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PUTTING RACE IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

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SYNOPSIS

Ferguson, Missouri, has become a symbol of racial tension in America. The death of unarmed African American teenager Michael Brown at the hands of white police officer Darren Wilson aroused a nation's conscience. Some viewed the incident as representative of bigger issues concerning unjust policing in black communities. Others remained silent and resolved to wait until more facts came to light. Yet others thought the young man reaped what he sowed. These starkly different reactions and recent similar events reveal the deep racial divide that still exists in this country.

But Ferguson offers Christians an opportunity to make progress in the realm of race relations in the United States. The Bible offers the spiritual tools necessary to build bridges across race and culture. Yet conversations among Christians about racial issues too often mirror the culture's categories rather than biblical ones. Many believers take their cues about race from the social climate instead of Scripture's teachings.

The Bible teaches that there is one race: the human race. All people are descended from the same historic parents and are created in the image of God. Each person, regardless of race or culture, has inherent dignity and worth as God's creation and image bearer. But there are also two spiritual races: the redeemed and the unredeemed. As God's "chosen race" by grace through faith, Christians should be able to dialogue about race relations productively. Only by employing the Bible's principles for understanding race will reconciliation become a reality.

Ferguson, Missouri, was an anonymous town outside of St. Louis until the events of August 9, 2014. On that date, unarmed African American teenager Michael Brown was fatally shot by white police officer Darren Wilson. The deadly encounter caused protests, marches, and occasional looting at sites across the country. Many, especially African Americans, saw Brown's death as yet another example of unjust policing practices characteristic of interactions between white law enforcement officials and black residents. Others, especially whites, viewed the shooting as an isolated incident that should be judged strictly according to its specific circumstances. Almost one year later, the two sides remain at odds.

Although Ferguson has become a symbol of racial tension in America, other similar events have enflamed the controversy. Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, and more were unarmed African American males killed by white police officers. Anger further intensified in November 2014, when a grand jury decided not to indict Officer Darren Wilson for killing Mike Brown. Then in March 2015 a Department of Justice Report demonstrated a pattern of unconstitutional policing and a focus on revenue rather than justice.¹ This succession of events heightens ideological differences, but the path forward remains unclear.

Christians have gotten involved, too. But for a people who claim to be supernaturally united by the Holy Spirit, their arguments have frequently been just as divisive and inconclusive as those of non-Christians. Should discussions about race and reconciliation sound different among followers of Christ? Does the Bible speak to contemporary racial issues? If so, how does a biblical understanding of race move racially and culturally diverse people closer toward unity?

DIVIDED BY RACE

Over the past fifty years, laws and social norms regarding race have undeniably improved. Yet with all of the progress, the United States remains deeply divided along racial lines. This reality is nowhere more stark than in the church.

In mainline Protestant churches, over 90 percent of congregants are non-Hispanic whites. This figure stands at over 80 percent for evangelical Protestant denominations,

and over 90 percent of churchgoers in historically black denominations are black.² In a survey of 1,007 Protestant pastors conducted by Lifeway Research, 86 percent agreed that the overwhelming majority of churches are predominantly one racial or ethnic group.³ These figures agree with the assessment of Mark DeYmaz, pastor of a multi-ethnic church⁴ and founder of the Mosaic Network of churches. He estimates that 13.7 percent of all churches are multi-ethnic and 14.4 percent of evangelical churches are multi-ethnic.⁵

The situations in Ferguson and other cities force Americans to question why so few churches display racial diversity and harmony. Even Christians must admit their view of race often conforms to the traditional cultural narrative. Believers are not immune to the effects of racism and discrimination.

Bridges across racial gaps cannot be easily built, but the Bible provides guidance. Christians should let their thinking about racial issues be shaped primarily by biblical principles and only secondarily by current social norms. There is a place for social analysis, but this should come after Christians have a firm grasp on the biblical principles that apply to race.

Race Is a Social Construct

Race as generally understood in the United States is a social construct. When most people think of race, they immediately picture skin color. Race is also associated with other physical features such as hair, body type, lip size, and nose shape. In the United States, the concept of race has been used to divide and oppress. By the 1600s, modern black slavery had become the norm in Europe. Several countries had established slave markets on the west coast of Africa. These ports began shipping millions of Africans to North and South America. Skin color proved to be an easy trait to differentiate between slave owners and slaves. Even after slavery was abolished, race served as a cultural and social barrier between people of African and Anglo descent.⁶ The close association between race and discrimination is a central storyline in the American narrative.

There's Only One Race: The Human Race

The Bible speaks of race in different terms than modern Americans. First, the Bible affirms what science has subsequently supported. Even though different races exhibit different physical features, the differences have little biological significance. All human beings, no matter what their genetic traits, are part of the same race: the human race. One of the best verses to illustrate this point is Acts 17:26: "And [God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined

allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (all Scripture citations ESV).

The “one man” in this verse is the historical Adam. God commanded the first man and his wife, Eve, to be fruitful and multiply. After the Flood, Noah and his descendants had children who had children who increased in number and filled the Earth. As the human population swelled, they ventured out into different geographic locations. They formed “nations” of people who dwelled in territories with particular boundaries during particular times. The times and places where human beings took up residence were all “determined” beforehand by God. So the multinational diversity present in the world is not by accident; it is by God’s design.

If all humankind shares the same ancestral parentage, what does that mean for race relations today? Primarily, it refutes any conception of ontological inferiority. Throughout much of U.S. history, racist men and women promulgated the myth that people of African descent were not only biologically different but also a deficient race.

From the earliest days, American slaves were treated as less than full persons. The “Three-fifths Compromise” of 1787, for example, allowed states to count black slaves as three-fifths of a person when determining their political representation in the U.S. House of Representatives. Laws against miscegenation also found their roots in ideas of racial inferiority. Miscegenation refers to intermarrying and procreation between races. Racists often used the perceived threat of miscegenation as one of the most potent methods of fear- and hate-mongering. But subtler forms of racism are more common today. Concepts such as the “bell curve” reinforce the idea that some races of people are inherently more intelligent than others.⁷ And in Ferguson, the Department of Justice confirmed disturbing patterns of racial bias at work in the criminal justice system.⁸

Second, the Bible teaches that all human beings are created in the image of God (the doctrine of the *imago dei*). The image of God in all people makes them equally worthy of dignity in the sight of God and all humankind. Racism not only disregards scientific facts but it also, more importantly, is a direct assault on the image of God in humanity.

THERE ARE TWO RACES: REDEEMED AND UNREDEEMED

While the Bible speaks of one biological race, the human race, it also speaks of two spiritual races. First Peter 2:9 says, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

To be a “chosen race” means to be called to faith in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit through the grace of the Father. In the final judgment, God will distinguish between two races of humanity – the redeemed and the unredeemed. These races are not determined by biology but by belief. Those who by faith accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior will enter into heavenly glory. Those who reject the gospel will be eternally separated from God and left to the devastating effects of their unbelief.

Just as all human beings have the same biological heritage, all people also share the same spiritual heritage. When Adam rebelled against God by eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, spiritual and physical death entered the world. All of Adam’s descendants share in death as the consequence of sin. The Westminster Larger Catechism puts it this way: “The covenant being made with Adam as a public person, not for himself only, but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in that first transgression.”⁹ Because of Adam’s disobedience, not only would human beings return to the dust, but their hearts died to God as well. For in Adam, all die (1 Cor. 15:22).

The theological concept of total depravity describes the state of sin into which all people are born. Every member of the human race has been corrupted by sin. “They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one” (Ps. 14:3). But total depravity does not mean we are all as bad as we could possibly be; it means every part of our humanity – mental, physical, spiritual – has been affected by sin.

Yet God provides a way to bring the spiritually dead back to life. Adam’s sin meant death for all humankind, but Christ’s obedience brings life for those who believe (Rom. 5:18). It is those who believe who become part of God’s “chosen race.” So although humankind is one race biologically, there are two spiritual races.

The Bible speaks of this spiritual dichotomy in various ways. Jesus says, “Before him [God] will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left” (Matt. 25:32–33). In another example, John the Baptist says, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:17). In these parables, the wheat and sheep are the people who repent and believe in Jesus Christ, and the chaff and goats are all those who persist in unbelief.

Conversations about race should be held within the biblical framework of the image of God on the one hand and total depravity on the other. Humans are of one biological race that is divided into two spiritual races. Even though race as a social construct has meaning, the most important racial category for Christians is being part of

God's chosen race. Believers must engage in dialogue about race with the goal of presenting the gospel to people who are still of the unredeemed race.

Racism Is Sin

Since the Bible teaches how to distinguish the concepts of biological race from spiritual race, Christians are free to better understand the cosmic roots of racism. Scripture teaches that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Every human being, even those of God's chosen spiritual race, is a sinner. One way sin manifests itself is in racism.

Racism is one form of pride. Human pride is an effort to exalt oneself over God and others. This is what happened to Adam in the Garden. He presumed that his own standard of right and wrong stood above God's standard. He arrogantly disregarded God's divine right to command obedience. The creature pridefully tried to put himself above the Creator, and people have been doing the same thing ever since.

If human beings would have the gall to exalt themselves over God, then it is predictable that they would try to exalt themselves over other human beings. John Piper explains it this way: "Anybody that would have the audacity not to submit to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords would not have any problem putting you down."¹⁰ Thus, racism is a form of pride that exalts people of one racial category over another.

The Consequences of Reframing Race

How do the categories of one race and two races, the image of God, and total depravity change our conversations about race? How do the biblical ideas that all human beings have intrinsic worth yet are equally lost in their sins affect our dialogue about race as a social construct? The effects are many.

First, the fact that racism is sin, rooted in total depravity, should make it no surprise that America is still dealing with racial tensions even fifty years after the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Changed laws do not change hearts. As Anthony Bradley states, "Of course racism still exists. Racism is sin and, as long as people sin, racism will exist."¹¹ Racism will never be completely eradicated on this side of heaven; it will only change forms. So believers can have a realistic view about how much racial progress can actually be achieved before Christ returns. Yet believers should not despair.

A positive implication is that if racism is sin, then people can be freed from it. Sin's domineering power is broken on the cross. Jesus Christ took away the power of sin to enslave His people. He brought liberation to those caught in the bondage of racial

bias. This means that even the most venomous racist can turn into a lion of love. No one is beyond the saving power of the gospel, so everyone can move from racism to compassion.

Also, since God created all kinds of diversity in the world and among His people, differences should be celebrated, not shunned. The notion of “color blindness” sounds appealing. It echoes Martin Luther King, Jr.’s dream for people to be judged, “not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” But in practice, it typically means that Christians refrain from talking about cultural differences in favor of a bland uniformity. Such thinking disregards the unique perspectives and contributions that come from various people groups. God’s children form a glorious tapestry comprised of an endless variety of strands that are being woven together by the Holy Spirit to produce a work of art that wonderfully displays God’s image. Christians should appreciate each other’s differences as expressions of God’s manifold splendor and not ignore them in a misguided attempt at unity.

Additionally, if diversity is a good gift of God, then it should be pursued in local congregations. Knowing that all human beings are equally loved and equally lost in the sight of God should compel believers to preach the gospel to all kinds of people in hopes that their churches will reflect the dizzying diversity of heaven. Revelation 5:9 says, “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands.” In this verse, God pulls back the curtain of heaven to reveal a happy ending where people from every ethnicity and geography will assemble around the throne of Jesus Christ to worship Him. Thus, each church should cultivate an awareness of the surrounding community and purposefully welcome neighbors from any race, economic class, language, education level, and so forth.

Further, Christians should recognize that their primary identity is in Christ. Racial identities are not foundational. Being one of the “chosen race,” a member of the household of God, a sheep, a stalk of wheat—these are all biblical categories for identity. “In Christ Jesus, the dividing wall has been broken down, and ethnic distinctions no longer matter. All who have been redeemed by Christ’s blood and reconciled to God and to one another are one in Christ.”¹² Believers can still identify as black or white, Chinese or Portuguese, but their most important identity is as Christians.

Finally, humility should lead Christians to acknowledge that everyone has cultural blind spots. Each person’s upbringing and social position gives him or her a certain vantage point from which to view life. But it also brings with it a certain inability to see life from the viewpoint of another. Christians need one another to help

form a more comprehensive panorama of the world. Brothers and sisters in Christ should be able to point out one another's racial blind spots without tearing each other down. Instead, speaking the truth in love, Christians should build up the body for holiness and unity.

MOVING FROM HOPE TO REALITY

Conversations about racial issues such as the ones Ferguson brought up will have a frustrating repetitiveness if Christians simply mimic the culture's categories of race instead of looking first to the Word of God. Scripture teaches that all human beings descend from one set of parents who were made in the image and likeness of God. But all human beings have also sinned and together have become estranged from God. Christians, though, are a people who have been brought from spiritual death to life by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. They are a new race, a chosen race. What unites believers is far greater than any racial divide. The recent resurgence of racial tensions caused by the death of Mike Brown, the nonindictment of Officer Darren Wilson, the protests in Baltimore, the fatalities of John Crawford, Ezell Ford, Akai Gurley, and others give the church an opportunity to engage productively in discussions about the social construct of race in America. When Christians consciously employ the biblical categories for race, then reconciliation has the opportunity to move from hope to reality.

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NOTES

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