

## **Remember the past...Change the future** by Dan Adler

A few years ago, I went with my wife and some friends to see the movie, "**Remember the Titans**". I thought it was a great movie. If you haven't seen it, it was one of those great underdog sports movies, where the guys that they thought couldn't win ultimately triumph. Like the formulaic "Rocky" and it's multitudes of sequels, I find that I'm always a sucker for these kinds of plots. This one was even better because it was based on a true story.

But this story had a much deeper, much more disturbing and moving subplot than just an underdog football team triumphing. This movie was about racism -- white on black. It took place in the 1960's at a time when desegregation was being put into place. A black coach was brought in to coach the football team. Formerly all white communities were suddenly dealing with African Americans going to school with their white kids. In the movie, as in real life, there was a great uproar in the white community. *Even though it had been almost a hundred years since a civil war was fought primarily over the issue of slavery, and slaves were freed, African Americans still had to face incredible insults, condescension, hostility and violence -- simply because of the color of their skin.*

These things disturb me greatly. I find myself crying a lot when watching such realities acted out in a movie. **But what disturbs me much, much more, on a much deeper level, is that many of the most hostile white people, in this movie and in real life, called themselves Christians.** Not only did they call themselves Christians, but they were pastors and elders and deacons, committed members and pillars in the church. This makes me shake and this makes me weep. This makes me call out to God for forgiveness and mercy upon us for tolerating and even fostering such evil in His Church.

Now as white people, we tend to forget the past pretty quickly. Or we have a much prettier view of the past. Or we separate ourselves from the past because we weren't personally involved in that part of it. *But it's clear that this is not the worldview of most of our African American brothers and sisters.*

When I was in elementary school in the '60's as a white boy in an all white town, living a quiet, peaceful life, there were African American boys and girls my age in other towns in this country who had to be afraid of bricks being thrown through their windows because of their skin color. They had to worry about their churches being burned. They had to endure being condescended to, called degrading names and having many white "Christians" treat them with hatred. **While neither my parents or grandparents made much money, they never had a story to tell of how the color of their skin affected their employment or caused them to be afraid.** Yet I can be sure that these other boys and girls, the same age as I, growing up in this same country, had to hear about and watch their parents and grandparents struggle for decent employment and fair treatment simply because of the color of their skin. They had to see their community norms be that of poverty and striving that would tear families and marriages apart. They had to have the possibilities of lynchings, attacks, and unjust treatment by white people hang over their heads.

The past isn't far away. In fact it is chillingly close. The events portrayed in this movie were happening during my childhood and adolescence. And for our African American brothers and sisters, it still affects them today.

Society has changed in many ways. Many of these blatant racist evils that were still so common in the sixties are mostly absent today. Sports teams are now not only integrated, but are dominated by the immense talents of African Americans. African Americans are recognized leaders and innovators in music and entertainment, and are enormously successful. African Americans now hold positions at every level in almost every institution in society.

***But what really disturbs me is that most of the changes that have taken place since the sixties have had very little, if anything, to do with the "white" church.*** Black church leaders had to fight with almost no support from, and often with opposition from, the white church for basic civil rights during the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King, Jr. Organizations like the National Association of Evangelicals refused to support the civil rights movement -- causing a great wound in the hearts of their evangelical African American brothers and sisters. For many, this wound remains deep and unhealed to this day, and causes many African American believers to feel extreme distrust and self-protection towards white evangelicals in particular. Secular political leaders have had much more to do with any positive societal changes than the "white" church has. **And now, though the "white" church is not openly racist** (except in some extreme situations), **it seems that we've only quietly morphed into something that's just simply more "tolerant".**

Not until 1990's did the Southern Baptist Church (which I think has many great and wonderful things happening in it to the glory of God) publicly confess it's sin of having it's very foundations as a denomination being based on it's demand to keep slaves and not allow blacks in it's churches. **Not until the middle 1990's did this happen!!** Only a few years ago, under great political pressure, did Bob Jones University (whom many of us could agree with on many evangelical, Biblical core beliefs) stop it's rule against inter-racial dating -- but even that was done with no acknowledgement of wrongdoing. At one point, they didn't even allow African Americans in their school. They have held incredible racist beliefs at the very foundations of their institution. These are just a couple of examples. But this isn't some long distant past, this is now.

**Here in Minnesota, it seems that we just cordially stay away from each other.** Although a few of our congregations are somewhat racially diverse, most of us are completely racially separated. We don't share or probably even understand each other's life experiences or worldviews because we don't interact. We don't advocate for each other's issues because they don't affect us or anyone we know.

So the Church moves on contentedly in our ethnically divided corners. It seems that secular politics end up bringing more salt and light into our culture in the areas of social justice and change than the Church does.

But as we've said so many times, this is not what God has called us to. He has called us to be the light of the world. ***We are called to lead the way in servanthood, righteousness, goodness***

*and love.* Our love for one another is how the world will know that we are Christians. And our unity is the sign to the world that Jesus was sent from the Father.

In the movie "Remember the Titans", black and white players began to not only function together as a team, but they grew to become best friends as they abandoned their prejudices, worked together, got to know one another and saw what strengths they had to offer to each other. *They began to be part of each others' lives and families.* Out of that radical change, they became a winning team. They became stronger than all the other teams and they won their battles. **THAT'S WHAT THE CHURCH HAS GOT TO DO!!**

Thankfully things have improved in our society. But we need to look clearly at what still needs to be done and begin to function as the true Church of Jesus Christ, and lead the way in righteousness and justice instead of dragging behind with prejudice or complacency. **Let us vow to lead the way in racial healing, understanding and love.** Let us vow to never again let ethnicity or the color of our skin divide us. Let us vow to see all Christians as our brothers and as an intimate part of ourselves. Let us pick up the responsibility for change and the call of servanthood on our lives. **And let us remember and take responsibility for the past and do all that we can to change the future.**