

Reflections on My Southern Heritage

M. Wayne Benson, 10-23-2017

I turn seventy-one this week. And my wife and family will soon be preparing a nice dinner to celebrate my entrance into the valley of the “ancient of days.” Every birthday causes one to reflect. This year, with the constant drumbeat of division in our nation, my reflections have been a bit deeper.

During our fifty years of marriage, my wife and I have relocated thirteen times in response to our divine calling to ministry. We’ve now lived in Michigan, Ohio, Missouri, and Alabama and currently reside in Midland City, Alabama. It’s about as “deep south” as you can get – about 20 minutes from both the Georgia and Florida state lines.

Though my childhood plus about thirty years of ministry were spent in Michigan, I grew up with a sense of “inherited pride” about my Southern heritage. After all my father was born and raised in Huntsville, Alabama. My mother’s family, my loving grandparents lived in Hannibal, where I was born and raised until about three years of age. It was my father’s search for a job after World War II that moved us all to Michigan where the auto industry had started to boom.

So, most of my discovery years were in the North, but blended in with a bit of Midwest and Deep South culture through my parents and the relatives we enjoyed visiting. Looking back on those years, I saw an interesting progression of education about various issues that have surfaced division in our country – more than I’ve seen in my seventy-year span of life. My “southern pride” was pretty much an inherited idealized notion about the good things “down south.” And those good things were easy to observe during our trips to Missouri and Alabama. The pace was slower, the people were more hospitable, and the winters were definitely warmer. And, more indelible than the cultural elements were the good memories of my father’s remaining family members (his mother and father passed at an early age) in Huntsville and the great memories of my mother’s family in Hannibal.

Though the span between of our trips to Huntsville as a boy were about three to four years apart, my trips to Hannibal were an annual event, even if my parents didn’t make the trip. My grandparents would drive the 550-mile trip to Detroit to pick me up after the last day of school and allow me to spend most of my summer days in Hannibal. Summers often revolved around farming and church-going experiences. And it was always a wonderful, spiritually-enriching experience.

In spite of my positive history with the South, in recent years, I’ve had to come to grips with the clash of ideologies, racially, geographically, spiritually, and politically. Until I lived in Alabama, I was only vaguely aware of the characterization of “southerners” as backward, uneducated, racists. The terms “redneck” and “hillbillies” are pretty much derogatory words or the butt of a joke. Having lived in Huntsville, home of NASA, Redstone Arsenal, and Johnson Space Center, I was impressed with the number of PhD’s, rocket scientists and engineers in this international hub. Probably my

background in the world of education and academics made those things stand out. But, I found myself almost excusing my Alabama residency to “northerners” by reminding them of the level of education and diversity in the city. In fact, I would occasionally find myself quoting sayings I’ve heard like, “Huntsville’s not Alabama,” unconsciously distancing myself from the state where I lived, not to mention the place of my father’s family. Now that we’ve moved to the Dothan, Alabama region, I can’t say that anymore. And, I’m pretty sure God has used our move to get my attention and deal with some pride and inner conflict.

Dothan is truly the “deep south” – whatever that connotation might mean to folks. The “Wiregrass Region” as it is called would be part of what many refer to as “LA” – Lower Alabama. You can’t get much lower in latitude and still remain in the state. I never thought, in all my previous years of ministry that I would live here. And, now that I’m here, I realize what a privilege it is. Perhaps I’m just blessed to be surrounded by wonderful people – and undoubtedly a healthy church culture contributes to that notion. We couldn’t be surrounded by more loving, warm, embracing folks. The city of Dothan is neither metropolis nor Hicksville. But it is representative of a history and culture that is both revered by some and hated by others.

I didn’t know I was considered a racist until my move to Alabama. Of course, like most, I’ve had to deal with various forms of prejudice, not the least of which was racial bias. But, most of that was projected to me by media, literature or, occasionally, friends. Actually, I am grateful for a mother that would not permit racial slurs in our vocabulary nor anti-racial attitudes in our home. No, that I would now be considered a “racist” was not some sort of self-discovery, but rather because of where I live. In the Deep South, we’re not only anti-intellectual obscurantists, but also racists if we’re white. Add that to the fact that I’m an “old white guy,” I’m also swept into the category of “White Supremacist.”

Of course, those mischaracterizations and projections are their own form of prejudice, aren’t they? I’ve yet to meet any White Supremacists down here, though I’m sure they exist. No doubt a few of the pickups sporting large Confederate flags may have been driven by a racist – or was it just someone proud of their southern heritage? I personally think hoisting a symbol of what divided our country, regardless of the innocent intent, is offensive. Statues and museum pieces reflect our history, regardless of days to be cherished or days to be memorialized, but the painful reminders need not be celebrated. However, the people I hang with are pretty much like the other people I’ve known in my history of human interaction. Some are pillars of moral virtue, a few are idiots. Some are noble, others evil. Some are humble, others supercilious boors. Most are in between, leaning in either direction on any given day. I’ve had the privilege of knowing many of the noble lot.

The racial tension in our country has caused me to think more deeply about the causes that brought us to this painful time in our nation. Having grown up during the 60’s, in my teen years, I’m not a stranger to division and protests. I was in the draft of the Viet Nam war, and, fortunately was never called. Both racial and war protests characterized those

times. The war finally ended, leaving thousands of dead Americans in its wake. The racial attitudes that prevailed, however, were met by the heroism of Martin Luther King and other leaders that courageously embraced his truly American ideals. Progress was slow and painful, but the majority of Americans at least recognized it over time.

I'm not sure I see universal progress today – at least obvious enough for all to recognize. We talk about racism, but, generally, only to point fingers of accusation. No matter that facts are dismissed in favor of misleading sensationalism in the media or are advanced by political race-baiters. I long for a productive, substantive conversation. Even more so, I long for relationships initiated by people across racial and generational lines.

As I reflect on my seventy-plus years, I want so much for this country, this noble dream called America and its enshrined freedoms, to come together as “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” I'm sure there are many historians and sociologists who have better insights than me, but from my 70-year perch, I think I can see further than some. Our wounds of slavery have never been healed. Our national sin of slavery, and there are others as well, has never been fully forgiven. And, isn't it true, only God can forgive sin?

The trauma of the past includes nearly four million slaves in America prior to the Civil War. The slave industry grew to 13% of the entire population. In Alabama, there were 435,080 slaves out of a total state population of 964,201, with 35% of the families owning slaves.¹ The depravity of ideas that propped up slave trade were not forged in the American dream, a utopia where “all men are created equal.” How that sin ever wormed its way into the Christian roots of our nation is beyond me. But, once allowed, and falsely justified, it created a wound so deep that even the blood of 620,000 Union and Confederate soldiers could not fill its trenches. It's like a national case of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. It lays beneath the surface, “a root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many [are] defiled.”² It only takes a jolt, a word, a memory – and there it is again.

I've seen the entire series “Roots” multiple times in an effort to understand and appreciate the historic pain of African Americans. I've read the biographies of slaves as well as the literature and movies about white dominance and racial oppression. More importantly, I've listened to the painful recitation of the prejudice endured as black Americans, my age or older...friends who trusted me enough to allow me into their history. After all these years, I still do not have a full grasp of the heartbeat of black folk who either identify with the history of their ancestors, or remember their own experiences. I want to understand – and I want to be a healing agent. But, I think, for the most part, I can only partner with the Holy Spirit to make that happen.

¹ Civil War Home Page, www.civil-war.net

² Hebrews 12:15

I've even tried to understand how the slave states could fight a war to maintain such a hideous practice as slavery. It's like a drug cartel whose entire livelihood is built on a practice that is, at its core, evil. But, slavery, once enshrined in law, and fed by greed, became a way of life around an industry that produces products. And it's easier to justify and rationalize something legal. After all, "we brought those natives out of poverty and animism to a better life in America," and the false nobility of "we can bring them to Christianity." The mythological justifications that propped up an industry were replete during the debates over emancipation. But it was sin – not merely of the slave-traders and slave-owners, but the sins of those satisfied by and demanding more of the industry products: the cotton, the tobacco, the food people consumed both in the North and the South.

How does one fight a horrible war to maintain a national sin? As I pondered what it would be like for one part of the nation to tell the other part of the nation that they would have to give up their entire livelihood, their means of economic vitality, which now depended upon a vast network of slaves, I at least understood how the addiction to both product and money, to a national way of life, resisted the inevitable antidote. And, in some states, like my birthplace, they were eventually divided and ordered to kill their own cousins across an invisible "Mason-Dixon" line.

It is often said that the victors write the history. One would almost think that the North was simply morally superior to the South – because, after all, they fought for the righteous cause and won the war. However, the tentacles of sin had spread over the entire nation, and it took the courage of leaders like Abraham Lincoln, and the preaching of great evangelists like John Witherspoon, to prick the national conscience enough to demand change. And it was costly – sin always is.

The complexity of national sin is always impossible to resolve by men. That's why politicians, though well-intended, have never been able to assuage the guilt nor heal the wounds of our past. I am convinced this is a matter between God and His people. A spiritual awakening of America is but a macrocosm of the awakening of individual human hearts to the beckoning of the Holy Spirit. Unless we see ourselves in the reflection of the Word of God...unless we humble ourselves and seek His face...we will never see our national conscience right-side up, nor will we ever see the division in our nation healed.

It was the prophet Ezekiel who cried out, "I searched for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one."³ It would seem that a nation is destined for mutual destruction if it will not humble itself before its creator – and that only those intercessors who "build the wall" can stand against that tide of judgment.

I'm seventy-one this week. I don't know how many years God will give me as an influencing agent. But I intend to stand in the gap and lift my voice against our national

³ Ezek 22:30

sins and open my arms to those who will receive His embrace. Cursing the darkness is never as effective as turning the light on. I long for the Light and for His people to respond in the way described by the prophet Isaiah⁴:

- 1 “Arise, shine; for your light has come,
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
- 2 “For behold, darkness will cover the earth
And deep darkness the peoples;
But the Lord will rise upon you
And His glory will appear upon you.
- 3 “Nations will come to your light,
And kings to the brightness of your rising.”

There could be no greater gift that I could hope for – to pray for – than to be part of a great, worldwide revival – greater than men could take credit for, and bigger than any denomination or church could contain. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

⁴ Isaiah 60:1-3