

William E. Pannell
The Challenge of Alienation

Abstract:

We are republishing here, the first article published by an African American scholar in *The Asbury Seminarian*, the precursor to *The Asbury Journal*. This was originally published in 1969 in volume 23, number 1, pages 22-28. It is difficult to believe that such an article written fifty-three years ago should still hold so much truth relevant to today's racial issues in the Evangelical Church in the United States. In a time where we are questioning racism and policing, issues of urban violence, and the politicization of the Church, it is useful to look back and see these same issues through the lens of time.

Keywords: Black Church, Evangelicalism, racism, urbanization, policing

At the time of this article, **William E. Pannell** was an evangelistic associate with Tom Skinner Crusades (1968-1974), after serving as a director of leadership with Youth for Christ (1964-1968). He would go on to be an assistant professor of evangelism at Fuller Theological Seminary (1974-1992), the first African American to serve on their Board of Trustees (1971-1974), and later a Professor of Preaching (1992-2000), Dean of the Chapel (1992-1998), President of the Academy of Evangelism (1983-1984), and the author of *My Friend, the Enemy* (1968), *Evangelism from the Bottom Up* (1992), and *The Coming Race Wars? A Cry for Reconciliation* (1993). He is currently Professor Emeritus of Preaching at Fuller. He was a popular speaker throughout his life and was an occasional adjunct at Asbury Theological Seminary throughout the years, especially in the 1990s. A new edition of *The Coming Race Wars?* was released in June of 2021.

Whatever we mean by “new forms in the ministry,” it is evident that more care must be given to the fact that we have become an alienated society. The issue for the majority of our people is no longer an economic one, but is a desperate search for meaning. For proof, you need only project yourself into the Negro condition while attempting, at the same time, to repeat the Pledge of Allegiance. Somewhere in that recitation you will come across the words that speak of “one nation... under God... liberty and justice for all.” They will stick in your throat. For a majority of Americans these are proud words and reassuring. To others- an increasing and significant minority- they are expressions of a promised land that “could have been, and should have been, but never was.”

Not all of those minority citizens are black. There are the disenchanting students, not all of whom subscribe to Students for a Democratic Society.¹ They still believe in the system. Potentially. But there are signs that if the old order fails to change, then the fat is really in the fire. For these young people are more morally sensitive than the members of any other generation. So there *is* a widening distance between generations.

Then there are the poor among us, and not all the talk in the world about free enterprise will alleviate their situation. To declare that poor men need only rise up and work is a statement either of ignorance or immorality. Even in the homeland of the noted senator from South Carolina² there are children who show signs of starving to death while he spends his time delivering delegate votes and defending John Wayne on the floor of the Senate.

There is also the issue of “law and order.” What made the term so opprobrious to black men during the recent campaign³ was its clear racist implications, especially if mouthed by the ex-governor who showed his contempt for law by defying the Supreme Court whenever he disagreed with its findings.⁴ The spectacle of whole police forces voting for George Wallace *in the North* reveals much about police-community relations. To the oppressed the issue becomes clear: “Who will save us from those responsible for justice?”

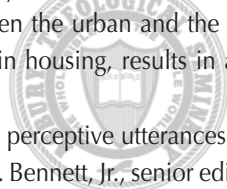
The frightful aspect of “law and order” is that the good people- the nice, quiet, upright people who “believe” in law and order, liberty and justice for all- are beginning to urge repression of dissent and protest. They, like those convened in Miami during a political convention,⁵ like to pretend that the answers to our problems, if there are any problems, are simple

ones. You simply rally 'round the flag, ask some conservative to pray, cut the apple pie, and arrange another tax bill favorable to big business. To make sure your strategy works, you hire more clubs and badges, more riot equipment, and order more bumper stickers from the local chapter of the John Birch Society.⁶ They read, "Support Your Local Police." The real threat to our society is that good people, peaceful people, will fail to recognize the repressive intent of those who mask their racism in patriotic rhetoric.

Our divisions are occurring at the time when our population is burgeoning and migrating to the cities. As if by magic, we have become an urban culture, a fact shocking to many. But the final showdown of all we profess in this country will happen in the cities, like it or not. Judd Arnett, feature columnist in the *Detroit Free Press*, declared that "the real America is to be found in the urban areas where almost 80 percent of our total population is now huddled in one form of inconvenience or another. This is where the action is, as the saying goes; this is where freedom will be saved, if it is to be saved at all; this is where our future as a people and a society is being determined- and it may be later than you think." He is right of course.

Herman Kahn and Anthony J. Weiner state in their book, *The Year 2000*, that by that date the total population in America will be 318 million. If Arnett is right and 80 percent of our people already live in cities, then it is noteworthy that by the year 2000, nine of our ten major city-centers will have a majority population of black Americans. The inner cores of these cities will be well over one-half black. Washington will be 75 percent black.⁷ The point here is that there are two movements in our population. The white "haves" are evacuating the cities, and non-white "have-nots" are moving in. The latter influx triggers the former exodus. The problem of the cities then, from transportation to politics to education, becomes a suburban problem. Only suburbia doesn't want to admit it. So another division is created between the urban and the suburban, and, because of the de facto segregation in housing, results in another black versus white issue.

One of the most perceptive utterances in many years comes from the gifted pen of LeRone T. Bennett, Jr., senior editor of *Ebony* magazine. Mr. Bennett, speaking of the frightful alternative facing our society, declared, "This is an important moment in the history of the Commonwealth. There stretch out before us two roads and two roads only. America must now become America or something else. A Fourth Reich perhaps, or a Fourth Reich of the spirit. To put the matter bluntly, we must become what we say



we are, or give in to the secret dream that blights our hearts" (*The Negro Mood*, p. 48).

The political year gives further credence to Mr. Bennett's insight. For if the campaign was monumentally dull, it did at least bring out into the open those underlying hostilities and deep antagonisms characteristic of our system. America is sick; we've "been fakin' it, Not makin it." Nor is the problem a matter of politics or economics. One would be naive to imagine that a change in administration would make much difference.

A basic insight would be to suggest that our society is sick in head and heart. Ours is a malady of the spirit. And "it must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh."

Walter Lippman suggests that "the country has entered a period of revolutionary change of which no one can foresee the course or the end or the consequences. For we are now living in a time when the central institutions of the traditional life of man are increasingly unable to command his allegiance or his obedience" ("The Dismal Choice," *Newsweek*, September 23, 1968, p. 23).

Significantly, almost every malady descriptive of our society also applies to the church. That the church is increasingly unable to command such allegiances or obedience is rather obvious. And even that hallowed institution referred to as evangelicalism shows signs of wear and tear. Some of us, particularly those of us who are black, spend much of our time fighting to believe in this peculiar institution at all. Maybe the fight would not be so necessary if we really belonged. But from our vantage point outside the gates, this group seems monumentally inept and splendidly dull. The reasons, or so it seems to us, are simple ones. In the first place our evangelical leadership spends much of its time in diagnosis and very little time in involvement. Even the "enemy" is always the same. Communism. We scarcely meet the world head-on. At any point. Then, of course on the one issue that promises to destroy our society quicker than any other namely, racism, the brotherhood of conservatives seems paralyzed with fear, ignorance, and the more subtle forms of prejudice designed to maintain the system intact. One struggles to believe that we still *think* like Christians.

So, the question may not be about forms at all. The first concern must be attitudes. The issue which faces the church today is *being*, not doing. If that sounds academic, it must be noted that from the biblical point of view, being has always taken precedence over doing. One recalls the brilliant denunciation of Israel's hypocrisy by an offended Jehovah,

revealing that tradition and the forms of orthodoxy are poor substitutes for compassion upon the poor. Prayer on Saturday is obnoxious to a God who prefers justice for the oppressed. Our Lord continued this fine tradition by denouncing the religious leadership of His day for hardness of heart in the face of outrageous social ills. His advice to the young lawyer professedly concerned about the identity of his neighbor, was an emphasis on being. “Be a merciful neighbor, and you’ll do...” One can only imagine what must be the indignation of God when He views the callous manner in which Bible-belt Christians quote scripture to defend gross immoralities of which they are a part. It is almost laughable to hear the suburban brother ask in pained tones what he can do about the urban crisis when he himself voted to move away from the neighborhood when it changed color. What he must first do is repent.

We are thus led to the historic Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, the Kerner Report.⁸ That report, all the more remarkable in that it was written for the most part by white moderates, speaks almost prophetically to the Church. Yet I find very few believers who have cared enough to read it. The most sensational, and to most white people, objectionable, part of the Report is the charge that the fundamental cause for disorder among black Americans was “the racial attitude and behavior of white Americans toward black Americans... White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II.” To the black man this is no new revelation; black men have been saying the same thing to America for three hundred years. Nat Turner said it. So did Frederick Douglas, W. E. duBois and Richard Allen. But secure people, those who have a stake in maintaining the system intact, will not listen to rhetoric and reason. So you have to get their attention. You are forced to throw a bomb.

It is this attitude among Americans, among the “good people,” toward anyone who doesn’t conform to acknowledged WASP tastes, that makes the word *program* so ineffective. What kind of program do you initiate to change the attitudes of men? The usual fundamentalist reply would be to preach the Gospel to them. But the sickness is with us, too. We are part of the problem.

Of course the answer to poor attitudes is education! In fact, if one believes the propaganda, there are no problems unsolvable if one can only pour enough “education” on them. But then, what is education? And whom do you educate? What do you teach? For instance, if the problem of

black men is white racism, why not educate white people? If the problem of poverty is the insensitivity of the affluent, why not educate the well-off? Education is not the answer because it is controlled by those who are not willing to give up position and power in order to see genuine change. The educational institution has become dehumanized and has married itself to middle-class values.

Educational racism can be documented if one examines a history text. Distortion in textbooks does not occur merely in treatment of contemporary material, but in the omission of material. It is time for the Church to speak up about blatant efforts of educators to teach propaganda as American history. Assuming that there are believers who know history, it is time for them to speak out about the real contributions which minority groups have made to this country's growth. There are abundant sources available which make ignorance a crime. Church libraries should offer several options for hungry young people whose stake in a united America is obvious. Individual believers should inquire about local texts to see if a balanced presentation of historical facts is being offered.

There is, however, a further point of deep significance to our future whether we see ourselves as churchmen or as patriots. It is that a very large number of people have a convinced attitude that they are unrepresented by anyone, that they are politically disenfranchised. I am not talking about the Yippies⁹ or the SDS.¹⁰ The Kerner Report cited, as one of the causes of civil disorders, the sense of powerlessness among a large number of inner-city residents. "Finally, many Negroes have come to believe that they are being exploited politically and economically by the white 'power structure.' Negroes, like people in poverty everywhere, in fact lack the channels of communication, influence and appeal that traditionally have been available to ethnic minorities within the city and which enabled them- unburdened by color- to scale the walls of the white ghettos of an earlier era. The frustrations of powerlessness have led some to the conviction that there is no effective alternative to violence as a means of expression and redress, as a way of 'moving the system.'" This sense of alienation from the system has given rise to a new cry for power among black people. It is called black power and it means the same thing to black men that Polish power means to Polish citizens and that German power meant to German immigrants, and that AMA power means to those who lobby against socialized medicine: survival.

The challenge that black power poses is a real one, and in my view potentially wholesome. Essentially, and apart from all the violent rhetoric of Rap Brown¹¹ and others, the concept seeks for black men a determinative role in their own affairs. It is the attempt of black men to answer affirmatively the demand of the white master that black men “do something for themselves instead of always looking for a handout.” In short, it is a black declaration of independence; the “boy” is growing up, Massa!

What makes the concept of black power so threatening is that inherent in its assertion is the right to control those institutions which bear directly upon one’s development. The areas include economics, education, and industry. Black power means an end to those firms which have systematically raped the inner city economically. At least it alters the traditional relationship. It’s rather like dumping the tea in the harbor if you want to legitimize the effort.

Whatever black power means today, or may come to mean in the near future, I consider it the privilege and responsibility of the Christian Church to understand it. It represents what is essentially a conservative solution to our long-standing racial hostility. There is here the absence of desire for white “handouts.” As Dr. Charles Hamilton has said, “If black people are simply *given* more handouts, this will only perpetuate the present status of ghetto colonialism.” But there is here a demand for and a determination to have the power of self-determination necessary to survive and thrive in America. If the black man succeeds, he will herald a new day in American democracy and race relations.

But understanding is not enough. If the concept of black power is right and hence applicable for other minority groups, black and white, in America, then the religious community must find ways to help implement these objectives. For the evangelical, of course, a drastic overhaul will be required in his application of traditional theological views. He will need to find a viable theological reason to involve himself in a work which, though redemptive, is not tailored precisely to the fundamentalist definition of that term. Something closer to our Lord’s idea is needed “to preach deliverance to the captives ... to set at liberty them that are bruised.” If I understand Him aright. He is not talking about an exchange of pulpits and choirs, nor a mere handout of gospel tracts. He is talking about radical and courageous involvement with men at the level of their primary needs. He is talking about “learning to scratch where it itches.”

We desperately need a conference of concerned evangelicals who can grapple with the theological bases for social action. It must include black churchmen, and since most of the best trained minds are *not* in the evangelical camp, we must relax our biases. The truth is that many keen young men are *not* evangelicals today simply because there has been no room for them. But these men must be heard. We need to learn from them. We missed our chance to discuss our problem courageously at Berlin.¹² It is doubtful we will face up to the radical issues in a renewal of Berlin slated for North America. If we do not face up to our responsibility, yea, our culpability, we shall have opted for disaster in human affairs, fascism in politics, and nullification of our world-wide influence.

We must recruit non-whites for faculty positions at major evangelical institutions. White youth have no opportunity to relate to non-white persons who occupy a professorial role. Where such a relationship is not possible (and it won't be immediately), an effort must be made to provide suitable guest lecturers to whom our students can relate.

The employment of non-white faculty members also suggests a possible attraction by which to recruit non-white students. There are few evangelical schools one could unqualifiedly recommend to black students. Those that are ideally located in major cities have poor and tentative racial attitudes. Others are simply too rural in attitude and location. Or maybe the word is provincial. Scarcely any have a black faculty member.

There must be all kinds of ways to attack the ills of our great society. Instead of using them, we have squandered the time, mouthed orthodox irrelevancies, and may find ourselves with too little, too late.

Let's work together as if it were not so!

End Notes

¹ Students for a Democratic Society was a student led organization on the political left in the 1960s, which was centered on college campuses. They were mostly opposed to the Vietnam War, but were particularly known for their violent confrontations of the Chicago police prior to and during the Democratic National Convention of 1968 in Chicago.

² This is most likely a reference to Senator Strom Thurmond from South Carolina, who voted against civil rights legislation, but also defended John Wayne's pro-war 1968 movie *Green Berets* and was a major supporter of the military in the conflict in Vietnam.

³ The Presidential election of 1968 was particularly contentious between Republican, Richard Nixon, Democrat, Hubert Humphrey, and Alabama Governor George Wallace running as an independent of the American Independent Party. During the primaries, Democratic frontrunner, Robert Kennedy was assassinated, and that same year Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated resulting in widespread unrest. Opposition to the Vietnam War was also prevalent. Nixon ran on a platform of restoring law and order. Humphrey was supportive of recent Civil Rights legislation, which led Wallace to enter the race in open opposition to integration and the equality of racial minorities. Wallace won the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia showing the strength of racism in the Deep South.

⁴ George Corley Wallace, Jr. (1919-1998) was a governor from Alabama (1963-1967, 1971-1979, 1983-1987) known for his segregationist views. He ran for President three times, in 1968 as a third-party candidate.

⁵ This is a reference to the 1968 Republican National Convention held in Miami Beach.

⁶ The John Birch Society is a right-wing political organization which is known for advocating ultraconservative, far-right political views, which at this time were primarily anti-communist, however it also openly opposed the Civil Rights movement and legislation tied to it as well.

⁷ While the numbers are slightly different in retrospect with regard to these predictions in 1969, the principles are still true. Instead of 318 million, the population of the U.S. in 2020 is 331 million. It is almost exactly correct in terms of urban and rural at 19.3% of the population living in rural areas and 80.7% living in urban areas. The inner cores of the top ten cities is nowhere near close to 50% African American, but this calculation was not considering the large influx of Hispanic immigrants which would arrive after 1969. The numbers for the 2020 Census for the top ten cities (rounded off) are:

New York	(21% African American and 29% Hispanic)
Los Angeles	(8% African American and 47% Hispanic)
Chicago	(29% African American and 30% Hispanic)
Miami	(18% African American and 69% Hispanic)
Philadelphia	(40% African American and 15% Hispanic)
Dallas	(24% African American and 41% Hispanic)
San Francisco	(5% African American, 16% Hispanic, and 34% Asian)
Houston	(23% African American and 45% Hispanic)
Washington D.C.	(41% African American and 11% Hispanic)
Atlanta	(47% African American and 6% Hispanic)

This indicates that in all of the top ten cities in the U.S. ethnic minorities makes up 50% or greater of these urban centers. So, while this prediction was not true for the African American community, it still holds true for ethnic minorities as a whole. Washington D.C. has not reached the level of 75% African American as predicted, but minorities do make up 62% of the population as compared to 38% white.

⁸ The Kerner Report was the result of a Presidential Commission by Lyndon Johnson, established in 1967 to investigate the causes of the riots of the summer of 1967 and bring forth recommendations to prevent such riots in the future.

⁹ Yippies, was the common reference for members of the Youth International Party, a countercultural offshoot of anti-war movements. It was founded in 1967 and led by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, and they are most well-known for their protest at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

¹⁰ The SDS stood for the Students for a Democratic Society, a student led activist organization which grew up on college campuses in the 1960's over issues like the Vietnam War and Black Power.

¹¹ Rap Brown, born Hubert Gerold Brown in 1943, but also known as Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin was the fifth chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1967 when he argued for violent resistance to the government (which he called the "Fourth Reich") and was also the minister of justice for the Black Panther Party for a short period.

¹² Most likely referring to the World Congress on Evangelism, held in Berlin in 1965-1966.



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