

Article: JAM133

“A FUSION OF HORIZONS”: HOW MULTICULTURALISM MISREPRESENTS 2 CORINTHIANS 5:13–21

This article first appeared in the Practical Hermeneutics column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 30, number 3 (2007). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), attempted to combine “philosophical hermeneutics” with practical history by showing that people have a “historically effected consciousness” embedded in their view of particular history and culture. Gadamer labeled the framework or range of meaning set by history a “horizon,” and stated that understanding or interpretation involves a “fusion of horizons.”

According to theologian Grant R. Osborne, “Gadamer argues that...language and text are autonomous entities with a life of their own. The act of interpretation does not so much unlock the past meaning of the text as establish a dialectic with the text in the present.”¹

An example of this “fusion of horizons” and its misrepresentation of Scripture is found in the questionable tenets of the new orthodoxy *multiculturalism*. This article is an attempt to evaluate its movement away from the author-text meaning of Scripture (e.g., the intention of the author as expressed in the text) that Gadamer’s school of New Criticism has prompted in an act of hermeneutical malpractice.

White or Black, Up or Down? A favorite Bible passage among evangelical advocates of multiculturalism is 2 Corinthians 5:13–21, which mentions that God has given us a ministry and message of reconciliation. The Racial Harmony Council of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities² elevates this passage to the “highest ground for affirmative action today” because “implicit in it is one’s reconciliation with one’s fellow human beings, one’s neighbors.”³ Rather than expound the passage, evangelical multiculturalists tend to cite the passage without historical context in order to expound a doctrine of reconciliation that is assumed to be accurate today, a teaching that has gained ascendancy and circulation within the “racial reconciliation” literature.⁴

The tendency is to give cursory attention to reconciliation as a reality already accomplished by God in Jesus Christ and to the gospel’s upward call to be reconciled to God. Too readily those who appeal to 2 Corinthians 5:13–21 use the passage as if its burden were horizontal reconciliation of racial groups to one another, which they call “racial reconciliation,” rather than vertical reconciliation of individuals to God.

Self-Referentially Contradictory Non-Essentials. The racialized interpretation and use of “reconciliation” in 2 Corinthians 5:13–21 is self-referentially contradictory and is contrary to the Apostle’s meaning. Evangelical advocates of multiculturalism who appeal to 2 Corinthians 5:13–21 ignore some crucial elements of the Apostle’s comments as they compel Christians to become consciously observant of racial differences, particularly skin color, in our relationships with one another in the church. Paul speaks in verses 11–12 about his distinctive role as a “minister of reconciliation”⁵ appointed by Christ. Paul argues that because he fears the Lord, he endeavors to persuade others concerning the truth of the gospel, not to commend himself, but to provide an occasion for the Corinthians to glory on his behalf in order that they might have an answer “for those who glory in the face of the matter and not in the heart of it.”

Paul says that Christ's love constrains him because of this conviction, that one died on behalf of all people without distinction, and that in him Jews and Gentiles alike died. Christ died for all peoples that they should live not to themselves but on His behalf. Paul draws an inference from this and says, "So then, from this time forward we do not regard anyone in keeping with the flesh; though formerly we acknowledged Christ in keeping with the flesh, but now we do not so recognize Him. So then, if anyone is in Christ, this one is the new creation; the old has passed away, see, the new has come."

Paul insists that God's new creative work in Christ gives redeemed eyesight so that a Christian no longer judges "in keeping with the flesh," that is, what is seen superficially. He illustrates what he means. Formerly, he judged Christ as despised, but he does not any longer, for he now sees the heart of the matter, not merely the face of it.

Here is the power of the gospel concerning race relations in the church. God's creative work through the gospel makes us people of the new creation where "the face of the matter" is not what counts, but rather, what counts is "the heart" (5:12). Because Christ died for all people without discrimination, we who believe in Him do not regard anyone in keeping with the flesh, which is to say, by one's outward circumstances, such as birth, station in life, wealth or poverty, race, ethnicity, skin color, or any other nonessential aspect of human nature. We look instead upon the heart of the matter and look upon one another as new creation in Christ. Disparities among us that endure as residuals of God's providential appointments to individuals in this present age, count for nothing, if we are of the new creation in Christ. Paul expresses all of this, not as admonition, but as *reality*, a reality that is already realized in Christ Jesus.⁶

All this grounds what Paul says next, when he succinctly summarizes the message Christ entrusted to him as the Apostle to the Gentiles:

Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, which is, that in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them and He has laid upon us the message of reconciliation. On behalf of Christ, therefore, we serve as His representatives, as though God were making His appeal through us. We entreat you on behalf of Christ: Be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, in order that we might be God's righteousness in Him.⁷

Paul's gospel, then, announces that reconciliation to God is a reality that God has already accomplished in Christ's sacrificial death on behalf of all people without distinction. Yet, in Christ's stead, Paul proclaims the gospel, which is God's own appeal to humans, entreating them to be reconciled to Him. True reconciliation to fellow humans is not found except through reconciliation to God.

In the Name of the Spirit of Diversity. Multiculturalism is a seductive philosophical view of the world. It allures ingenuous Christians who mistakenly think that its virtuous-sounding talk of "social justice," its goal to achieve "diversity," its suppression of ill-mannered speech with "political correctness" is of a piece with Christian virtue and is compatible with the Christian gospel.

The allurement of multiculturalism to Christians is understandable, even if inexcusable, given its purposeful ambiguity, which seemingly is intended to veil its antithetical posture toward Christianity. The way evangelicals exploit and manipulate Scripture to authorize and justify the baptism of multiculturalism for the church and for the Christian academy is even less excusable.

Evangelicals embrace the new social gospel of multiculturalism as though it were the gospel itself. Many evangelical ministers and leaders who champion the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ already, regrettably, incorporate the social gospel as a "fusion of [the] horizons" of Scripture's intended author-text reality with a contemporary message of misplaced reconciliatory action into the message they regularly proclaim from pulpits and lecterns.

— A. B. Caneday

NOTES

1. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 369.
2. See discussions of its origins in James A. Patterson, *Shining Lights: A History of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).
3. W. Richard Stephens, "Affirmative Action and Racial Harmony in Christian Colleges: A Discussion Paper and Recommendations by the Racial Harmony Council, Council for Christian Colleges and Universities," approved and revised by Robert Suggs, Ruth Bentley, et al., December 14, 1998.
4. See, for example, Curtis Paul DeYoung, *Reconciliation: Our Greatest Challenge—Our Only Hope* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1997), 44–45; Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 52ff; Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang, and Gary A. Perrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).
5. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the author's own translation.
6. Elsewhere Paul expresses the matter this way: "Now as for me, may I never glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me and I also to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything, but new creation does" (Gal. 6:14–15).
7. For an intriguing exposition of this passage, see N. T. Wright, "On Becoming the Righteousness of God: 2 Corinthians 5:21," in *Pauline Theology*, ed. David M. Hay (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 2:200–8.