

A Brief Theology on Race and Racism

A theology of “race” begins with God.

God created humankind in his own image, the *Imago Dei*, the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). This image confers value to every human being and is the basis of universal human rights. However, the Bible goes deeper for those in Christ, declaring that we from every nation and every socio-economic background, are united and “joint heirs” with Jesus (Romans 8:17; Galatians 3:29; 4:7; Ephesians 3:6). We are in His image, valued, and highly blessed.

Scripture and science affirm that God “*made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth*” (Acts 17:26). According to Scripture there are no separate races, but only one race, the human race.¹ According to Scripture, people who are Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, African, Indian, Arab, and Jewish are not different races. They are various ethnicities of the human race. The idea of “races” is itself a construct devised by fallen humanity to often justify and legitimize bigotry and discrimination.²

Understanding God’s creation – one human race composed of a diversity of ethnicities -- underscores this eternal reality: there’s no place for racial/ethnic superiority or supremacy. Favoritism is repeatedly condemned by God (Deuteronomy 10:17; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9), and discrimination is rejected as well (James 2:2-8).

Before anything or anyone was created, God existed eternally as a Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This has extraordinary implications regarding our understanding of unity with diversity. Dr. Tim Keller notes, “God is perfect unity in diversity and diversity in unity... Because God is unity in diversity, Christians can and must know unity across the diverse human barriers of race and culture.”³

Living in the beauty of this unity has been challenging due to our flawed nature. The first humans sinned (“missed the mark” and transgressed), resulting in alienation, psychological fragmentation, and violence. The proclivity to sin continues. As Romans 3:23 states, “...all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” King David was explicit about his sin, “For I was born a sinner, yes from the moment my mother conceived me.” (Psalm 51:5 NLT)

According to Scripture the core reason people are racist and practice a host of other sins, is because their hearts are corrupt. Jesus made it clear, “For from within, out of a person’s heart, come evil thoughts...” (Mark 7:21-22).

At the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), humanity sought unity and self-empowerment apart from God. This man-made failure resulted in further scattering and division around various ethnic

¹Of interest, geneticists have also traced all humans back to a single “mitochondrial Eve” and a single “y-chromosomal Adam. All the genetic material for variations was present in the first human beings. In other words, there is no Biblical or scientific basis for separate races.

²For example, Charles Darwin’s book on evolution was titled, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859)

³Tim Keller, <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/the-bible-and-race/>

groups. These groups were separated by distinctive combinations of language, customs, religions, and the like, but not genetically determined “races.”

One of the effects of collective sin has been various ethnic groups oppressing others by exploiting, enslaving, or exterminating them... a tragic occurrence in nearly every part of the world. The horrors of the North Atlantic slave trade and the Holocaust were not new. Sinful and evil humanity has recorded these tragedies from the beginning of time. The Bible records the long enslavement of the Israelites by the Egyptians and their subsequent liberation by God. Thankfully we are promised redemption and restoration in Revelation 7:9, one we can experience today through the power of the cross (Ephesians 2:14-16).

After the debacle of Babel, God redemptively chose one people group, the descendants of Abraham, to become the nation of Israel. From the outset, their purpose was to bless all the nations of the earth and bring the seed of salvation to humanity (Gen. 12:3). This was not favoritism, but rather God’s sovereign election unto a distinct purpose to serve and bless.

God’s plan of salvation through Israel culminated in the coming of Jesus. Jesus declared himself the Messiah saying, “Salvation (comes) from the Jews.” (John 4:26). His very name, Yeshua or Joshua, means, “God rescues.” During his earthly ministry He explicitly declared His salvation was for all nations without exception (Matthew 28:18-20), confronting the ethnocentrism (“racism”) of his Jewish brethren by reminding them that God sent His servants to provide for Gentile widows and heal Gentile lepers as well as those of the Jewish nation (Luke 4:24-30). His blood was shed for all peoples.

The Jewish people had historically become proud of their status and despised the Gentiles, but Jesus was tearing down this racism and prejudice through his ministry. Ultimately, Jesus put an end to this by, “*destroying the dividing wall of hostility...*” (Ephesians 2:14).

After Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, he and Father God poured out the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost upon, “*men from every nation under heaven*” (Acts 2:5), uniting people groups of different languages. As we look at this, we recognize, “the church was multicultural and multilingual from the first moment of its existence”.⁴

Despite Jesus’ ministry and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, the early Christians continued to wrestle with the implications of the Gospel upon ethnicity and racism. Jesus’ close disciple, Peter, the first to preach the gospel on that Day of Pentecost, later struggled when called to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10-11).

Peter’s struggle to go to the Gentiles was just the beginning of the divisions within the church because Christians have been more deeply influenced by their national interests and racial identity than their greater identity found in Jesus Christ. This kind of pride can change as Christians reject their idolatry, fractiousness, and tribalism and embrace their new humanity as “one” in Christ.

⁴ DeYoung, Curtiss Paul, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation As an Answer to the Problem of Race*, page 22

Finally after numerous “signs,” Peter shared the Gospel with the Gentiles, saw the Holy Spirit fall upon them, and confessed, “*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him...*” (Acts 10:34-35).

Peter again succumbed to racial separation in Antioch and was rebuked by Paul because his racial division “was not in step with the truth of the Gospel” (Galatians 2:14). Paul called out his hypocrisy and perversion of the gospel. It’s clear that some of the Jewish Christians in Antioch put their national/ethnic interests above the wellbeing of the church at large.

There are significant ramifications today in Paul’s rebuke. One is that racism is a serious issue and must be confronted inside the church. Also, racism is an affront to the gospel. The church today must resist its division along racial and social lines.

The good news is that a true believer can overcome this sin and live in the full benefit of the impact of the gospel. As Jim Wallis notes, “Faith communities that are becoming more multiracial are some of the best places to have the difficult, painful, and personal conversations... about our racial future.”⁵

As we move toward sincere and biblical reconciliation within the church, the church can share the hope of reconciliation with the world as well. In the words of the late Billy Graham, “racial and ethnic hostility is the foremost social problem facing our world today.” The world is in desperate need of healing, salvation, civility, and empathy.

Remarkably, we clearly see the gospel at work in Antioch by uniting a culturally and ethnically diverse team (Acts 13:1-2). The leaders were united across the diverse human barriers of race and culture as this became an early prototype for what church can and should be. This reveals a relevant outworking of how the gospel works against cultural “isms.”

The Church at Antioch was clearly multi-ethnic and multicultural as the historian Luke gives details about the leadership team. Included in the list of prophets and teachers were Barnabas, a wealthy Jewish Levite; Simeon, called Niger, most likely a black African convert to Judaism; Lucius, probably a Greek or Roman from North Africa; Manaen, a Hellenized Jewish aristocrat and Saul, the Jewish scholar, raised as a Roman citizen.

Luke, the author of Acts, highlights the diversity for good reason. The gospel had taken root in hearts and it began to change structures, systems, and outdated cultural strongholds as homogenous people groups transformed into a multiethnic church leadership team. It was in Antioch that “the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:26).

Christianity, often known for what it is against, actually has a long-standing history of what it is for. Christianity, surprising to some, is pro-ethnicities, pro-equality, pro-children, pro-women, pro-justice, pro-life, pro foreigners, and is the answer for the poor (economic justice) and marginalized.⁶

⁵ Jim Wallis, *America’s Original Sin*, page 214

⁶ Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success*; Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*;

At the end of history, the book of Revelation reveals a new heaven and a new earth containing people of “every tongue, tribe, people, and nation” (Revelation 7:9) worshiping their common Savior for all, the Lord Jesus. In the words of Duke University’s Dr. Valerie Cooper, Professor of Religion and Society and Black Church Studies, “Revelation 7:9 is a beautiful picture of what I imagine when I think of diversity, anti-racism, inclusion, and a beautiful application of the finished work of Christ.”

Diversity and ethnic expression *is* beautiful. Tim Keller explains, “Our resurrection bodies will keep their ethnicity. Final redemption, then, does not erase racial and cultural differences. Different cultures have their own particular glories and splendors...”⁷ No one culture, even Jewish culture, is singled out as superior to others.

The early church bore an unprecedented witness to a “new people” where people of different ethnicities, wealth, and status were together in the bonds of love. Marginalized and vulnerable groups such as the poor, slaves, women, orphans, disabled, sick, and the unborn were valued. The Church of Philippi was a model expression of those from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds who were pulling together and embracing each other with dignity. The New Testament shows new lives living in new ways and forming new communities which had significant impact on societies.

The Gospel of Jesus is the answer for the ultimate eradication of racism. It begins with repentance in the heart, then permeates one’s home, community, and church. The gospel most certainly speaks to issues of justice; thus we speak truth into society (Matthew 5:13-16).

From the creation, when God made from one man and one woman every nation of people, to the eschaton, when God will make everything new and welcome men and women from every nation, He has always been at work to demonstrate the beautiful tapestry of His diverse creation. And even at Pentecost God reversed the curse of Babel – changing the confused din of disunity into the pure gospel message of clarity – so in the church God brings multi-ethnic brothers and sisters together and reverses the curse of Cain, changing fratricide into fraternal affection and love.

⁷ Tim Keller, <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/the-bible-and-race/>