man’s island, Jean Louise, every man’s watchman is his conscience.” GSAW p. 264

A. Atticus allows Boo Radley to avoid justice because of his sense of order. TKAM p. 370 For all that has been written about Atticus representing the order of the law, when it becomes clear to him that Boo Radley killed Bob Ewell in the process of saving Scout, Atticus is willing to look the other way. He relies on his conscience.

B. Atticus does not want to lose the order of paternalism. For all that has been written about Atticus upholding equality, he did not believe that black people could be trusted to take care of themselves. He argues that they are a backward race. GSAW p. 242 He relies on his conscience.

C. Seared consciences can justify racism. If every man’s watchman were his conscience the world would not have made it this far. Atticus and I demonstrate that our consciences are fallible and biased in favor of ourselves. In directing us to our consciences Harper Lee was prescient of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s love of self. We have taken it a step further than she may have

envisioned when we claim that each conscience can establish its own reality. Here is a perennial pastoral problem, the question of authority. In what ways do you teach the authority of the Word of God over that of the conscience? How does this apply to racism?

8. Try as we might, we cannot defeat the sin of racism by even our most sanctified efforts. Only in the holy love of Jesus do we find salvation and forgiveness. "...you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them," Atticus piously intoned. TKAM p. 374

A. Atticus did not walk around in Tom Robinson's shoes. When he takes up the case of the black man wrongly accused of rape he does so in order that he can hold his head up. TKAM p. 100 He is certainly heroic in his jail house defense of Tom, but we do not see that Atticus ever takes time to know anything about him.

B. Atticus did not walk around in Calpurnia's shoes. GSAW p. 148 When his long-suffering nanny's grandson, Zeebo, kills a white man in a drunken car accident, Atticus desires to take the case, but only so that an NAACP lawyer can't have a shot at it.

C. Jesus did walk around in our shoes. The Scripture tells us that Jesus knew men's hearts. It does not reveal the shudder such knowledge must have induced. He knew our sin not only by observing it from the safety of a holy citadel, but by feeling it. He endured the onslaughts of sin by walking in our midst. He heard the racial slurs directed at Samaritans and its stinging reply. He was taught that tax collectors were less valuable than rabbis, that shepherds were smelly, and that Romans only cared about money.

The sinful, prejudicial associations of racism were among the many sins He absorbed into His own body on the cross. He did it not just for those involved in slavery, discrimination, oppression, and hatred, but also for those who struggle to sort out the ambiguities of their own sinful attitudes toward people that are not like themselves. He did it for you.

In the new life Jesus gives we become the one body, the one nation, the one people, the chosen race that has been called to declare His love for all people.

## **Conclusion**

In the coming years we, as Pastors will be called on to address the problem of racism, or more broadly, the sinful association with only those whom we perceive to be like us, (tribalism). The desires of satan, the world and our own flesh drive us to it. In addition, technical communication capabilities will increase, not decrease the incidence of tribalism. In previous generations we had been forced to create our tribes from those in proximity to us. Now, we have the capacity to find people around the world who thrive on prejudice similar to our own.

In the face of this pressure, the people of God will look to us to make sense out of their fractured world, and guide them with the Word of God, to show love and respect for all for whom Christ died. God grant us the wisdom to do that.

S.D.G.

Terry Forke

Quad Circuit Pastors' Conference

1/13/16

# Atticus Finch

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### Introduction

When Atticus Finch walked out of the courtroom following the trial of Tom Robinson, and all the people in the black section of the courtroom rose to their feet, and Rev. Sykes whispered to Scout Finch, "...stand up. Your father's passin'," I cried, with pride, that a white man would be honored in such a way.<sup>1</sup> Atticus Finch was a boyhood hero of mine.

Apparently I am not the only one who holds Atticus Finch in high esteem. Those whose chosen profession is the law still admire him. "Atticus Finch is invoked as a guiding influence more frequently in essays for law school admission than any other factor by far."<sup>2</sup> In fact, Americans in general have long worshipped him, or at least the film ideal of him, as one of their greatest heroes. In 1963 Gregory Peck won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of Atticus, and in 2003 the American Film Institute listed Atticus Finch as the number one hero of American films in the last 100 years.<sup>3</sup> Given his national status, it is no wonder that when Go Set A Watchman, Harper Lee's second novel, portrayed Atticus Finch as a racist, many faithful readers were incensed.

By sheer happenstance, last winter, I decided to revisit the halls of ideal worship by reading again, To Kill a Mockingbird. Not long after I completed it, the first announcements that Harper Lee had agreed to the publication of the pre-sequel, Go Set a Watchman, began to hit the wires. The media coverage was unbearable. So, I acquired a copy to see for myself what had happened to my hero in his later years.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, Harper. To Kill a Mockingbird. Grand Central Publishing. New York. 1960 p. 283

<sup>2</sup> Rosenbaum, Thane. [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/jurisprudence/2015/02/atticus\\_finch\\_hero\\_worship\\_law\\_students\\_love\\_to\\_kill\\_a\\_mockingbird\\_anticipate.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2015/02/atticus_finch_hero_worship_law_students_love_to_kill_a_mockingbird_anticipate.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.afi.com/100Years/handv.aspx>

unkindnesses of time are struggling to recall what they are all about, allow me to summarize briefly.

In 1957, Harper Lee, an aspiring writer from Alabama, submitted the manuscript of her first novel to the publisher J. P. Lippincott. Her editor, Tay Hohoff, presumably appreciated the story, (which we now know as Go Set a Watchman), and the budding talent, but asked Ms. Lee to rewrite the story, focusing on Jean Louis Finch as a young girl. Two years later Ms. Lee returned with To Kill a Mockingbird. That novel went on to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1961. It was not until 2015 that Harper Lee agreed, (some say under coercion), to allow the publication of the unedited version of the first, but later in time, novel. The sequence of the writing of these works is significant when attempting to analyze their meaning.

#### To Kill a Mockingbird (A Review)

Jean Louise Finch narrates her own story of growing up in Maycomb County, Alabama in the late 1930s. Scout, as she is then known, is somewhere around 6 years old. She and her older brother, Jem, are being raised by their lawyer, father, Atticus, and, since his wife had died years earlier, a black nanny, by the name of Calpurnia. The story meanders through the daily lives and characters of small town Alabama. Scout, a precocious child, learns many lessons, primarily focusing on those who were underprivileged in some way: Dill- a boy who spent the summer with his aunt because his parents did not want him, the Cunninghams- a classmate and his family, who were poverty stricken, Boo Radley- a neighbor who was mentally ill, and Tom Robinson- a black man, unjustly accused of raping a white woman. In each case it is Atticus, with modest, muted wisdom who teaches the lesson; enduring Dill and his aunt, protecting the Cunningham's pride, sheltering Boo Radley, and at the expense of being called a "nigger lover," defending Tom Robinson in court.

Through humor, insight, and high drama we watch as Scout comes to admire and idolize her father. America followed suit. Always in search of heroes, and still in the mood to paint such heroes with broad strokes, we glommed onto a larger than life image of Atticus, (especially in the film), devoid of any subtleties that sin spawns even in fictional characters. That is why the revelations of the elder Atticus were so jarring to so many fans.

#### Go Set a Watchman (A Review)

Now twenty-six, Jean Louise Finch is on her way from New York to Maycomb to visit her elderly father. It is generally expected that she will marry her childhood friend, Henry Clinton, who is now working with Atticus in his law office. This relationship carries the first half of the story, until the bombshell explodes when Jean Louise follows Atticus and Henry to a town meeting where vile racist taunts are spewed and plans are laid to keep blacks in their place.

It is obvious to Jean Louise that her father approves all this. She is sick with confusion and anger. When she confronts him, he does not deny it. In fact he seeks to convince her of the reasonableness of his position. She angrily rejects him and everything he stands for. Later, with the help of her uncle Jack, Atticus' brother, Jean Louise surrenders to an uneasy peace with her father. He tells her that he is proud of her for standing up to him and holding her ground. She tells him that she loves him. She reaches the conclusion that it takes all kinds of people to populate a world. She cannot beat her father and she cannot join her father because "...they're (the racists) the drag and we're the thrust, together we make the thing fly."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lee, Harper. Go Set a Watchman. Harper Collins, New York. 2015. p. 277

## II. Theories on the Racism of Atticus Finch and our own.

### A. Atticus Finch should never have been seen as a hero.

A theory that was unable to gain traction was that Atticus Finch was not the paragon of virtue that Americans had made of him. "In fact, there is a well-established body of scholarship on *To Kill A Mockingbird* that draws attention to flaws in Atticus's character."<sup>5</sup> Chief among these flaws is that he did not defend Tom Robinson as a person but as a point of law. Atticus did not really get to know Tom or care for him.

This view holds that creating a hero out of Atticus Finch saved the collective conscience of white America. "Atticus Finch has, for more than 50 years, allowed white America to sleep at night. He embodied the heroism that white America believed would keep our criminal justice system clean of racial horrors. White America still believes that a few legal heroes will solve all the problems—will keep the racist wolves at bay. Atticus Finch enabled a lie."<sup>6</sup>

In actuality then, Atticus allowed whites to trust his efforts so that they could maintain their personal bias. Katie Pryal writes, "I noted Atticus Finch's "failure of empathy," and said that white readers could not—would not—empathize with black characters in the book because of a "fear of revelation." In other words, I was arguing, white people really don't want to know what it's like to walk around in the skin of a black person, despite what Atticus claimed in the book."<sup>7</sup>

### B. Atticus Finch should be seen as a hero that lost his ideal.

A second theory is that Atticus' age and the political developments of the day changed him. Specifically, Atticus became a racist in his old age due to the *Brown vs Board of Education* decision, which upset his perfect little world. "Atticus and Scout discuss an important Supreme Court case that has altered (Atticus would say gravely damaged) race relations throughout the South. This case would almost certainly have to be *Brown vs. Board of Education*..."<sup>8</sup>

This view is a caveat against the loss of ideals as a result of the weariness induced through the constant barrage of the realists, and the weakness of age.

### C. The heroism of Atticus Finch depends on who is looking.

This is my personal analysis and one of the lessons I think the books can teach us. Both stories are really about Jean Louise Finch, (Scout). It is significant that *Go Set a Watchman* was written first. When Harper Lee was told to rewrite *Go Set a Watchman* she set about describing how Jean Louise could not have known her father's position on race.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is about how Scout came to idolize her father to the point she could see none of his faults. The young Scout benefits from this view because it drives her to aspire, insofar as is humanly possible, toward a non-prejudicial life. *Go Set a Watchman* is about how Jean Louise, as an adult finally sees her father not as a monolithic character of heroic proportions, but as a complex mixture of wavering interests. The older Jean Louise

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<sup>5</sup> Marsh, Laura. <https://newrepublic.com/article/122295/these-scholars-have-been-pointing-out-atticus-finchs-racism-years>

<sup>6</sup> Pryal, Katie. <http://katierosegquestpryal.com/2015/07/16/atticus-finch-white-americas-worst-nightmare/>

<sup>7</sup> Op. Cit. <http://katierosegquestpryal.com/2015/07/16/atticus-finch-white-americas-worst-nightmare/>

<sup>8</sup> Barton, Fredrick. "Still a Work in Progress." *The Cresset*. Valparaiso University Press. September 2015. p. 17. Atticus to Jean Louise: "Jean Louise, what was your first reaction to the Supreme Court decision?" GSAW p. 238.

benefits from this view because taking Atticus off the pedestal allows her to learn how to love someone with whom she deeply disagrees. In a telling passage her uncle enlightens her, “As you grew up, when you were grown, totally unknown to yourself, you confused your father with God. You never saw him as a man with a man’s heart, and a man’s failings... You were an emotional cripple, leaning on him, getting the answers from him, assuming that your answers would always be his answers... You had to kill yourself, or he had to kill you to get you functioning as a separate entity...We wondered, sometimes, when your conscience and his would part company, and over what.”<sup>9</sup> In this relationship there is much for us to learn regarding our approach to racism.

#### D. The ambiguities of our racism

At its 1992 Synodical Convention The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod adopted a resolution titled, “To Combat All Racism.” The resolution said, in part, “Whereas, Racism, namely the mindset that considers one group of people to be superior to another, continues to hurt its victim and cause offense in the church and conflict in society... Therefore be it Resolved, that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod urge its members to repent of any attitude or practice of racism as individuals and congregations...by loving and serving all their fellow humans as they have been loved and served.”<sup>10</sup>

The resolution also encouraged the CTCR to complete its study on racism, and the Synod to make “maximum” use of it. Happily the CTCR complied, and issued its report in February 1994. After offering a sociological definition of racism, an overview of the positions various Lutheran bodies had taken, and a conclusion that a Lutheran response was necessary, the study noted that it may not be an easy road. “Few today will fail to recognize conspicuous oppression and enslavement of racial groupings as blatantly racist. Often more difficult to recognize are the subtle and varied forms by which the heritage of racism continues to disadvantage members of minority groups.”<sup>11</sup> Such subtleties are the *raison d’être* of this paper. Few of your people are overt racists, but it does not follow that we are thereby free from its more subtle ambiguities.

The report continued by listing various barriers to overcoming racism. Denial- “No matter what form it takes, denial is an age-old strategy that satan uses to blind people to the reality of their sins...”<sup>12</sup> Paternalism- “To the detriment of healthy intergroup relations, paternalism tends to trivialize minority group persons, portraying them as incapable of caring for themselves or functioning responsibly.”<sup>13</sup> Fear- “The fear of such change may immobilize some and lead others to fight desperately, perhaps even irrationally, to maintain the status quo.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Op. Cit. GSAW p. 265

<sup>10</sup> Convention Proceedings, 58<sup>th</sup> Regular Convention LCMS July 10-17, 1992. p. 113.

<sup>11</sup> Commission on Theology and Church Relations. Racism and the Church. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. February 1994. p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> Op. Cit. Racism and the Church. p. 47

<sup>13</sup> Op. Cit. Racism and the Church. p. 49

<sup>14</sup> Op. Cit. Racism and the Church. p. 51

The report concludes by commending ten “Guiding Principles” to the Church for responding to the evils of racism. Among those principles are:

2. The Scriptures require that the church confront moral evil in its midst, including the sin of racism.
3. The church will commit itself to respond to racism in both word and deed by showing love and respect to all for whom Christ died.
5. When a Christian congregation includes new members of differing backgrounds, it will do all in its power to create a healthy climate for them in order to make them feel that they are truly welcome as members of that family.
7. When the church decides to share the Gospel in a community which is made up of a racial or ethnic group different from the majority of the members of the church, its goal and firm commitment will be to carry out the ministry of Word and sacrament by making use of the cultural forms of that community.
8. The church will regard those groups it hopes to serve not as “objects” of its ministry but as those whom our Lord calls to be “full partners” in the Gospel.<sup>15</sup>

Analyzing our awareness of these barriers and our compliance to these guidelines will require some measure of introspection, something at which sinners are not particularly adept. We may have a sincere desire to treat everyone equally, but there is sin in us working in the opposite direction. Social researchers have tried to put their finger on the origin of this bias toward bias. They will not name it “sin,” but they may grant us some insights as to its methods. “Much research has found that humans are tribal creatures, showing strong bias against those we perceive as different from us and favoritism toward those we perceive as similar. In fact, we humans will divide ourselves into in-groups and out-groups even when the perceived differences between the specific groups are completely arbitrary.”<sup>16</sup>

Without access to a proper understanding of the nature of man the sociologist still hits close to home. Sinners are inclined to associate with those they perceive to be like them. Scientists call this inclination an implicit association. As the name suggests, experiments reveal that we tend to believe, even against our conscience, that those who are like us are safer than those who are not. You can find an Implied Association Test at: [UnderstandingPrejudice.org](http://UnderstandingPrejudice.org).

“As these experiments suggest, it is not that we are either prejudiced or unprejudiced, period. Rather, we are more and less prejudiced, based on our upbringings and experiences but also on a variety of temporary or situational prompts (like being told we're on the green team). [As opposed, arbitrarily to the red team.] One simple, evolutionary explanation for our innate tendency toward tribalism is safety in numbers. You're more likely to survive an attack from a marauding tribe if you join forces with your buddies.”<sup>17</sup>

We know, however, that sin, not an evolutionary vestige of our time on the savannah, causes us to hold people of a certain skin color, or ethnicity, or language, as more valuable than other people. The ambiguities of these implicit associations are difficult to ferret out. “Nonetheless, if prejudice has both a psychological side and a cultural side, we must address

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<sup>15</sup> Op. Cit. [Racism and the Church](#). pp. 51-57.

<sup>16</sup> Mooney, Chris. <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/11/science-of-racism-prejudice>

<sup>17</sup> Op. Cit. [Science of Racism](#).

both of these aspects. A good start may simply be making people aware of just how unconsciously biased they can be.”<sup>18</sup> This insight holds true even for Christians. How can I confess such sin if I am unaware of it? I have chosen a literary tool to help us do some thinking about the problem of racism.

### III. Lessons from Atticus Finch.

1. Atticus was a well ordered man. His sense of order was, perhaps the dominant characteristic of his personality. Threats to his sense of order were to be exterminated. His paternalistic attitude was his understanding of the order of the South and had to be maintained. “So far in my experience, white is white and black’s black.” GSAW p. 246 “You realize that our Negro population is backward, don’t you?... You realize that the vast majority of them here in the South are unable to share fully in the responsibilities of citizenship, and why?” GSAW p. 242

A. Our sense of order can threaten a healthy response to change. Christians have for much of the history of this country been the dominant socio/religious group. “We” have been in control of the culture. What happens when we lose control? If we respond by grasping for power, or, conversely, by shrinking into the shell of our own little tribe, what happens to the proclamation of the Gospel?

B. Whites are predicted to become a minority in the United States within thirty years.<sup>19</sup> How will we handle that upheaval? “We,” (all white males), have been in control. What will it feel like to be a minority? How will the largely white LCMS respond to proclaiming the Gospel to a majority that is not like us? Will our “whiteness” continue to define the LCMS into its extinction?

C. Muslims are perceived to be a threat to traditional values in the United States. The average citizen estimates that Muslims comprise about 15% of the population. The reality is that they are less than 1.5% of the population.<sup>20</sup> Why the disparity of this perception? Will this minority grow? How will the Church respond if it does?

D. Our sense of order may be upset by the growth any number of minorities, e.g. atheists, homosexuals, Native Americans, even the mega-rich. How will we lead people through these changes in a godly manner?

2. Atticus was afraid of loss of control. He could not abide upsetting the status quo which left whites firmly in control of the political setting of the South. Both he and his brother Jack seemed to assuage their consciences by implying that their real fear was that things were moving too rapidly. This seems a thin veneer. “...If the negro vote edged out the white you’d have Negroes in every county office.” GSAW p. 243 “Do you want Negroes by the carload in our schools and churches and theaters? Do you want them in our world?” GSAW p. 245

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<sup>18</sup> Op. Cit. Science of Racism.

<sup>19</sup> El Nasser, Haya. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/6/25/whites-on-target-to-become-a-us-minority.html>

<sup>20</sup> Whalen, Andrew. <http://www.digitaltimes.com/muslim-population-us-new-poll-shows-none-us-have-any-idea-392930>

A. Fear drives racism. “The fear of racial and cultural differences can be strongly counterproductive in human relationships.”<sup>21</sup> Which tribe, or ethnicity, or race is the greatest threat to your control of your world? Do you even want them in your world?

B. Fear is idolatry. The Scriptures teach us that we should fear, love and trust in God above all things. When our fears drive our actions we have created an idol in place of the true God. How can we as Pastors address the fears associated with racism? What happens to the proclamation of the Gospel if we refuse to confront this fear?

3. Atticus did not forthrightly convey his racial bias to his children. Scout was allowed to grow up thinking of her father as somehow above the sin of racism. “Atticus Finch is the same in his house as he is on the public streets.” TKAM p. 61 “Where most men had codes and tried to live up to them, Atticus lived his to the letter with no fuss, no fanfare, and no soul-searching. His private character was his public character.” GSAW p. 114 “Men tend to carry their honesty in pigeonholes, Jean Louise. They can be perfectly honest in some ways and fool themselves in other ways.” GSAW p. 237 “...I never knew what was in your mind. I only heard what you said. You neglected to tell me that we were naturally better than the Negroes...” GSAW p. 247

A. We can hide our bias from others. There may be holy reasons for doing this. If the implicit association theory is true, perhaps we are even unaware. Atticus hints at this in one of the quotes above. There may be other unwholesome motivations for hiding our bias. Did Atticus hide it, or did Scout refuse to see it? The point is that we are capable of harboring a sin to the degree that we coddle instead of confess it.

B. We can hide our bias from ourselves. Do we have an obligation to root around in our psyche to come up with some sort of prejudice with which we can beat ourselves up? (Frankly I am afraid of such a response to this paper.) I respond: if such bias is a sin that harms us and our neighbor perhaps it would be spiritually healthy to assess a few ambiguities, not for the sake of self- flagellation, but for the sake of our neighbor’s well-being.

4. Jean Louise struggles with giving up the hero image she had created of her father. “The one man I could say is a gentleman... You’re the only person I think I’ve ever fully trusted...” GSAW p. 252

A. Parents teach their children race relations, without even trying. Does racism receive mention in your catechetical instruction? Under which chief part should it appear? How can Pastors help parents of the congregation teach proper race relations?

B. We all have heroes that may impede our development. Like Scout, do we look the other way when our heroes exhibit signs of racism? Do we excuse unacceptable behavior with a good-ol-boy attitude? How can heroes stand in the way of the proclamation of the Gospel?

5. Jean Louise is taught that she had to separate herself from her hero, (the unrealistic picture of her father), in order to develop her own watchman. “You had to kill yourself, or he had to kill you to get you functioning as a separate entity...We wondered, sometimes, when your conscience and his would part company, and over what.” GSAW p. 265

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<sup>21</sup> Op. Cit. Racism and the Church. p. 50.

A. The reign of individualism is unchecked through the ages. To some degree we are still a “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” culture. How many graduation speeches have you heard directing young people to better themselves by following their own heart? The problem, of course, is that the human heart is a vile thing, wholly consumed by its own continued beating. How can we teach that racism is founded in the heart?

B. The Word of God can change lives. There is only one power that can change people’s hearts, faith in Jesus, which comes by the hearing of the Word. The CTCR developed a Bible Study in conjunction with its report on racism. This might be a good place to start for the Pastor who interested in taking this subject on with his people.

6. Specific sins may lie latent in us, unknown even to ourselves, until a specific threat wakens it. Satan is a master at exploiting those sins that we think we have under control. We conclude that we can afford to let sleeping dogs lie, until they become a threat. This attitude is reflected in the title of, and grants form to the first book. Since mockingbirds don’t do anything to hurt humans, but only sing sweetly, Atticus instructs his children, “It’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” TKAM p.119

A. If the premise, “You don’t kill what doesn’t harm you,” is true, is the reverse, “It is acceptable to kill what does harm you,” also true? When Muslims lived in Saudi Arabia they were acceptable, but now that they are building a mosque down the street they have become a threat. We shouldn’t let them come to our country. Now that homosexuals are out of the closet are they fair game for discrimination?

B. Violence is acceptable against violence. Atticus does not mention sin when he kills a mad dog that is a perceived threat to the entire town. TKAM p. 127 Some Christians seem to have adopted a “fight fire with fire” methodology. If abortionists kill babies, we can kill abortionists. If Muslims kill Christians, Christians can kill Muslims. If police kill black people, black people can kill police. How can Pastors help end this vicious cycle? Will it take words or actions?

7. Our day is not much different than that of Atticus’. We want to avoid the clear teaching of the Scripture and substitute in its place the dictates of our conscience. Such a fickle authority as conscience can ultimately justify almost any behavior. “Every man’s island, Jean Louise, every man’s watchman is his conscience.” GSAW p. 264

A. Atticus allows Boo Radley to avoid justice because of his sense of order. TKAM p. 370 For all that has been written about Atticus representing the order of the law, when it becomes clear to him that Boo Radley killed Bob Ewell in the process of saving Scout, Atticus is willing to look the other way. He relies on his conscience.

B. Atticus does not want to lose the order of paternalism. For all that has been written about Atticus upholding equality, he did not believe that black people could be trusted to take care of themselves. He argues that they are a backward race. GSAW p. 242 He relies on his conscience.

C. Seared consciences can justify racism. If every man’s watchman were his conscience the world would not have made it this far. Atticus and I demonstrate that our consciences are fallible and biased in favor of ourselves. In directing us to our consciences Harper Lee was prescient of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s love of self. We have taken it a step further than she may have

envisioned when we claim that each conscience can establish its own reality. Here is a perennial pastoral problem, the question of authority. In what ways do you teach the authority of the Word of God over that of the conscience? How does this apply to racism?

8. Try as we might, we cannot defeat the sin of racism by even our most sanctified efforts. Only in the holy love of Jesus do we find salvation and forgiveness. "...you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them," Atticus piously intoned. TKAM p. 374

A. Atticus did not walk around in Tom Robinson's shoes. When he takes up the case of the black man wrongly accused of rape he does so in order that he can hold his head up. TKAM p. 100 He is certainly heroic in his jail house defense of Tom, but we do not see that Atticus ever takes time to know anything about him.

B. Atticus did not walk around in Calpurnia's shoes. GSAW p. 148 When his long-suffering nanny's grandson, Zeebo, kills a white man in a drunken car accident, Atticus desires to take the case, but only so that an NAACP lawyer can't have a shot at it.

C. Jesus did walk around in our shoes. The Scripture tells us that Jesus knew men's hearts. It does not reveal the shudder such knowledge must have induced. He knew our sin not only by observing it from the safety of a holy citadel, but by feeling it. He endured the onslaughts of sin by walking in our midst. He heard the racial slurs directed at Samaritans and its stinging reply. He was taught that tax collectors were less valuable than rabbis, that shepherds were smelly, and that Romans only cared about money.

The sinful, prejudicial associations of racism were among the many sins He absorbed into His own body on the cross. He did it not just for those involved in slavery, discrimination, oppression, and hatred, but also for those who struggle to sort out the ambiguities of their own sinful attitudes toward people that are not like themselves. He did it for you.

In the new life Jesus gives we become the one body, the one nation, the one people, the chosen race that has been called to declare His love for all people.

## **Conclusion**

In the coming years we, as Pastors will be called on to address the problem of racism, or more broadly, the sinful association with only those whom we perceive to be like us, (tribalism). The desires of satan, the world and our own flesh drive us to it. In addition, technical communication capabilities will increase, not decrease the incidence of tribalism. In previous generations we had been forced to create our tribes from those in proximity to us. Now, we have the capacity to find people around the world who thrive on prejudice similar to our own.

In the face of this pressure, the people of God will look to us to make sense out of their fractured world, and guide them with the Word of God, to show love and respect for all for whom Christ died. God grant us the wisdom to do that.

S.D.G.

Terry Forke

Quad Circuit Pastors' Conference

1/13/16