OVERVIEW

The article, "Exorcising an American Demon," makes a substantial contribution to the issue of racism from a faith perspective. The authors' thesis is that racism is neither an individual problem, nor simply an institutional problem. The racism transcends the behavior of the individual person. Racism is not limited to the bigotry and prejudices of individuals. Racism is power plus prejudice, but racism is also something more than this. A dimension lost in many discussions of racism is that of spiritual forces.

Racism is not just a secular problem of institutional inequality and bias. Racism, as Wylie-Kellermann makes clear, has a spiritual component. He categorizes racism, using Walter Wink's terminology, as a principality and power. The influence of a principality and power is both spiritual and temporal. The reality of the power of racism is grounded in the institutions of our culture and society, including the church. The power of racism to oppress humanity and to defy human solution is a spiritual force. Wylie-Kellermann argues that the only proper and effective context for confronting racism is within the life and worship of the church. The new life of the Christian community, especially signified through the sacrament of Baptism, is the only means of confronting the spiritual and temporal power of racism.

The author suggests that racism must be seen as idolatry. He writes, "When [people] elevate any human or historical factor to so great a height that it has the power to give substance and direction to all cultural institutions, no matter what the raison d'être, that human or historical factor has become a god. Self worth and meaning, he says, must be found in God alone, putting value in or on anything brings the bondage of sin and death.

When whiteness is depended on and taken advantage of, people of color are hurt and devalued. Ultimately everyone ends up losing something. He writes, "Those of us who enjoy privilege on the basis of race, or who seek justification there, are truly pathetic victims, cut of from the rich gifts of
our own humanity. We are also cut off, not incidentally, from the richness of our own histories and cultures "all sold for a mess of whiteness."

The article makes two important contributions to the discussion of racism. The first is the manner in which he casts the issue of racism as a power with both spiritual and temporal components. And he does so in a manner that bridges the philosophical divides within the Christian community. Neither the liberal view of racism as the manifestation unjust economic, legal, and political systems that can be cured by political methods through systemic change of the social order nor the conservative view of racism as a personal issue that can be cured by conversion are adequate. Defining racism with an empowered-spiritual context provides the Christian community with a the means of confronting racism and acting on racism beyond our typical narrow and self-serving theological definitions.

The second contribution of Wylie-Kellerman's article is to center the response to racism within the life of the church. He sees worship and prayer as foundations upon which racism can be confronted. In this analysis, Wylie-Kellerman draws heavily upon the work of Aidan Kavanaugh's, especially his classic work, Liturgical Theology. Liturgy is not only the presentation of our doctrine; it also informs and forms our doctrine. Liturgy and prayer represents what we believe to be true. Wylie-Kellerman extends Kavanaugh's position of liturgy forming theology to the issue of our social relations within the church and within society. As our liturgy serves to model what we accept in faith as the intended form of creation, our prayer and worship serve to train us in our social relationship as well as strengthen us to combat racism on a systematic level. The individual or institutional definitions of racism often leave us without effective starting points. Grounding our response to racism in the life of worship and prayer of our community provides a practical, achievable, and yet immensely powerful weapon for the church.

We question whether Wylie-Kellerman's analysis of racism adequately considers the potential implications of his thesis. At question is the author's concept of church. Wylie-Kellerman's thesis is predicated on the position that the church alone has the spiritual resources to combat racism. The author states such in defining racism as a principality and power. Humanity does not have the power to combat these forces without grace and grace that is experienced through the full life of the ecclesial community. This
position is remarkably similar to the social ethic developed by Hauerwas and Willimon's in their book, *Resident Aliens*. The church finds its social ethic strictly in being the church. The potential exists in these similar positions to become an isolationist church: a church that separates itself from the wider society and retreat in upon itself. This tendency does not negate Wylie-Kellerman's position, but it suggests confronting racism must be done with care to avoid this pitfall. The engagement with racism as a temporal and spiritual power for Christians must begin within the prayer and worship life of the faith community. But confronting racism, we insist, requires moving beyond the community of faith. It requires engagement with the secular aspects of society, to confront the inequality and injustices of racism. We do not argue the ultimacy, but we do accept the significance of the secular civil rights movement. Communities of faith should complement the efforts of secular society. Only in this way can the church fulfill its mission to love one's neighbor and society receive full benefit of the "salt and light" function of spiritual institutions.

The author concludes his article insisting that racism must be attacked in the very worship of the Church. "In worship. Under the sign and hope of resurrection. In freedom from the power of death. Where the principalities are already declared undone."

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

- How do you understand the spiritual element of racism?
- What are some specific ways in which your church can use prayer and worship to engage racism? How can you take this engagement into the world?
- How is racism an American demon?
- In what ways do you see the spiritual principalities and powers at work in the world around you in regards to racism?
- How would you go about challenging the strongholds of racism in the church and in the world? What is the cost of doing so? Are you willing to pay what it costs?

**IMPLICATIONS**

- Many agree that the answer to everything is education. This article is important because it brings to light a part of racism that must be
overtaken on our knees.

- Remembering the basic premise of this article, to see racism with both a physical and a spiritual eye, will be key as one works for solution to this problem.

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