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Missing the Mark

We Must Refocus Our Aim if We Are to Win the Race Game

I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

—John 10:16

God graciously endowed me with the ability to play basketball and gave me the opportunity to play both in college and overseas with missions basketball teams. My sports involvement has been a vehicle He has used to teach me lessons about race relationships. It was (and is) a natural open door for building cross-cultural friendships. I was the first black person many of my new white friends had ever known.

Without question, God used sports to give me a vision for unity in the body of Christ at large. I am convinced that whether we're on the court or in the pew, certain commitments and qualities—such as determination, diligence, and devotion—help to build an unbeatable combination of harmony and integrity. But victory is never easy. Sometimes it requires a flexibility that takes us beyond the familiar and the comfortable.

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ANOTHER COURT

God continues to use sports in my life as an analogy for racial partnerships. For instance, as I've grown older, my ability to play basketball at a certain level has begun to diminish quite rapidly (amazing what happens with age!). As a result, I've decided to turn to tennis. The word spread that I wanted to learn this sport. The head coach of the University of Tulsa women's tennis team was referred to me. As this patient woman began to teach me how to play tennis, much of her instruction did not make sense. In fact, some of it seemed downright stupid. But I had a vested interest in her instruction because I was paying twenty-five dollars an hour to receive it (three lessons; she gave me the fourth for free), so I didn't give up.

To my surprise, when I followed her directions, the ball went where she said it would! Slowly I began to learn the game of tennis by faith as I did what I was told to do. With the instruction of the tennis coach and of Rudy Perkins (a former Southern Cal tennis player and one of my best friends) and Bill Funderburk, I experienced the joy of winning tennis tournaments. But before any tournaments were won, there were many more losses. Fortunately, I was able to learn from them.

The same is true in race relations. Step-by-step we learn by faith what we must do to bring about unity. My prayer is that each chapter of this book would be a step in the right direction for those of you who are serious about improving race relations, or a confirmation for those of you who are already active that you are moving in the right direction. Some of what I am saying may not ring true for you initially. This will not negate the truth of what has been written. This may simply be the first time you have heard some of these truths, or it may be the first time you have had the opportunity to view truth from a Christian African-American perspective. Please don't let yourself become defensive. Instead, ask God to help you to work through the tough issues. This is how spiritual growth takes place as we work through the tough issues by the power of the Holy

Spirit—as opposed to running away from our difficulties.

I hope you will be motivated to read this book from cover to cover because of your vested interest. For me, the vested interest in tennis was the twenty-five dollars an hour I had paid for instruction. For you as a Christian, hopefully, the motivation will come from such Scriptures as John 10:16, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd,” and John 17:21, “[I pray] that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

There are other similar passages, such as 1 Corinthians 12:12–26 and 1 John 4:19–21, just to list a few. Our ability to glorify God and the integrity of the Gospel we preach is at stake.

One of my goals in writing this book is to deepen your relationship with our Lord and Savior and the hope that, as a result, your relationship with others will bring you spiritual joy and a better understanding of Christians from other cultures. Many of the truths in this book will make some people uncomfortable, but for those who persevere, the results will be worth the effort. We just need to keep in mind that what we are learning has eternal ramifications.

My wife, Brenda, and I conduct marriage seminars around the country. We have found that as we explain to husbands and wives how and why they are different, it gives them understanding and security. We have discovered that a basic understanding of differences reduces competition, alleviates fear, and produces patience. My hope is that this book will birth in you some of these same results in cross-cultural relationships. It is critical that we who are Christians learn to complement one another in the body of Christ. We need each other. The key is interdependency.

THE WRONG QUESTION

The starting place to learn about anything is to ask questions. I asked my tennis coach how to serve the ball or hit a backhand in

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order to improve my game. The same is true when we begin to address the racial issue.

God is opening the door for me to consult with individuals, Christian colleges, churches, mission organizations, parachurch ministries, and general managers of Christian radio stations. All of the above who have hired me to consult with them have asked me the same question initially. It is intriguing to me that all these people from all these organizations ask the very same question. What is alarming is that they are all asking the wrong question. They are missing the mark.

Whenever I am asked this particular wrong question, a warning bell goes off in my head. This bell comes from the experience of thirty years of racial dialogue. It tells me that the individual (or organization) asking the question is probably not genuinely serious in his or her attempt to secure and practice information regarding Christian African Americans.

The authors of this question are usually looking for a way out. They are like those Christians who say to me, “I’m color-blind,” or “I don’t see color in my relationships.” My response to such a statement is to tell them that’s not true. Ask an individual the color of his car or his eyes and he will tell you they’re blue or brown. So how come the color of someone’s skin can’t be assessed?

I usually engage the owner of this statement in a conversation that quickly reveals that he (or she) is not as “color-blind” as originally thought. The real issue is not the color of someone’s skin, but how you treat him because of the color of his skin.

What is the wrong question? It reminds me of the question the rich young ruler asked Jesus about how to obtain eternal life. Jesus responded in Matthew 19:17–26 (NASB):

[Jesus] said to him, “Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” Then he said to Him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false wit-

ness; Honor your father and mother; and You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.

And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” And looking at them Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

It seems the rich young ruler was asking the wrong question. He was asking, “Am I on the right track to get into heaven?” But Jesus, being Jesus, was and is in the stretching business. He was not about convenience but about a faith that requires risk and sacrifice. It is interesting that the rich young ruler knew that what he was doing was not good enough for him to gain entrance into heaven. What is frightening is that he was not willing to do what was necessary to spend eternity with Jesus. He was more than willing to rule but not willing to give up what he had and believe that Jesus could possibly give him even more.

It is easy to sit back and say that the rich young ruler was unspiritual. Yet many of us have the same response to cross-cultural relationships. Without a living, active faith in God, it will always be impossible to improve race relations even among Christians. Too many Christians have become comfortable and do not want to be stretched any more by God in any direction.

SURPRISE, SURPRISE

When I think of the wrong question being asked so frequently

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these days about race, it also reminds me of the question and response in Luke 10:25–37 (NASB):

And a lawyer stood up and put [Jesus] to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” And He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And He said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.” But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (vv. 25–29)

Jesus, of course, goes on to tell him the powerful parable of the Good Samaritan (vv. 30–37). The question should not have been, “*Who* is my neighbor?” but “*How* can I *serve* my neighbor?” Can you see the implications of this parable? The Jews hated the Samaritans and the Samaritans the Jews. Jesus was commanding the Jewish lawyer to serve everyone, even people who were not of his culture or race. And he said this at a time when Jewish tradition did not even allow Jews to walk through Samaria!

To everyone’s surprise, Jesus held up the Samaritan as the model. Here the outcast of society accepted and aided his enemy. This principle is true in our society. Christian minorities are often more accepting of those in the Christian majority than those in the Christian majority are of them. In fact, like the Samaritan, Christian minorities will often go out of their way to help. They have to because they understand the pain of rejection. Not helping someone in need would make these Christian minorities just like the people they don’t want to be like!

And so the wrong question many white evangelicals are asking when attempting to relate cross-culturally is this: “*How can I relate to the African American?*”

What is so wrong with this question? It seems harmless enough,

but let's look at it closely. Why? Because the reality is that Christian African Americans see white America as controlling the economy and real estate, starting businesses and white parachurch ministries, even going overseas as missionaries—all without asking for any input from African Americans. But when these same white Christians go overseas as missionaries, they learn the language (many times from nationals) and the culture, study the history of the people they intend to serve, adapt to the food, and often wear the clothing of the country. Much of this is done before they ever step foot onto the mission field.

So when white evangelicals ask, "How can I relate to Christian African Americans?" Christian African Americans are shocked. We are shocked because even *asking* the question is confusing! We wonder why these same white evangelicals don't take the identical approach with African Americans here that they do with indigenous people around the world. Could it be that these same white evangelicals don't value knowing Christian African Americans as much as they do those people who have the same dark complexion but live overseas? Could it be that these same white evangelicals know that those people of a different complexion who live overseas are not coming to *their* America?

I know that question isn't a nice one. Nor is it easy to hear. But with no answers coming from the white evangelical community, inquiring minds want to know. Minds tend to wonder. With little explanation given by white evangelicals, their silence seems to say quite loudly that many white Christians don't really care about their Christian brothers and sisters who are of a different race and culture yet live right here in America.

A WAY OUT

When white evangelicals ask this question, it looks to African Americans as though they are looking for a way out of developing a serious relationship with African-American Christians. We African-American Christians have a question of our own: "Do white evangelicals really *want* to relate?"

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I believe that any white evangelicals who are *serious* about relating to African-American Christians will read the history of African Americans (written by African-American authors, Christian and non-Christian), study the culture, and understand that African Americans are more expert on themselves than whites are (later in this book, suggested readings will be given). The fact that many white evangelicals don't study African-American history and culture continues to assist in building the wall of racism between the two races. I know that your reading this book means you are doing just what I'm recommending, and I commend you. Please keep reading. There are many insightful and helpful books written by African Americans about the African-American experience and heritage, including contributions made by blacks not just to America, but to the world. Your reading books such as this one is a step toward breaking down the wall of racism. Later in this book, I'll discuss specific examples in history that will help in our understanding.

As a history major in college, I learned that historiography teaches that the more you learn about other peoples, the more you learn about yourself. So, even from a selfish perspective, all Christians should be motivated to learn about as many cultures as possible. This point makes it even more amazing that it seems few white candidates for missions work in Africa study African Americans. What a tremendous opportunity this would give them to learn about African culture by studying African Americans before going overseas to minister.

African-American Christians know that whites who are serious about developing a relationship with African-American Christians don't sit around asking *how*, but start doing *something*. They know that you can't learn how to swim if you never get into the water!

White evangelicals who are serious about cross-racial understanding will go (the Great Commission) where the African-American Christians are, just like the missionaries do. White missionaries have never asked the people of various countries to come to them.

How could white Christians ask people of different cultures here to come to them? But they do. How many times have I heard from white Christians, “We’d like to hire African Americans; we just don’t know any. Besides, none have applied for the job.” This is one of the major problems in bridging the race gap between white and black Christians.

SERVANT VS. PATERNALISTIC ATTITUDES

Another way many white evangelicals—and here I’m speaking especially of churches, missions organizations, and parachurch ministries—miss the mark in their attempt to relate to the Christian African-American community lies in their policy of assimilation. This is the idea of absorbing the Christian African-American culture, history, and traditions into the white Christian community without the white Christian community having to make any basic adjustments.

This is not at all what the Bible has in mind. *All* cultures must make adjustments for the sake of Christ.

Matthew 9:16–17 states:

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.

Al Campanis, formerly of the Dodgers, and Jimmy the Greek, a former sports announcer for CBS television, both said that they did not believe that blacks were as intelligent as whites. Therefore, whites should not allow blacks to be placed in positions of authority or any decision-making positions. (Al Campanis and Jimmy the Greek faced the red eye of the TV camera: here pretense must be maintained. Both men were fired from their jobs. Their punishment

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was manifestly unfair.)¹

I'm not sure their firing was right because they were simply expressing their own opinions and perspectives. They were fired for being honest. Yet, when you look at sports organizations in general, and blacks in decision-making positions in those organizations, you have to wonder if the administrators who fired these two men weren't hypocrites. What is sad to me is that this situation is comparable to that in the evangelical community.

Look at the lack of blacks in leadership in Christian churches and ministries that say they want to reach blacks. Look at those few blacks who are employed by those churches and organizations. Usually you will see that their budgets are significantly smaller than their white counterparts—and so with their lines of authority. You will probably not find much equality in the attention given to issues that make a difference in the Christian minority community. This is a shame, for if it made an effort, the white evangelical community could easily endear itself to the Christian minority community. So—does the evangelical community believe the same as Al Campanis and Jimmy the Greek? If you look at who is in the boardroom or at the top management levels of these organizations, you won't find many blacks in decision-making positions in the evangelical community.

Yet, doesn't 1 John 3:18 call us to love not simply with tongue or word, but with our actions and deeds as well?

AFRICAN AMERICANS ARE NOT THE ENEMY

Let's take a hypothetical situation. Let's pretend a predominantly white Christian organization or church sincerely desires to minister to the African-American community. Someone has the idea to hire an African American to fulfill this vision. The following is a story of what usually happens:

A white Christian organization or church recruits and hires an African American named Jerome. Jerome is immediately told, "We don't know anything about your race and culture, but we want to

do something. Will you please come join us and assist us in reaching your people? You will have the authority to do whatever you need to do to accomplish your goal!" Jerome can't help but be excited about this tremendous opportunity to serve the Lord and work with these unusually understanding white evangelicals.

But things seem to change once he starts to work. No contract is signed. He believes the verbal agreement is better than any contract because he is working with Christians. He begins to do what he was hired to do. He uses different approaches to reach a different race of people, and his strategies begin to be questioned with negative overtones. Without any hint of warning, the African American hears: "We don't do it that way!" The promised authority is never realized because it was never given in the first place. No matter how logical the minority's point of view as to how the actions of the organization or church will be viewed by the people he was hired to reach, his opinion is ignored. In fact, the organization or church begins to make decisions in the area of race relations without the input of the very person it hired to lead it. Meetings are actually held without Jerome being invited—he's not part of the inside planning. This attitude of controlled action reduces Jerome to a token.

What has happened? Unfortunately, the church or Christian organization has operated out of fear of change or fear of the unknown rather than out of faith that God brought Jerome to them. This fear has often become a stronger motivator than faith in God to do what has already been agreed upon.

The result of these good but shallow intentions is that Jerome now feels betrayed and hurt by people with whom he will spend eternity. He feels lonely and unsupported, a common by-product of this kind of working condition. The Christian African American discovers that he has been deceived (intentionally or unintentionally) by Christians who seemed to be more concerned with boards, constituents, trustees, and money than with God. And if Jerome doesn't quit first, he will probably be asked to leave somewhere between three to five years later. The organization may even put

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unwarranted charges of violation of company policy in his file because he stated his disappointment with the organization. Often, inside and outside the organization, he is asked how he is being treated by Christians (black and white) who are praying for the individual, church, or organization to be successful. If he tells the truth, he will get in trouble with the organization. If he lies, he will be in trouble with God. He may even be faced with the dilemma of taking this Christian organization or church to court because it has breached its contract or simply quietly walking away from the organization feeling like a failure, even though he tried to serve it to the best of his ability. He has to provide for his family, but the church or Christian organization may have damaged his reputation. All of this because he in good faith trusted his white Christian colleagues.

This happens all the time in the secular business world to people of all races. And unfortunately, it happens quite frequently to whites in Christian churches and/or ministries. The hurt is naturally greater when this happens in a ministry. But when this happens to blacks hired by churches or ministries that say they want to minister to blacks, the pain and ramifications are much more devastating. Correctly or incorrectly, the perception is racism.

When an African American is hired by a church or Christian organization for the purpose of assisting it in reaching the black community, it is usually for the knowledge and experience this person has in this area. Peter Drucker would identify such a person as a “knowledge” worker. Drucker describes in *The Effective Executive* how a knowledge worker should be allowed to function: “The knowledge worker cannot be supervised closely or in detail. He can only be helped. But he must direct himself, and he must direct himself toward performance and contribution, that is, toward effectiveness.”²

If Drucker is right, then churches and ministries that desire to reach the black community by hiring a black must prepare themselves before the black ever sets foot in the institution for a different kind of working relationship. Due to the fact that this institution is

attempting to do something it has never done before (or done well before), it must be willing to allow this “knowledge” worker to work in a different manner. The institution must allow time for this new approach and concentrate on the results. Thus the institution must not treat the new staff member the same as everyone else, not because of the color of the person’s skin, but because of the dynamics of the task.

Drucker goes on to say, “Such a man (or woman) must make decisions; he cannot just carry out orders. He must take responsibility for his contribution. And he is supposed, by virtue of his knowledge, to be better equipped to make the right decision than anyone else. He may be overridden; he may be demoted or fired.”³ This may be where the majority of the problem is, not a personal racism (not ruling this out) so much as an institution that has not “counted the cost.” Who these individuals report to will be critical. Institutions without a sacrificial mind-set are usually set up to fail—and usually do—in their attempts at cross-cultural ministry. Their negative behavior may not be intentional but may be perceived as such by blacks.

PARTNERSHIP VS. PATERNALISM

I wish I could tell you that Jerome’s story is only hypothetical, but unfortunately it is not. It has happened many times and continues to be done to many of our black Christian brothers and sisters by otherwise well-meaning, but tragically misinformed, white Christian brothers and sisters. As I have interviewed blacks in many Christian parachurch ministries, I have heard this story too often. It is all too true! An article in *Ministries Today* titled “Plain Vanilla Christianity” reveals the struggles of several African Americans in Christian parachurch ministries.⁴ Somehow the mark is being missed!

What the white evangelical community needs to work toward is developing a partnership *with*—not *for*—African-American Christians. Developing such a partnership will require a radical change in thinking. That, in turn, will lead away from a mind-set of

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paternalism and into a powerful partnership that the world will be sure to take notice of. In other words, change *must come* in the traditional approach white Christians have taken in attempting to relate to the Christian African American.

What kind of changes in thinking? They are very simple. They are the changes in thinking that are motivated by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of humble, submissive Christians. Many white evangelicals must go beyond the rhetoric of saying that blacks and whites are equal before God to actually demonstrating it with consistent, progressive actions. This new perspective in thinking will alleviate the fears of those who are accustomed to having control by redirecting their faith where it should have always been—in God. If our faith is in God, then we will be more open to see God move in ways we have not seen Him move before. We will be more open to watching *God* be in control and not ourselves. Hebrews 11:1 says, “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

Building relationships with someone who is different demands faith and trust. It demands an attitude of hoping for the best. This attitude—motivated by the love of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit—must move white evangelical leaders to attempt to understand what it is like to be a minority in the workplace or ministry where they are. It means understanding that whatever position the black has been hired for, he has multiple inherent responsibilities. One is to the job for which he or she has been hired. Another is as a bridge builder between two cultures and/or races. Another is serving as an in-house race relations consultant. Still another is exercising public relations skills: protecting the organization, often when it needs protection but doesn't realize it. Finally, he is a pioneer, taking the organization or church where it has never gone before. All of this will demand much understanding and support by the organization or the church. It will also require that the individual be part of the decision-making body of the particular organization or church.

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This kind of understanding will make it easier for Christian love to be translated into action. It will affect budgets, ranges of authority, and the openness to listen to different ideas and perspectives. This attitude will also mean that people from all ethnic backgrounds will be hired in all types of positions for a variety of parachurch ministries and cross-cultural churches, not just for those that are black or minority related, or for music ministries.

Thus, if any predominantly white Christian organization or church wants to hit the mark in the area of relating to Christian African Americans, it must be willing to put these suggestions into practice by faith. And until Christians of *all* races can see one another as each other's neighbor—that is, until neighborly love is seen as an action and not a feeling—nothing is going to change dramatically. First John 3:16 says: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.”

This verse challenges us as Christians to be willing to die for fellow believers. God is not asking all Christians to die for Him, but He is asking all Christians to live for Him, and thus for one another. When Christians treat each other as though they are willing to die for each other, then we will see a radical change in the relationship between Christians of different races. First John 3:18 (NASB) says: “Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”

Dear Father,

Help us to make sure that our actions match our confession. Help us not to become defensive as You may reveal areas in our lives which may not as of yet be submitted to You. Let us rely on Your Holy Spirit to produce through us actions that bring honor to Your Name.

Amen.

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NOTES

1. Studs Terkel, *Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel About the American Obsession* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 4.
2. Peter Drucker, *The Effective Executive* (New York: Harper Business, 1967; reprint 1993), 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 6.
4. Jo Kadlecek, "Plain Vanilla Christianity," *Ministries Today*, November/December 1996, 34–41.