Truth or consequences

by L. Gregory Jones in the May 16, 2001 issue

When David Horowitz offered 50 college newspapers a paid advertisement, he was setting a perfect trap. College editors across the country had to decide whether or not to publish the ad, which opposes any form of reparations to African-Americans for slavery and racism. If editors turned down his offer, Horowitz could claim that political correctness still reigns on campuses, and that major universities are afraid of opposing views on issues of race. If they accepted, Horowitz would get widespread publicity for views that would not otherwise pass editorial muster for accuracy or depth of analysis.

Horowitz got mixed results. Many school newspapers rejected the ad, while a number of others ran it. Some whose editors published it later regretted their decision and issued apologies to their campus communities. Duke's student newspaper, the *Chronicle*, accepted the ad and then defended its decision strongly, mostly on "free speech" grounds.

As a result, the Duke campus became embroiled in a provocative series of protests, debates and discussions, some about journalistic ethics and the problem of using "free speech" to defend the acceptance of a paid advertisement. Other students have addressed the legacies of racism at Duke, and challenged administrators to take concrete steps to improve the racial climate and, in the divinity school, to heighten our already strong commitment to racial reconciliation.

We have also examined the underlying issue of reparations, and asked ourselves how we might more faithfully work to repair the damage wrought by the legacies of slavery and the reality of racism.

Unfortunately, here in the U.S. we've become preoccupied with the actual logistics of the compensation—how much it would cost, who would pay and who would be eligible to receive payments.

How would the discussions be different if we asked how the United States, as a people, ought to undertake repentance for the past? Horowitz's ad presumes that

the issue of reparations is about what “we” (i.e., white Americans) owe to “them” (i.e., black Americans). He uses that bifurcation to defeat the issue by saying things aren’t nearly so neatly divided. But what if the question really is about how all of us as a people are to come to terms with the past?

There are dangers in such a question, for many people comfortable with the notion of repentance will use it as an opportunity for infinite guilt with little promise of forgiveness. We must also ask whether, in our individualistic presumptions, we have a sufficient sense of what it means to be a “people.”

We should at least be able to ask how Christians in the U.S. ought to undertake repentance. At least in principle, Christians are a people who recognize the call to practice and understand costly forgiveness that induces serious repentance. We have resources that we draw on to capture a deeper understanding of the stakes involved in repairing the past. Yet we are ourselves so broken, and have done so much to trivialize both forgiveness and repentance, that we often mirror the world’s confusions.

How can we make a serious theological contribution to the reparations debate in the United States? We can broaden the debate by linking reparations to questions of repentance, forgiveness and a costly reconciliation. But the costs are not only in terms of financial payments. There are several other dimensions we need to identify—ironically, they are dimensions that I have discerned more from observing South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission than through my participation in churches in the U.S.

First, we need a truthful accounting of the past and of the realities of the present. Among the disturbing features of Horowitz’s ad are its bizarre and willful distortions of the past. I am not suggesting that we will all reach agreement, but our disagreements need to be shaped by a quest for truthfulness. This excludes both willful distortions and a self-justifying venting that assumes something is true simply because “I feel it” or “I think it.”

Second, there needs to be some public remembering of the legacies of slavery and the realities of racism. I realized this when a friend from South Africa asked me why the U.S. has not built memorials to remember the legacies of slavery as it has for such events as the Vietnam war and the Holocaust.

Third, we need to undertake concrete deeds of repentance directed at eradicating racism and healing the brokenness of our past. Though mainline churches led the way in the civil rights movement, today this commitment to racial reconciliation is found more in evangelical traditions than anywhere else.

Fourth, some form of financial reparations is crucial. In the context of these other three dimensions, reparations can avoid being seen either as a “payoff” or an unjustified “theft” of money by others. I am not suggesting a complicated form of payment to specific individuals or families. Reparations might be made through concentrated efforts to invest financially in institutions such as historically black state colleges and universities. We cannot avoid the importance of economic issues if we are to find a future not bound by the past.

If we Christians begin to reclaim the significance of repentance and forgiveness in relation to reparations, Horowitz’s ad may, perversely and inadvertently, have offered us a Lenten gift.