The White Problem

Once upon a time there was a kingdom of people who pursued happiness. Nothing was more important to them than being happy. And the happier they became, the happier they wanted to be.

The source of the people’s happiness was a Happiness Machine. Whenever the people felt unhappy they would pour their troubled feelings into the Happiness Machine. The Machine would melt their feelings down and purify them. The residue of troubles became dross, and the dross was drained away and dumped in a distant area of the kingdom. The people would take their purified feelings and go away happy again.

There was only one difficulty. A small group of people lived in the distant part of the kingdom where all the dross was being dumped. These people were very unhappy. The more dross that was dumped, the more unhappy the people became. But these poor unhappy people were not permitted to use the Happiness Machine because it was not able to purify its own dross.
As time went by, the happy people wanted to become even more happy. So they made the machine work even harder and consequently produced more dross. Soon they had to build more machines to take care of the happiness needs of the people. And the dross was piled higher and higher. And the unhappy people became unhappier and unhappier.

Since the unhappy people lived so far away, the happy people were not often aware of their existence and much less aware of the problems caused by the dross. Whenever the happy people were confronted by the terrible results of their happiness, they took their troubled feelings to the Happiness Machine and it made them feel happy again. It was easy to forget that it was the dross of their own troubles that made the remote people unhappy. And they considered the unhappy people as incurably unhappy, and believed that they had nobody but themselves to blame for their own unhappiness.

The happy people would never have realized that they were the cause of the unhappy people's troubles, nor that their own happiness was dependent on the unhappiness of others. They would never have become free of their self-deception and enslavement to the machine, if one day the dross had not piled up so high, backed up into the Happiness Machine, and blown them all to kingdom come.

Not a Minority Problem
To begin with, we have been trying to change the wrong people. Almost all of our nation's social and political actions have been aimed at changing minority people and changing conditions within the minority communities. Concerned white people, firmly believing that racial problems must be solved and that racial conflicts must be reconciled, have devoted time, effort, and money to help red people, brown people, and black people with their problems. The churches, the government, the universities, and many other groups have worked hard at helping minority people change. But little progress has been made because we have been trying to change the wrong people.

Through subtle conditioning forces we have been made to believe that the source of our racial problems is in the minority ghetto and that the solutions to these problems can also be discovered in the minority ghetto. In addition, we have believed that the white society has the will and ability to assist in the discovery and applications of these solutions. But the problem is not in the ghetto; the problem is in the dross and in the Happiness Machines that produce the dross. The machines belong to us and they work for us; their job is to make us happy. And while they are making us happy, they never stop dumping their dross on the minority people of America.

The actual Happiness Machines are the structures and the institutions of the white society. They produce milk and bread, law and order. And they produce dross. They produce segregated ghettos, deteriorated housing, unemployment and underemployment, poor schools and poverty. The very same institutions that create and sustain our standards of living also create and perpetuate the wretched conditions in the minority communities of our country.

We have seen the results of our dross many times. During
the last 20 years we have been confronted with the problems of minority people in hundreds of ways. On TV and radio and in newspapers, we watched marches, demonstrations, riots; through books, lectures, and interracial encounters, the painfully oppressive conditions of minority life have been thrust before us. But we have not been confronted in the same way with the cause of these conditions. No one has made us see that the forces responsible for these problems are the same forces that sustain our own lives. No one has made us see that the minority conditions in America are a direct product of our own struggle for happiness. It should not be surprising, therefore, that all our efforts to solve the problems of minorities have caused so much frustration and met with so little lasting success. We have tried to eliminate the effects of the dross without cutting off its flow.

For example, we have tried to provide programs of remedial education for children in dismally inadequate ghetto schools, rather than seeking to change the educational system itself. In like manner we have been trying to provide remedial programs to compensate for the unemployment, underemployment, poor housing, political powerlessness, poverty, and poor health of minority people, rather than seeking to change and reconstruct, if necessary, the institutions of white America which make political powerlessness, poverty, and poor health the enforced route of minority persons.

What makes it even more complicated is that the responsibility for developing and administering these remedial programs has been assigned to the very same institutions which are already responsible for creating and perpetuating the problem. It is as though an airplane were spraying poison gas over a city, causing the inhabitants to be sick and die. The owners of the airplane, in response to the protests of the people who are being poisoned, will neither admit that they are doing the gassing nor promise to stop. They do, however, commit themselves to developing an antidote to the gas. While the antidote is being developed, the gassing continues. When the antidote is ready, the pilot of the airplane is directed by the owner to spray it together with the poison gas the next time he flies over.

The antidotes which have been created in our society go by such names as Race Relations Sunday, Brotherhood Week, civil rights bills, integration efforts, urban renewal, public welfare, public housing, Headstart, wars on poverty, and employment training. Some of these programs, in spite of their misdirection, are well-designed and effectively carried out. At best they even give the impression of progress and change. Yet most of them are intended only to compensate for evil and to counter the effects of evil, but not to get at and prevent the evil at its source. The worst part is that by giving the image of bringing change, they actually perpetuate the destructive forces which they were supposedly created to eliminate.

While it is true that thousands of minority people have been assisted in escaping ghetto conditions and moving into the mainstream of American life, the conditions they left behind remain unchanged, and the millions of people who remain there have barely noticed the absence of a few thousand fortunates. To us it may be an indication of progress that black and brown faces appear in increasing numbers on our TV screens, in our neighborhoods and churches, in political offices and in business and industry. But all our efforts to re-educate and em-
ploy have barely been successful in keeping up with the fresh supply of undereducated and unemployed persons. The result is that programs designed primarily to change minority people and the conditions of minority communities have not accomplished their purpose, but have only managed to prolong the status quo.

At the end of 1970, the white man's income was still almost twice that of the black man's, just as it was in 1950. The percentage of black unemployment remains consistently double that of white. The housing shortage—most severe in its effects on minorities—has become worse. Civil rights legislation, supposedly the legal machinery for overcoming the injustices worked upon minorities, has been unenforced according to a 1970 study by the United States Commission on civil rights. Interracial feelings and attitudes have become immeasurably worse both in minority and white communities; fear, mistrust, and hostility predominate on both sides. The present calm and relative cessation of violence is not a sign of peace, but the silence of aggravated non-communication—the eerie serenity within the eye of a hurricane.

If we were to double or even triple the efforts behind our minority assistance programs, we might be able to show some statistical progress beyond the maintenance of the status quo. But even then, the real result would be to set two forces of the white society further in competition with each other: the force which creates and perpetuates inhuman conditions in minority communities, and the force which tries to correct the first set of conditions. Thus the sickness itself, which is not in the minority community but in the white community, goes unchallenged because we are trying to change the wrong people.

America's racial problem is not a minority problem: it is a majority problem. The cause is in the white society; the effects are felt in the minority community. The problems of minority people are only the symptoms of white America's sickness. The white society owns the minority ghettos of America; we control them, maintain them, and condone them. What happens in the ghetto is determined by what happens in the white community, in the institutions and agencies of white America which cause and perpetuate the problems of minority life. All the programs in the world aimed at changing minority people and the conditions of the minority community will be useless because they do not change the institutions and structures that create and control the conditions in the first place. The truth of this is very hard for us white people to accept because our own happiness and the style of life to which we have become accustomed depends on these institutions and structures remaining unchanged.

Identifying the Disease

The name by which this white problem must be called is racism. To call it anything else is to avoid the real problem. And the fact is that there is no problem that we would more like to avoid facing than the problem of white racism. Why else, for example, do nine out of ten discussions of the subject begin with such phrases as, "Now I'm no racist, but . . ."; "I don't have anything against Negroes, but . . ."; "What about black racism?"; "It's not a problem of racism, but of economics, or politics, or sociology." There is no other accurate
designation that is less offensive. There is no way to approach the subject indirectly. It is the unique problem of white America; it is white racism.

For a brief period of time in 1968, the issue of white racism was brought into the daylight and talked about by the U.S. Riot Commission, appointed by President Johnson to investigate the violence and revolt in our urban black ghettos. The Commission reported that the major cause of urban unrest is the racism in the white society. Although the riot commission dealt directly with the subject in only a few sentences of a 600 page report, these brief statements caused a furore among white Americans: “What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that the white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it and white society condones it. White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has accumulated in our cities since the end of World War II.”

The response to these statements was something akin to the public exposure of a family scandal. Shock, anger, and denial came first, and then the matter was quickly hushed up, and the Riot Commission's report was largely ignored. Even concerned liberals, who at first rejoiced at the opportunity to deal with racism more openly, were soon agreeing that discussing racism openly only produces negative reaction among whites and becomes counterproductive. Their suggested solution was to deal with other issues, and at the same time use these issues to get at racism in a more indirect manner.

Very quickly, the issue of racism was dropped in favor of new issues and activities such as environment, university revolt, and sensitivity training. Certainly these are important, but when they are used as alternatives to dealing with racism because it is thought to be “too hot to handle,” then these issues become diversions, fads which will also be deserted when another new fad comes along.

We should not be frightened by the exposure of our white racism. Rather we should thank God and celebrate that the truth has been brought to light. If a man is seriously ill, and doctor after doctor incorrectly diagnoses the sickness and prescribes the wrong medicine, allowing the illness to become worse, that is a tragedy. But if a doctor finally comes along and correctly identifies the illness and prescribes the proper medicine for a cure, then it is time for a celebration. The name of the illness is “white racism”—a hard fact to accept and a harder fact to change—but at least it is out in the open. Now we know what the illness is; the possibility of new health is there if we take seriously the diagnosis and develop proper treatment.

The White Man Needs Freeing

With the development of black power in 1967 and 1968 came new hostility and further separation between black and white people. This time the antagonism was mostly between the black and white people working hardest for change—those who had been holding hands and singing “black and white together” for so long in the earlier civil rights movement. The slogan which more than anything else symbolized the new division was spoken by militant black leaders: “White man, if you really want to help, go home and free your own
people!" The hostility and rejection which well-intentioned white people felt in the statement caused immense frustration. It meant we weren’t wanted; it meant we were in the way. We didn’t like being forced out of the black community; we didn’t like being grouped together with all other white men and judged as racists. And we certainly didn’t like seeing the racial barriers growing even higher and higher, with the hostility, hatred, and fear increasing on all sides.

What we didn’t realize at the time, but what has become much clearer since then, is that we were not so much being rejected as we were being given a push in the right direction. With a kind of realism and honesty not often possible in human relations, and especially not in public dialog, a game we were playing was exposed. The game of white men trying to change minority people was not only useless, it was dishonest. What was news to us, but what had been well known among minority people for centuries, is that the white man and the white society need to be changed. We were not just pushed out of the black community; we were being pushed into the white community to go home and “free our own people.”

Behind this statement is an assumption that is very strange to us. It is that white people, along with the oppressed minority, are not free: our individual racism and our participation in corporate racist actions result in the enslavement of others. The major thesis with which this book approaches the subject of racism is based on this strange assumption: personally and corporately we white Americans are enslaved in racism and must be set free. As white, middle-class citizens we do not want to be racist oppressors, but we are! Against our own conscious wills, we are participants in the corporate actions of a society which victimizes its minority people. Without conscious awareness or decision, we were made into persons whose thoughts, feelings, values, and actions are racist.

The white oppressor is himself oppressed; the enslaver is among the enslaved. The imprisoner is imprisoned; the victimizer victimized. He is a prisoner in the racist structures of American society, and he needs to be set free.

In our white American mentality nothing could be more abrasive to us than the idea that we are not free. Our attempts to resolve racial conflicts have been based on the assumption that we are free, and minority people need to become free like us. We have wanted to help them “come up to our level.” When we talk about equality we mean we want them to be equal to us. All of these goals indicate that we are not aware of needing freedom ourselves; we are not aware that we, too, as well as minority people, are oppressed.

Likewise, as Americans, we sing and speak and pray about ourselves as people who are already free, whose freedom is already attained and needs only to be preserved with vigilance and shared with missionary zeal. We are the people who have fought off oppression and gained independence. Ours is the land of the free and the home of the brave. We should give thanks to God at least every fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day that we are “free, white, and 21**, and that we do not have to struggle for our freedom like most other people in the world.
The Gospel of Liberation

Contrary to what the church actually teaches, white Christians seldom identify with oppressed people or identify themselves as oppressed. The need for “rescue,” “salvation,” and “redemption” is usually limited to the spiritual realms of life, and even then it is treated more as a calmly accepted reality than as a passionate hope or an exciting surprise. Aspiration for a better life in the future is more often than not replaced by satisfaction for the way of life as it is right now. Freedom is defined in political and economic terms rather than theological, thus creating two kinds of religion: the religion of the rich who have already been redeemed, and the religion of the poor who still await their redemption.

But there is only one Christianity, not two. And the Christian is deceived whose primary identity is not with the oppressed. The gospel of Jesus Christ is, and always has been a means of freedom for enslaved people. Jesus Christ lived and died for the sake of the downtrodden, the poverty stricken, the suffering, the sick and the dying—all who were and are now the oppressed. When Jesus preached his first sermon, he announced the purpose of his ministry by quoting from the prophet Isaiah:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, He has anointed me to preach the Good News to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set free the oppressed, To announce the year when the Lord will save his people.”

Not only the ministry of Jesus, but the actions of God throughout history, as recorded in the Old and New Testaments, were almost always reported in terms of liberating oppressed people. Moses was sent to free the Hebrew people from enslavement in Egypt. Isaiah proclaimed comfort and release to the captives of Babylon. The prophets were sent to demand justice for the poor who were being oppressed by rich countrymen. The psalmist prayed for rescue from his enemies and tormentors. St. Paul and the early Christians discovered and celebrated their liberation from the law, from sin, death, and the devil. And when they were harassed, imprisoned, and killed by their Roman rulers, they looked forward to their ultimate liberation in the new Jerusalem.

The Christian gospel has not changed. It is the same today as it always has been. It is a gospel of liberation for oppressed people. It is good news to the poverty stricken in the ghettos of our land. It is the proclamation of liberty to the captives in our prisons and on our reservations. It is sight for the blind, strength for the lame, community for the lonely. It is freedom for the oppressed people of America and the world. And it must be doubly emphasized: that is all the gospel there is! There are not two gospels—one for those who are down and out and one for those who are up and about. There is not one Christianity for those who need freedom and one for those who don’t. There is one gospel of Jesus Christ: it is the gospel of liberation offered to those who identify with the oppressed.

This does not mean, however, that the liberation is only for the poor, black, and powerless, and not for white middle class suburbanites. White middle class suburbanites need to be liberated as much as anyone
else. You and I must consider ourselves oppressed people. Not only are we enslaved to false values, greed, callousness, exploitive powers, and corruption, but we are being oppressed and harassed by many of the same dehumanizing forces of our society that beset those who are not white and middle class. Under our facades of security, respectability, and righteousness, there lies the reality of our brokenness, our fear, and our uncertainty.

As white middle class Americans, we can understand freedom only in so far as we identify ourselves with the oppressed. And one of the indicators of our oppression is our racism. Just as minority people of our country have been subjected to the evils of a racist system, we have been imprisoned within and made participants of that racist system. The depth of our enslavement can be seen in our inability to be consciously aware of our racism; we think of ourselves as being already free. But it is only when we identify ourselves as being among the enslaved and oppressed that freedom becomes a possibility for us.

"White man, go home and free your own people," means our people are not free. For our own sake, not just for the sake of minority people, we need to know we are enslaved by our racism and a host of other dehumanizing forces which we accept as normal and harmless. To oppose racism and to seek elimination of this evil in America includes first of all liberating our white sisters and brothers. And this requires that we understand the nature of our oppression and enslavement in racism, which is the task of the following chapters.

The Comfortable Prison

There are, then, two prisons created by racism, not just one. The first is familiar: the prison of the oppressed minority. It is the uncomfortable, poverty haunted ghetto. The inmates are black and Puerto Rican people in the inner city, native American Indians on the worthless arid desert, Mexican Americans in the cities and towns of the Southwest, and migrant workers wherever cheap stoop labor is required on American farms. Unless we have been totally deaf and blind to the media exposure given to this uncomfortable prison over the last ten years of social turmoil and racial conflict, its existence and conditions are already well-known to us.

The second prison is that of the white majority. For a prison it is deceivingly comfortable and disarmingly warm and friendly: but it is a prison nevertheless. You and I are its inmates, and it exists wherever we live, learn, work, and play. The walls of this prison are the residential, institutional, and cultural walls of white America. Inside these walls racism is systematically produced and perpetuated in white Americans. Its bars may