

Sherrod Loses Job, Falsely Charged with Racism

The Wired Word for July 25, 2010

In the News

On Tuesday, Shirley Sherrod, an appointee at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, was forced to resign after a video clip of a speech she gave in March to a Georgia chapter of the NAACP was posted on the Web site Big Government and picked up by a news agency. In the clip, Sherrod, who is black, was shown saying that some 20 years before, when she was the Georgia Director for Rural Development, she didn't do everything in her power to help a white farmer who had contacted her for assistance.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced Sherrod's resignation, declaring in a statement that "there is zero tolerance for discrimination at USDA."

It turns out, however, that the clip had been edited -- perhaps maliciously -- to distort the point Sherrod was making.

When the full video was later released, it was clear that Sherrod had told the story to illustrate her own racial bias before she had learned from her mistaken view and abandoned her bias.

In the edited clip first released, Sherrod said, "I was struggling with the fact that so many black people had lost their farmland, and here I was faced with having to help a white person save their land. So I didn't give him the full force of what I could do. I did enough."

The unedited video, however, puts that comment in context and shows Sherrod telling how she reversed herself and brought the full power of her position to help the white farmer keep his land. She went on to say, "Well, working with him made me see that it's really about those who have versus those who don't, you know. And they could be black; they could be white; they could be Hispanic. And it made me realize then that I needed to work to help poor people -- those who don't have access the way others have."

In explaining the roots of her own racism, Sherrod tells in the speech that her father was murdered by a white man. There were three witnesses, but the man was never indicted. She was 17 at the time, and she said she made a commitment that night to stay in the South and work for change. She told of praying for guidance and said, "But, you know, God will show you things and He'll put things in your path so that -- that you realize that the struggle is really about poor people, you know."

Her later realization that she needed to help people regardless of their race was an enlargement of her initial commitment the night of her father's murder.

After the news of her forced resignation was made public Tuesday, Eloise Spooner, wife of the white farmer Sherrod had helped, spoke in her defense, saying that they probably wouldn't have their land today if not for Sherrod's help. In fact, said Spooner, she considered Sherrod a "friend for life." Her husband, Roger Spooner, called the racism charge against Sherrod "hogwash."

The edited clip appears to have been released as part of an argument over racism between the Tea Party and the NAACP. After the NAACP had condemned certain actions within the Tea Party as racist, the Web site Big Government, which supports the Tea Party, posted the clip supposedly to expose racism at the local NAACP meeting in Georgia. After the clip was released, the national office of the NAACP agreed that Sherrod should

be fired. Later, however, after they saw the unedited version, they retracted that, saying they had been "snookered" into believing Sherrod was a racist.

As of this writing (on Wednesday), Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has apologized to Sherrod for forcing the resignation and has told her there is another job for her in the USDA if she wants it. He did not go into detail but indicated the position was related to civil rights claims that black, Hispanic, female and Native American farmers have made against the department over the years. He said Sherrod was "extraordinarily gracious" as he apologized directly to her and has said she wants to think the offer over.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Vilsack Apologizes to Sherrod. CNN](#)

[Ousted USDA Official: I'm Not Sure I'd Take Job Back. msnbc.com](#)

[Sherrod's Steadfast Motto: "Let's Work Together." CNN](#)

[Full Transcript of Shirley Sherrod's Speech](#)

[Statement on the Resignation of Shirley Sherrod \(includes full Shirley Sherrod video\). NAACP](#)

The Big Questions

1. In what ways does God help us transform our thinking? How does he call us to abandon narrow viewpoints?
2. How is transformed thinking related to spiritual conversion? How is it related to the ongoing process of growing in faith?
3. How does your commitment to follow Jesus affect how you reason about important matters?
4. When has God shown you that you needed to rethink some long-held belief or bias? How did that rethinking change your life? How did it change how you viewed others?
5. What is meant by "Repent and believe in the gospel"?

Confronting the News with Scripture

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 23:7 (KJV)

"For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he." (For context, read 23:6-8.)

We have quoted this verse from the King James Version because the Hebrew that underlies Proverbs 23:7a is obscure, and various Bible versions translate it in various ways. But the rendering above from the KJV, which is supported by the New American Standard Bible and by a footnote in the New International Version, is the one we prefer. No matter how the various versions word it, the line seems to refer to the stingy or selfish person mentioned in verse 6.

The point here is that stingy people are that way because of their mindset -- how they think in their "hearts," their inward being. But the point applies not just to stinginess but to one's whole character, which is driven by how we think about things and people and by what values we attach to them.

Question: When has changed thinking about a group of people changed your behavior toward them?

Mark 1:15

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (For context, read 1:14-15.)

This is Jesus' first declaration of the gospel. The word "repent" literally means "to turn around," as when a man realizes he is walking in the wrong direction and so reverses course or heads in a new direction. But the Greek word underlying the English means "to think differently" or "to reconsider." In other words, Jesus is both calling people to change direction, heading for God's kingdom instead of away from it, and to seek the kingdom view of things.

Question: In what ways was your spiritual conversion a rethinking?

1 Kings 8:47

"... yet if they come to their senses in the land to which they have been taken captive, and repent ..." (For context, read 8:46-53.)

These words are from King Solomon's prayer of dedication for the newly constructed temple in Jerusalem. He is not saying that his people have done wrong and have been taken captive, but only asking that if they do and are carried off but then "come to their senses ... and repent," God will help them. We have quoted this verse to show how Solomon linked "come to their senses," which is clearly a thinking process, to repentance, which is a spiritual one.

Questions: Would it be appropriate for your pastor to issue an altar call using the words "come to your senses"? Why or why not?

Galatians 3:28

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (For context, read 3:19-29.)

This is part of Paul's discussion of the role of the Law of Moses for Christians. Since Christianity was born in Judaism, some early believers felt that anyone other than Jews who embraced Christ had to also adhere to the Jewish dietary, Sabbath and other religious practices, and, if they were male, be circumcised. Paul, however, insisted that the law by itself justified no one; only faith in Christ can do that. He wanted his Jewish readers to know that reliance on the law was not adequate for their salvation and his Gentile readers to know that their outsider relationship to the law did not make them outsiders for the sake of justification. Whatever their relationship to the law, members of both groups could be justified only by faith in Christ.

Paul then made the sweeping and important statement quoted above, saying that all people who come to Christ are one.

We should not miss that this view of the law was a massive rethinking for Paul. Before his conversion, he had been a big-time persecutor of Christians, whom he saw as violating the law.

Question: Probably most Christians would see this verse as a condemnation of deliberate racism, but what does it suggest we do about our unexamined behaviors and attitudes that allow stereotyping of people to continue to find fertile ground within us?

Proverbs 10:12

"Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses." (For context, read 10:11-12.)

With her father's murderer being protected because he was white, Sherrod had grounds for hatred. But here's something she said in her speech, something that was not included in the edited clip:

"But where am I going with this? You know, I couldn't say 45 years ago [at my father's funeral] -- I couldn't stand here and say what I'm saying -- what I will say to you tonight. Like I told you, God helped me to see that

it's not just about black people -- it's about poor people. And I've come a long way. I knew that I couldn't live with hate, you know. As my mother has said to so many, 'If we had tried to live with hate in our hearts, we'd probably be dead now.'"

Question: Do Sherrod's comments illustrate the proverb? Explain your answer.

Questions for Further Discussion

1. Why do you think Sherrod was forced to resign without being given an opportunity to explain her side of the story? Why do you suppose her employer didn't first check the facts before demanding her resignation?
2. How do we hold so-called "news" agencies responsible for telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?
3. How can we decide which news stories are true?
4. Andrew Breitbart, who released the edited video on the Big Government Web site, has since said, "I could care less about Shirley Sherrod," saying that his purpose was to counter the charge by the NAACP and others of racism in the Tea Party (See [Andrew Breitbart On Hannity: "I Could Care Less About Shirley Sherrod."](#) *Media-ite*). But is it okay to make people collateral damage to support a cause? What would Jesus say about that?
5. How does Romans 12:2 -- "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect" -- apply to today's lesson?
6. How does 2 Corinthians 5:10 -- "... we take every thought captive to obey Christ" -- apply?

Responding to the News

In a partisan world, there will continue to be hardball, take-no-prisoner tactics by people on all sides of a controversy, and it's quite possible for even Christians to start to believe these common practices are okay. Therefore, it behooves us in the church to continue to champion honesty, good motives, fairness in reporting and similar qualities, and to declare foul play foul when we see it.

Other News This Week

Living in the United States where freedom to worship as we see fit is a protected right, it is easy to forget that in some other places, people pay with their lives for being Christians. At minimum, persecuted Christians need our prayers.

The message below is from Dr. Maqsood Kamil of the Presbyterian Seminary in Pakistan. It tells of two Pakistani Christian pastors who were gunned down at the court in Faisalabad. He includes a link to the news story, but describes the tense situation for Christians in Pakistan.

Dear friends,

Greetings. We had a very sad and tearful day and night yesterday. I wanted to send you this news as soon as possible but did not find any time till late at night. Two young Christian brothers falsely accused of blasphemy were shot dead in the court in Faisalabad. Below is the link for Dawn News paper. You may read the story in our most trusted news paper as well. It has not covered the full story. Apart from killing the two young Christian brothers in the court, in the evening Muslim mob attacked the Christian dwelling places, Daood Nagar and Waris Pura. Christian shops, a church and some other places were burnt. Situation in Faisalabad is extremely tense. Christians are fleeing the area. Dead bodies of the martyred Christians were buried early in the

morning today. At the seminary, in our family and as a community we were on our knees to ask God's protection for Christians in Faisalabad and around the country. Please pray for the consolation of the family of the martyred Christians and for the safety and security of all the Christians in Pakistan.

Love

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Here's the link: [Blasphemy Accused Killed on Court Premises.Dawn.com](#)

Closing Prayer

O God, be in both our thinking and our actions. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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