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Imago Dei and Spiritual Indifference: Maycomb as a Microcosm of Christian Complacency

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Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, takes place in Maycomb County, Alabama during the 1930s and focuses on the Finch family: widowed attorney, Atticus Finch; the black housekeeper, Calpurnia; the school-age son, Jem; and the precocious six-year-old daughter, Scout. The primary action of the novel revolves around Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson, a black man who is wrongfully accused of raping a white woman. From the beginning, even the townspeople who know Tom is being falsely charged are resigned to the fact that Atticus's efforts to defend Tom Robinson are futile. As one town citizen remarks: "in the secret courts of men's hearts Atticus had no case. Tom was a dead man the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth and screamed." Ultimately, that statement would prove to be prophetic.

Closed Ranks and "Community"

Although racism has long been deemed the dominant theme in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a closer examination shows that the sins of pride and complacency play a key role.

As Maycomb is a town where church attendance is the "principal recreation," it wouldn't be a stretch to say that most of the townspeople primarily self-identify as Christian. But the people of Maycomb hide their own weaknesses by pointing at who they are *not* and devaluing those

groups. Thus, at the root of Maycomb's racism is a sense of pride that ultimately results in indifference toward the suffering of others.

In her depiction of Maycomb, Lee puts many "good people's" ills on display and dares us to absolve this behavior as "just the way people are." In effect, *To Kill a Mockingbird* forces us to watch the natural evolution of the effects of pride through the depictions of Tom Robinson, Boo Radley, Walter Cunningham, and others. Lee's assertion is that the small indignities meted out by seemingly well-meaning people all too often produce unmitigated suffering in the lives of the vulnerable and less desirable.

The lessons of *To Kill a Mockingbird* challenge Christians to recognize the *imago Dei* in each human being and call them to self-assessment. The people of Maycomb, convinced of their own righteousness, fail in these tasks, and their inaction leads to great injustice. Maycomb excuses its own sin while harshly judging others, ignoring the biblical injunction to examine ourselves: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? (Matthew 7:3).

Good Intentions and Culpability

Our instinctual response to stories about places like Maycomb is to see them as distant from our own reality—after all, we and our neighbors are nice people who are doing our best to live decent lives—we would do better. Maycomb's familiarity disabuses us of this notion and encourages the recognition of its likeness to ourselves.

In the aftermath of Tom Robinson's trial and death, Jem comes to this sort of awakening in a conversation with his neighbor:

> Jem was staring at his half-eaten cake. 'It's like bein' a caterpillar in a cocoon, that's what it is,' he said. 'Like somethin' asleep wrapped up in a warm place. I always thought Maycomb folks were the best folks in the world, least that's what they seemed like.'"
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> "We're the safest folks in the world," said Miss Maudie. "We're so rarely called on to be Christians, but when we are, we've got men like Atticus to go for us."

Miss Maudie's response illustrates the complacency that has seized Maycomb. Not only is Maycomb guilty of pride and arrogance, but they also simultaneously refuse to dirty their hands to address the suffering around them. This lack of integrity among the churchgoers of Maycomb County is especially apparent in their attitude toward Atticus, who is a prominent citizen and the town's resident hero.

Through Maycomb's association with Atticus, the townspeople can be Christian by extension. Comments such as, "There are some men in this world who are born to do our unpleasant jobs for us. Your father's one of them," illustrate that through Maycomb's association with Atticus, a sense of Christian responsibility is unnecessary. Their complacency was undergirded by their association with Atticus, which was all that was necessary to salve their conscience and respond with inaction. The townspeople who recognize injustices around them but do not act demonstrate a greater fear of their fellow man than of the judgment of God. Seemingly, Atticus is the only one who truly sees the situation clearly when he explains that he chose to defend Tom Robinson because the case "is something that goes to the essence of a man's conscience—Scout, I couldn't go to church and worship God if I didn't try to help that man."

Taking a Stand and Standing Alone

To Kill a Mockingbird evokes Philippians 2:3-5: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." If the citizens of Maycomb had practiced the truths of these verses, they would have treated everyone with dignity regardless of the person's race or class. However, that humility might come at the cost of alienation from their community, which is a price that few are willing to pay.

Only Atticus Finch has the courage to set aside his pride and reputation to do what is right. He suffers humiliation and alienation for defending Tom Robinson. He knew he would. He also knew that he was

bound by a higher duty. "I've got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience." The Bible tells us that fear of the scorn of men should not prevent us from doing what is right, and that God will uphold the righteous: "Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord!" (Psalm 31:24).