

# A New Set of Prejudices

by Roland Foster

I'll tell you one of the stories of my life.

I grew up in the South, in a home filled with love and peace, but also one governed partly by racial bigotry. My daddy was a southerner who liked and respected a few black people, those he felt were good, solid citizens who also "knew their place;" but he believed the majority of Negroes were lazy, unintelligent, and antagonistic toward whites. His attitudes were shaped, of course, by his own upbringing and the society of the first part of the twentieth century, and also by an unfortunate boyhood incident in which he was mistreated and humiliated by some black youths. I'm not defending my daddy; he was as wrong as wrong can be. I'm just describing the heritage and environment that planted prejudices in our family. I received them by inheritance, as it were.

When I was eighteen or so, one of my friends got married, and I served as an usher. My friend had invited to the wedding one of his friends and co-workers, a black man, along with his wife. I will always be ashamed of the fact that, when that couple showed up at the church door, I didn't seat them. I just ignored them, and let them usher themselves to a seat. I didn't know what I should do — whether to seat them, and where — and yet, I probably did know what I should do, I simply was afraid to do it. I felt embarrassed and frustrated at the time, and I have felt guilty ever since. I hope they have forgiven me.

On the night Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, I was working late at a customer site. One of the men who worked there came into the computer room exulting over the fact that Dr. King had been shot. I felt disgusted and kind of sick about that, but I didn't say anything. If I had, would it have helped Dr. King? No. Would it have changed that man? Probably not. Would it have hurt my relationship with him? Yes, certainly, and possibly gotten me in trouble with my boss as well. Would it have made a difference to my conscience? Oh, yes, it would have.

As I was living through the time of the civil rights movement, I was being changed by its message. I was beginning to realize and understand the injustice of judging people by their skin color; of treating blacks like subhuman creatures. I saw the things that white people did in Little Rock and Birmingham and many other places, and I was deeply ashamed of them. Also, I was beginning to work with a few black people, and I was learning that I had more in common with them than I did with, say, someone from Norway or Russia or Japan — or with those who hated Negroes.

In 1969 I finally quit running away from God and joyfully, if somewhat belatedly, said "Yes" to His invitation to join His family. In 1976 I decided that I really meant it, and I made a heartfelt commitment to him. At last God could begin to deal with some things in my life that needed changing. (No, I won't tell you about all of them.)

I became active in the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International, and one summer I went to a Men's Advance (Full Gospel's euphemism for "retreat") with some

twenty or so other men. One thing that made that Advance unusual was that there was not a fixed agenda. We went where the Holy Spirit led us, and on Saturday night He led us to have a worship service during which we paired off and washed each other's feet. My partner was a black man in his eighties, probably the gentlest, most saintly man I have ever met. When he knelt to wash my feet, I was profoundly moved by his humility and gentleness. When I knelt to wash his feet, I was filled with joy and gratitude to our God for giving me that privilege. I knew what God was accomplishing in me, and I could literally feel the chains of prejudice falling away from my mind. I cannot adequately express the joy and exhilaration of that freeing experience.

Of course, it has taken more than one experience to do the job. I'm thankful that the Lord has kept them coming. I've worked as closely with black people as with white people, and if you were to ask me what color their skin is, in some cases I'd have to think hard about it before I could tell you. I have brought both white and black people home as unexpected house guests, sometimes to my wife's mild but tolerant dismay. For a while I had a prayer partner relationship with a black man. I found myself one day borrowing a truck and spending a Saturday to help a young black man move some of his family.

My experiences have taught me that black people are not generally different from white people in any important respect. The differences between individuals are mostly cultural, and have nothing to do with skin color.

One prejudice that was not easily overcome had to do with racially mixed couples. When I would see such a couple, even after my foot washing experience, my mind would start to raise an objection. But I began to recognize this as the silly prejudice it is, and to tell myself to get with God's program. I believe I can now truthfully say that it no longer bothers me. In fact, I have helped a friend get over the same hurdle and learn to love an African American son-in-law.

I suppose it is impossible to live without any prejudices. What one should strive for, in my opinion, is to adopt a set of prejudices that is consistent with truth. Nowadays I try to model my prejudices after God's. I figure if I can truly love whom God loves and hate what God hates, I can't go wrong. I know that there are many in our society who disagree with God's opinion on just about everything, and therefore will label me (and God, by implication) "intolerant" and worse. Frankly, I'd a lot rather have my current set of prejudices than theirs.