A look at the legacy of *Brown v. the Board of Education*, its effect on Covenanters, and how far we have yet to go

Still Separate and Unequal?

DERIC GILLIARD

By most accounts, 1954 was a remarkable year. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* was the most popular movie, closely followed by *The Caine Mutiny* and *On the Waterfront*. The New York Giants swept the Cleveland Indians in the World Series. A new automobile cost about $1,950, a new home $22,000, the average income was $3,960, and a postage stamp cost three cents. Dwight Eisenhower was in the White House and the economy was flourishing. And the United States was about to become entangled in an obscure Asian nation called Vietnam.

(And oh, yes, in addition to luminaries like billionaire Oprah Winfrey and presidential candidate Al Sharpton, I was born in Atlanta.)

Perhaps the most critical development of 1954, however— especially in regards to civil rights and race relations—was the U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. the Board of Education* on May 17, 1954.

That unanimous decision ruled that racial discrimination in public schools was unconstitutional, overturning the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which stated that "separate but equal" was legally and fundamentally sound. The Brown decision, which eventually led to the end of Jim Crow laws and legal, institutionalized racism, ruled that segregated public institutions are by their very nature "unequal."

The Brown challenge case was actually a collection of five cases—from the District of Columbia, Kansas, Delaware, South Carolina, and Virginia — bundled into one. The decision was prompted in part by the case of Linda Brown, a Topeka, Kansas, third grader who had to walk a mile to her black elementary school instead of attending a nearby white elementary school.

Rebuffed by the principal in his attempts to register his daughter at the white school, Oliver Brown contacted the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). He joined a suit filed by the NAACP on behalf of a number of African American parents from Topeka. The case was first heard in district court in June 1951 before finally being heard by the U.S. Supreme Court nearly three years later.

So what did this decision really mean? What changed? And when?

A great deal did not change early on, to be sure. Schools in Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, Maryland, desegregated a few months later in compliance with the decision. Nearly two years after the decision, however, twenty-seven black students attempted to register in all-white schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, and were turned back.

In September 1957, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus—in direct defiance of a federal district court order — called in the National Guard to prevent the "Little Rock Nine" from attending an all-white high school. Only an order from President Eisenhower and 1,000 paratroopers who remained on call for an entire school year allowed the black students to

Catherine Gilliard (second from left) with her siblings Douglas, Daryl, and Regina Williams

attend the school, which was in their own community. Similar incidents took place in a number of states, including Alabama, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania. Although the legal system had begun to turn the corner toward equality and justice, society was slow to follow.

"Our city [Chicago] is divided by ethnic groups and that pretty much spelled out where you went to school," says retired Oakdale Covenant Church pastor Willie B. Jemison. "We probably didn't get any real movement here until the mid to late sixties and the problem arose that we had more black kids than schools. The powers-that-be had attempted to build a second black high school east of Vincennes [Avenue] since World War II so that black kids wouldn't be in classes with the white kids. [But] rather than build more black schools, or put kids in other areas, they built those portable classrooms and called them the 'Willis Wagons.'" (The portable classrooms were named after Benjamin C. Willis, Chicago school superintendent from 1953 to 1966, who clashed with civil rights leaders.)

Jemison was one of six black preachers who helped remove a white counselor from Ryder Elementary School at 87th and Wallace during the mid-sixties because of mounting evidence that he didn't care about the students under his charge.

"He left," says Jemison, "[Our] phones were tapped. But we were able to change the quality of education there."

Pastor Stan Long of South Bay Community Church in Fremont, California, who was a high-school junior when the decision came down in 1954, said things changed slowly in his hometown of Salem, New Jersey, too.

"There was probably a little bit of movement in the school in that they allowed me to be on the editorial board of the yearbook," says Long. "However, I didn't see any real change until the civil rights movement [in the 1960s]. Before that, it was business as usual. I still remember the guidance counselors steering me away from going to college and encouraging me to join the service, or do something else. There was nothing to encourage me to think beyond the stereotypical job" for African Americans. The schools, says Long, were not segregated officially, but were for all practical purposes.

My wife, Catherine Gilliard, chairperson of the Covenant Executive Board, was born after the school desegregation decision in 1954. As a nine-year-old girl in Chicago in 1965, she, her sister Regina Williams, now a leader at Oakdale Covenant, and three other elementary children all transferred from all-black Altgeld Elementary on 71st and Loomis to Foster Park Elementary on 85th and Wood.

Willie B. Jemison

The Brown decision, which eventually led to the end of Jim Crow laws and legal, institutionalized racism, ruled that segregated public institutions are by their very nature "unequal."

Stan Long today and (at right) in 1958. He went on to college at Zion Bible Institute despite guidance counselors who discouraged him from continuing his education.

The group was chosen as part of a program that allowed minority children who were excelling academically to attend majority white schools. Riding Chicago public buses from their neighborhood to an all-white community, they faced a hostile environment day-in and day-out.

"We had police protection from the time we got off the CTA [Chicago Transit Authority] until we walked into the school on Wood Street," she says. "That was a five-block walk. As you can imagine, we were terrified. We were walking to school and your parents are supposed to be able to protect you and they're ducking from rocks and bottles, which were thrown at us each day. We would run the five blocks each morning into school and run each afternoon to the bus stop to return home."

Once, she said, Craig, one of the five black students, didn't run fast enough and he was tackled, beaten, then thrown into a dumpster.

Deric Gilliard is a licensed lay minister and member of Commission Disciples Covenant Church in Stone Mountain, Georgia.

"Policemen in uniform were standing in line, looking the other way as people would gather in crowds and through bottles and rocks, even though my mother and other adults walked to school with us," Catherine recalls. "It was very difficult to process this type of hatred as a child. My distrust of people in positions of authority started at this very early age."

Today, fifty years after the Brown decision, there are areas in which we have made great strides.

African Americans and Hispanics who were born in the U.S. routinely have access to public-school systems in their neighborhoods. Today, 17 percent of black Americans are college graduates, compared to 2 percent in 1957. And it would be alarming news if a student and his or her parents showed up at the front door of a local school only to be told that they were not welcome.

I grew up largely in Kansas, roughly an hour from the school involved in the Brown decision. Kansas, home of John Brown and a state that fought tooth and nail to remain a free state during the Civil War, is pretty progressive racially. I never attended a segregated class or school there—thank God for that—although who knows what would have happened had we had more minority students. I can't imagine how my life would have been different had I not been influenced by my white fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Faclum. In other places—especially cities like Philadelphia, Chicago, and Atlanta, many systems integrated, slowly but surely, by the 1970s.

Unfortunately, today, fifty years after the landmark Brown decision—most big city public schools are nearly as segregated as they were then. Whether you're talking New York, Chicago, Boston, New Orleans, or Charlotte, the story is the same. The vast majority of big city schools are 90 percent minority—only now, based primarily on economics, not by legislation.

Whites who have economic means first fled in the 1960 to the far suburbs, preferring to commute sometimes for more than an hour to avoid living with people who are different. They've been followed by those seeking better schools or a chance to buy a home of their own—whites, Hispanics, new immigrants, and many blacks, able for the first time capable of enjoying the benefits denied their forebears—who have moved to the suburbs in pursuit of the American dream.

What are the ramifications of a economically segregated educational system? A few at-risk youth will succeed under virtually any circumstances. But what about all those inner-city children and families—or even the ones in your community, or mine—who are strapped with inferior teachers, counselors who don't care, parents who must work two and three jobs to make ends meet, families who have never had a college graduate and don't have the skills needed or a few free, non-working moments to teach their children how to study and help with their homework?

Perhaps the worst thing about segregated schools—and communities—is that we don't get to know each other. If everyone in my community looks like me, thinks like me, and acts like me, my family and I lose the benefit of getting to know you, learning from you, learning to trust you, and vice-versa.

The church, which produces teachers, counselors, bankers, police officers, legislators, physicians, and business persons, must realize that we all have a responsibility to more than ourselves. Each of us—each church, each family, each individual—has a role to play in making the promise of *Brown v. the Board of Education* a reality.

We must keep that in mind when we consider that predominately black and Hispanic neighborhoods are likely to suffer from high rates of crime and unemployment, a poor tax base and physical infrastructure, reduced access to public services, and an overwhelming scarcity of happy, two-family homes. Relatively few white youth are asked to overcome such stark obstacles. Making matters worse, too often black children—especially black boys—have come to believe they are betraying their race and the manhood by studying hard, seeking knowledge, and aspiring to excel academically.

Our churches can offer after-school tutoring services to their communities. We can provide ACT prep sessions, and even scholarships. We can teach basic computer skills to parents and students who are behind the eight ball. We can start Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops that offer outlets and opportunities for the less fortunate. We can teach parenting skills. We can show random acts of kindness and the love that only comes through the saving grace and relationship with Jesus Christ.

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Henry David Thoreau once said that "most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them." If you believe that's true for the broader community, how much more so for minorities, who, according to the National Urban League's (NUL) "State of Black America 2004" survey, found that 56 percent of African Americans rate public education as fair to poor? Perhaps part of that is due to the fact that teachers with less than three years experience teach in minority schools at twice the rate that they teach in predominately white schools.

The promise of *Brown*, which opened the door for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, was for a better America for all of God's children. Progress has indeed been made. That fact is undeniable. But according to the NUL's Equity Index—a statistical

measurement of the disparities that exist between blacks and whites in economics, housing, education, health, social justice, and civic engagement—"the status of African Americans is .73, or 73 percent when compared to the conditions of their white counterparts." Today, 70 percent of African American children are born out of wedlock and 12 million children live below the poverty level. Some of the solutions must come from within the black community; others can only be solved with a collective response.

We still have a ways to go to fulfill the promise of *Brown v. the Board of Education*. As the body of Christ, perhaps we only need to remember the principles of the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew 25:37-40: "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did to me."

So what does that mean for today's church in general and the Covenant Church in particular? If we are truly to be a church that celebrates and promotes racial reconciliation and ethnic diversity, we must live out the gospel throughout our churches. We can make a difference in our local communities by doing the uncomfortable—reaching out to lend a hand to those not only less fortunate than us, but different from us.

It is always easier to help those we know and care about. The real challenge, however, is to leave our comfort zones. All of us can identify the ethnic groups in our communities who not only need help, but would truly appreciate it. Instead of ignoring their plight, every church should commit to at least one sustainable project. Adopt a struggling school, a community center, a pregnancy center, or partner with an ethnic church in need. Do something!

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"I can't believe this is happening"


Jerome Nelson

When Jerome Nelson was going to school in Gary, Indiana, in the 1960s, he knew there was a high school for white students somewhere in the city. It was just south of Ridge Road, a boundary line that ran along Interstate 80/94 through Gary. And Nelson says he knew better than to cross it.

"There was this school called Lew Wallace High School," Nelson says. "I was grown and had come back from the military before I ever saw the school. Gary was that segregated. You were *that* not allowed in that area. The police would stop you at Ridge Road. I was an adult before I ever saw that school building.

"Man, that's sick," he adds.

Nelson, fifty-five, is now director of church and society ministries for the Central Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church. He remembers the first time he ventured south of Ridge Road. It was in the early 1970s, and he was back from home on leave from serving in the Air Force.

"Some of my friends told me they had built a Burger King in town," he says. "I talked them into getting in a car with me and going there—we were going to cross this invisible boundary line. We actually went across to this Burger King and bought hamburgers."

While Nelson and his friends were in the restaurant, several police officers in a squad car kept a watchful eye on them. When they came out, the police were blocking the exit.

"We had to turn around and go out back, the way we came," he says.

Nelson says that in the 1960s and 1970s—when segregation in schools and housing became illegal—many white residents of Gary moved east, out of the city. He recalls seeing a new exit being built off of the expressway so that these new commuters could still get to their jobs at the steel mills.

"I would just watch them come in and then get back on," he says. "It was like white flight every afternoon."

Nelson left Gary for about eighteen years, getting married and raising a family in California. When he and his wife returned in 1986 to take care of his ailing parents, the lines of segregation had moved. Gary was primarily black, with the surrounding suburbs mainly white.

In the early 1990s, Nelson, who ran his own insurance agency, drove to nearby Chesterton to meet with a client who was buying a homeowner's policy. Dressed in his business suit, carrying a briefcase, he arrived at his client's house, located just across from a high school where some white students were playing basketball.

"I went into the house," says Nelson, "and while I was talking to the client we started to hear noise. The students were calling me 'Nigger' and saying 'come outside.'"

The client called her husband, a police officer, who came to the house, confronted the young men, and then, as a precaution, went with Nelson as he drove out of town.

"I remember thinking, this in the 1990s. This is not happening to me," he says.

Nelson, who now lives in Chicago, says his hometown remains as segregated as ever. This time, he adds, the segregtation is primarily economic. Those—of any race—who have money leave to find better opportunities. Those who don't are left behind. ❑

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God's word and our commitment to righteousness demand it!

A graduate chapter of a national black fraternity in Decatur, Georgia, provides an awesome testimony of putting feet to their faith. Twelve years ago, they adopted a neighborhood school where 98 percent of the children come from families below the poverty rate. The Kappa Alpha Alpha chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc., began a "Smart Academy" on Saturdays that provided one-on-one mentoring to dozens of at-risk children in core curriculum areas. The young men of the fraternity also orchestrate an annual field trip to a historically black college or university, combined with a cultural experience.

Ten years later, the school's principal credits the fraternity with being the driving force behind the school's rapidly increasing test scores that have taken it from being at the bottom of the county to one that now earns federal money for standards of improvement and excellence. Perhaps equally important, Omega Psi Phi's presence provides these children—the vast majority of whom come from fatherless homes—male role models who love them and whom the children can respect and relate to. If a fraternity can do this, how much more can our churches, steeped in the abiding agape love of Jesus Christ, accomplish?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. often spoke of his desire to achieve the "beloved community." Reaching that lofty goal would mean a world in which racism, discrimination, bigotry, and prejudice would be replaced by true, godly sisterhood and brotherhood. It requires that we work to improve an educational system where half the black boys in our nation drop out of high school and more black men fill our nation's jails than its colleges. Many of these young men can be salvaged. Their lives can make a difference.

But only if you and I commit to put feet to our faith and reach out to them with the love of Jesus. ❑