

Down With The Honky Christ—Up With The Funky Jesus

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Most white people understand what a black person means when he calls someone a "honky." If they can't define it verbally they feel what it means—oppressor, bigot, slave-trader, exploiter, and in many ways, middle-class. A honky belongs to the status quo, the safe, the comfortable. "Funky," on the other hand, may be a new term to many of you. In black parlance funky often has certain positive connotations. For example, if I call a song funky I mean that either voice or instrument stepped creatively from behind the strictures of the notes, boldly and freely authenticating his or her own soul in the rendition of the number. Funky stands opposite to honky—liberated, authentic, creative.

These two adjectives used in relation to the Gospel incarnate in Jesus pinpoint the problem I see in traditional evangelical circles, black or white. We and our leaders have been preaching a honky Christ to a world hungry for the funky Jesus of the Bible. The honky Christ stands with the status quo, the funky Jesus moves apart from the ruling religious system. Jesus stood with and for the poor and oppressed and disinherited. He came for the sick and needy.

Jesus announced his call in Luke 4:16-20. God's spirit was upon him "to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Nothing else is added to the call. He closed the book, gave it to the attendant, and sat down. And to ensure that his audience understood why he read that passage, he added, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Christ never strayed from the focus of his call. When people questioned his messiahship such as John did in prison, Jesus confidently pointed to his work among the

unloved: "the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor hear good news."

Most Christian black theologians today would agree that ministry to the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed defines Christ's life on earth. The best adjective to describe it for me is funky, and the best symbol for his life is black. In our culture black has meant nigger, outcast, leper. In a way the Old Testament Hebrews were niggers. James Cone in *Black Theology and Black Power* approaches this when he says, "To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are." Black is the antithesis of white, and since the founding of our nation (even though black people aided the revolution—see page 10), black has symbolized the outsider.

If Christ was called to the poor and oppressed, as the Bible indicates, then that is also the call of his followers. And if black (or funky) is in our culture the most basic image for that group of people, then that call is to be black theologically. Someone has said that all persons seek to be equal to their superiors. That is the world's way; Christ's way is just the reverse. He came into the world as the ultimate "nigger" of the universe. He moved to the bottom of the social order, and his people and his culture rejected him. Christ's situation sounds like that of Any Black Person, Anywhere, U.S.A., giving added weight and validity to the symbol of a black Christ. In a deeper sense, however, Christ Jesus became blacker than black since "he was made sin for us." And he died on the cross, a death reserved for the niggers of his day. The system sought to lock him eternally in that despised, black status—damned forever.

Just as Jesus moved to the bottom of the social order, voluntarily giving up heaven for us, we as his followers are to move to the bottom of the social order—to become niggers with him. The black Christ calls the world to become black, to deny everything for what can only be a nigger's death—the cross. The black church sings a song like no one else: "Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free?" And we come back with,

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“No! There is a cross for everyone, and there is a cross for me.” To be black theologically is to join yourself to Jesus and his cross.

Black Christians must consciously choose to be black. Our skin color does not automatically make us black theologically. The siren call of the system to move up the social ladder and out from among the poor means death. Theological blackness is a spiritual challenge for all, white and black, and is similar to that Paul gave the Jews in Romans 2:28 and 29.

The challenge Jesus brings to white Christians is to deny their theological whiteness. Just as black is the best symbol for Jesus’ ministry in our culture, so white or honky symbolizes what Jesus fought against. Theological whiteness frustrates and denies Christ’s call and his methods. Each one of us is tempted to become white, as Moses (Heb. 11:24, 25) was tempted to remain within the Egyptian power structure.

If what I have described is the authentic call of Jesus through his Gospel, what is it that we evangelicals have been preaching? I said at the outset that we have been preaching a honky Christ to a hungry world. This honky Christ has no content; he does not come to the dispossessed. We preach a honky Christ of easy salvation. Specialists in getting quick, easy decisions for a strange, mystical, theologically white Christ are rapidly increasing. These persons peddle a Jesus easy to accept, a Jesus who demands very little commitment of energy, money, life.

The honky Jesus does not come down from heaven to the lowest social stratum, but grabs greedily upwards for the good things in life—at least that’s the conclusion we could draw if we look at how some of his followers act. I seriously question the nebulous, almost contentless “Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” present in some prominent evangelistic efforts. The Gospel, we are told, means personal salvation and little beyond that. We do not hear about Jesus’ uncompromising commitment to liberation from all oppressive, satanic forces. The only cross in the honky gospel is the one on which Christ died. There is little mention of the crosses he carried before he shouldered the last one, or of the crosses he expects us to lift.

I sometimes get the impression that such an inoffensive Christ jumped off a mountain and impaled himself on the cross so that people could have someone to invite into their hearts as saviour. A person has only to pause, pray the prayer of faith, receive some minimal instruction, and then continue his life. The primary requirements for the new life shared with the new believers are: read your Bible, pray, attend church, and tell someone else about Christ. There is no call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. The only call this gospel makes is to personal pietism. Sin, repentance, conversion, and the new life are dealt with almost exclusively in vertical dimensions. The horizontal dimensions of the Gospel are presented as optional, not intrinsic to it.

That is what frustrated some of us who attended the International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne, Switzerland, in July, 1974. Donald McGavran

of Fuller Seminary clearly articulated the position held by the majority of black and white evangelical leaders present. He said, “The conditions for conversion are only three—repentance, belief on the Lord Jesus, and baptism” (*Let the Earth Hear His Voice*). The wise evangelist, he continued, “intends that becoming a Christian should always be seen as quite simply—trusting Jesus and being arrayed in his righteousness.” From what was presented as evangelism, one would never know that the call of the Gospel is to join the black nigger Jesus at the very bottom of the social order. We cannot be content to be white niggers, but must go all the way to become black niggers with him.

We evangelicals need to develop a supportive community to present an effective alternative way of life to the disinherited. And this community needs to be practical and physical as well as spiritual. As one works among the poor, the necessity of a new financial base becomes



apparent. The system that relates to the poor only from a questionable base of charity will never suffice, for such charity is designed not to liberate the poor and make them self-sustaining, contributing members of society (as in Second Corinthians 8:14) but to keep them in a state of dependency. New structures providing greater resources are needed. Christ’s disciples must develop the means to provide, not all, but some of all the goods and services required by the poor. These services should include such establishments as newspaper and hot dog stands, bakeries, stores that sell groceries, hardware, clothing, furniture and appliances, automobile, electrical, plumbing, remodeling, and construction services, shoe repair and pawn shops, finance and insurance companies, educational and banking institutions (see the interview with John Perkins of Voice of Calvary, page 8, for information about a black organization developing these kinds of services). If there were banking institu-

tions for the specific purpose of serving the poor, then commercial banks could not so easily red-line poor housing areas. It seems to me that for maximum benefit to the community, some if not all of such businesses and services should be profit-making. Christians engaged in this type of work would not engage in profiteering, a common practice in poor communities. And profits made would provide additional capital to expand and provide other needed services, rather than to make individuals wealthy.

From such practical models, Christians would be able to affect the way secular businesses relate to poor communities. The scope and quality of influence would be in direct proportion to the breadth and diversity of business in which Christ's people are involved. We would become what Christ called us to be—salt, leaven, God's agents of influence on the larger society. We would also become light, God's city sitting on a hill and visible to all. Our children would no longer have to follow the world's corrupt system in respect to models of business, or to search for opportunities to use administrative and business skills. We could challenge the next generation to commit the whole of their lives to validating Christ's presence to the poor in a concrete, tangible way.

Such a comprehensive life of faith would call for new approaches to Christian education, evangelism, and mission. Christian education would move from the classroom into the street to provide feet, legs, hands, and arms to the knowledge we put into minds. Similarly, evangelism would become total biblical social evangelism. Daily physical contact with both new creatures and new works in Christ would draw people to ask with the Philippian jailor, "What must I do to be saved?" And we could direct them to believe on Jesus, convinced that the deeper implications of his call helped to bring them to their decision.

Every believer must be involved in mission. White people would tell other whites caught in the system that Christ liberates and that he has chosen the poor. This is essential, since the decisions affecting the poor are made not in the inner city, but in the primarily white-controlled social structure. Blacks would tell their people outside the system that the Gospel liberates them from the need to get into the "inner ring."

I do not have a problem *per se* with someone who is called to minister to the rich, to suburbanites, to urban high-rise apartment dwellers. But I want to know that he or she is working for a new community that calls those persons to use their resources to help the powerless and oppressed. Understandably, to minister to certain people one may be required to live a relatively comparable lifestyle. But Christ told us how to test our attitudes in any community: "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

When I say, "down with the honky Christ and up with the funky Jesus," then, I am suggesting not that we change Jesus but that we see him as he is. He moved creatively from behind the strictures of the religion of his day and obeyed God by serving the causes of justice, mercy, and faith. As his followers we dare not do less. □

The Mendenhall Model Answers The Black Muslims

In 1960 a recently converted black man moved his family from California back to Mendenhall, Mississippi, to which he had sworn never to return. He had left years before after his brother was shot by a policeman and killed outside the Negro entrance to a movie theater. The killing was never reported, then a frequent practice in Mississippi when black people were murdered. But John Perkins heard and answered God's call to return to a society that still oppressed the black community. During the years since he returned Perkins has planned and built a pilot community called Voice of Calvary, which includes a health center, a gym, a library, and a Bible institute. He was persecuted during the civil-rights era. He was arrested while trying to post bail for a friend and colleague and nearly died from a police beating; he spent six months in a hospital recuperating from his night in jail. "Even then," says Perkins, "when my circumstances shouted defeat, I felt undefeated." God gave this man a resilient spirit and a broad vision of helping his black brothers and of healing the wounds of white-black tensions. An able administrator, Perkins says that he takes a positive outlook. And anyone who spends even a short time with him cannot long remain pessimistic about race problems.

Perkins spoke at last year's Evangelicals for Social Action workshop, where tensions between black and white participants dominated much of the meeting. Our interview, an edited version of which follows, was conducted at that workshop. Perkins, his large hands extended in front of him and his glasses resting on the end of his nose, explained what he and his black and white staff members were doing in Mississippi to bring the whole Gospel to those in the Southern rural black community.

Question. Is the white community still listening to blacks?

Answer. No. To a certain degree blacks have had their chance to speak. I don't know whether the white community will listen any more or will hear what blacks are saying. The confrontation period is over, and since there's little open violence between whites and blacks, white people see no need to listen. We need some kind