

Greed and profit at heart of racism, lynching expert says

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WACO—Systemic racism has more to do with greed and profit than with race-based hatred, a Baylor University authority on lynching told a Christian community development conference.

“Racism is not fundamentally about identity but about political economy,” said Malcolm Foley, director of Black church studies at Baylor’s Truett Theological Seminary.

Foley, special adviser to the university president for equity and campus engagement, addressed the No Need Among You Conference at First Baptist Church in Waco.

“Christian anti-racism risks a descent into sentimentalism” when it focuses on changing hearts and attitudes toward individuals without looking at the economic and political systems that lie behind racism, Foley asserted.

The Christian confession of faith—Jesus is Lord—is “profoundly political” because it means mammon—“the god of profit”—is not Lord, he said.

For centuries, racism has provided the justification and rationale for economically exploitative practices, from chattel slavery to the extermination of indigenous people, Foley insisted.

“Racism is not historically about hate. It’s historically about greed,” he said.

‘Demonic feedback loop’

Foley described a “demonic feedback loop” of exploitation, enforcement through violence and justification. The justification—the idea of white supremacy and the inherent inferiority of people of color—arose to provide a rationale for exploitation of non-whites, he explained.

Foley, whose doctoral dissertation focused on African American Protestant responses to lynching in the late 19th century and early 20th century, said the proper question to ask when encountering racism is, “Who benefits?”

Between 1883 and 1941, 3,000 Black men were lynched in the United States, he said. Lynching lost its social acceptance not when America became more enlightened and benevolent but when lynching became “bad for business,” Foley observed.

Rather than focusing solely on individual racist attitudes and actions, he encouraged Christians to consider systems involving policies, practices and processes, as well as people.

Theologically, he referred to the Apostle Paul’s writing in Ephesians 6 about wrestling “not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”

“We must be a repenting and a resisting people” who not only repent of complicity with sinful value systems, but also resist economic exploitation, Foley said.

Rather than simply accepting unfettered capitalism in an unquestioning fashion, he encouraged Christians to adopt a “counter-economy that sees need and exploitation as evil.”

Even so, he warned, some will feel threatened by that message. He pointed

to the example of Martin Luther King, whose public approval ratings plummeted when he began to focus not just on racial justice, but also on economic justice.

However, Christ's followers are called to "walk in the way of the cross" and stand for all manner of justice, he insisted,

"Seek to build communities with no need," he urged. "Make your churches agents of the just redistribution of resources."