

How the Gospel Affects Our Understanding of Race Relations 6.0

As Understood by the Potomac Baptist Church Elders

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Authentic equality and true justice will only be realized when the gospel of Jesus Christ is understood and practiced. As is being proven today, other attempts to achieve equality and justice end up in further division and ultimately, a frustrated withdrawal from each other. This conviction is the driving force behind this paper.

Our desire here is twofold: 1) to make plain our understanding of how the basic principles of the gospel shape our approach to racial reconciliation, and 2) to provide a basis for further discussion. We see this as our starting point, not as the formulation of an argument or lecture. Our format, then, will be to review the key aspects of the gospel, and then explore how each area informs our understanding of race relations.

A Review of the Elementary Principles of the GOSPEL

GOD: God is the loving Creator, Designer, Owner and Judge of all things. God exists as a trinity of co-equals, each having a role and function complementary of the others.

MAN: Man is created in the image of God, but since Adam, is universally fallen and sinful from birth. This sin leads to death (in man and in all creation.)

LAW: God's holy standard of righteousness both guides and condemns mankind. It is absolute and perfect. It was summarized by Jesus as: love God with your whole heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.

JESUS: Reconciliation between God and man, and reconciliation of man to man comes through the sacrifice, resurrection and lordship of Jesus Christ, through his words and his work on the cross. There is only one way to peace with God and man, and that is through Christ. We can access forgiveness by repentance from our sins and faith in Christ. Through him we experience grace.

CHURCH: When Christians come together, we collectively become the representative body of Christ on earth. The church as a collective body is the visible expression of God on earth reflecting the character, nature and work of Christ in all we do through the power of the Holy Spirit.

FUTURE: Christ will come again to earth, and under His reign He will make all things right. He will establish justice, righteousness, and peace. He will judge the living and the dead. People from all nations and ethnic groups will gather around God's throne as family (Revelation 7).

What follows now is our understanding of how the elementary principles of the gospel apply to the challenge of race relations in America.

How the Gospel Informs our Attitude Toward Race

ONE CREATOR: We believe that ALL human beings trace their heritage back to the creation of one man who was designed by one God (Genesis 1-3, Acts 17:26). We are ALL related in the same human family, and we all answer to the same God who gave us life. Our rights and responsibilities are not simply intrinsic to us as human beings, they are God-given to us as individuals.

GOD'S IMAGE: We believe that all men are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26) which means our value and worth come from God, not from our race, our culture, our accomplishments, or the government. All are inherently equal before God and made equal again in Christ (Galatians 3:28). Biblically then, the most important part of our identity is who we are individually (Romans 9:6). This is followed in importance by our adoption into God's family (the church). Lastly, but significantly, comes our culture and ethnicity.

EQUALLY FALLEN: We believe that all men are sinful (Romans 3:23, Romans 5:12) and therefore have a common problem, which makes it hypocritical for some sinful men to look upon other sinful men with disdain (Romans 14:10). In terms of racism then, no person, no culture, no people group is untouched by the sin of racism, even those who have been victimized by racism itself. Being a victim of oppression does not eradicate one's sin nature. We are all in a struggle against sin together.

INSTITUTIONAL SIN: When we as individuals sin, we look for others who feel the same way we do. People sinning together, then, will invariably look for ways to legitimize their behavior, which they do by institutionalizing or codifying it as "normal" or "acceptable." The Bible's word for this kind of collective sin is "the World" (Ephesians 2:1-3, Romans 12:2, I Corinthians 1:20, 2:12, Colossians 2:20, I John 4:5), and it is not limited to one political party or type of government. "The world" involves institutions, structures, laws, ideologies, and philosophies that are contrary to God's kingdom. When sin evolves to this level, it is extremely difficult to fight because it has taken a group of people captive intellectually (Colossians 2:8). However, as followers of Christ, we are called to expose and fight against institutional sin, whether it is white supremacy on one side or perpetual black victimization on the other. Both false systems of thought can be institutionalized and propagated to the detriment of society. In the end, Christians must evaluate all institutions, organizations and societal structures (which will always be a "mixed bag" of beliefs) based on how closely they align with the principles of the gospel, and then advocate for just and righteous systems. Failure to do this is to sin (James 4:17).

LAW: Our understanding of right and wrong is not set by the state, nor by the dominant culture of the land in which we live, nor by a political group, nor the preferences of men, but rather by the infallible laws of a holy God which apply to ALL men. His law is perfect (Psalms 19:7). God is our judge, and we will be judged in the end by no man (Romans 14:1-12). Neither will we be condemned by the actions of others with a similar skin color. We answer to God as individuals, not as a group. Therefore, we are each responsible for our own actions (Acts 10:42). Each of us will give an account of our life to God.

REPENTANCE: Much symbolic repentance has been done both at Christian conferences and community gatherings. People of one skin color ask forgiveness of people with another skin color. The assumption is the color of their skin has made them guilty. The goal seems to be a momentary feeling of absolution, rather than racial reconciliation. True repentance begins by acknowledging something is a sin primarily against God. We repent to Him first. Then we take responsibility for whatever way in which we have contributed to this sin. A public declaration can then be helpful. This is different than admitting you are complicit in a sin just because of your ethnicity. Guilt by skin color does not come from the gospel. In the end, repentance is acknowledging we have not always seen each other (or ourselves) the way God sees us. The fruit of true repentance (Matthew 3:8) is actionable steps toward bridge building, godly relationships, reconciliation and justice.

JESUS: We believe our primary identity is "Christo-centric," or centered on Christ (Philippians 1:21). Our cultural backgrounds can and should be something we appreciate and celebrate, but when our identity becomes ethno-centric, we begin to see everything through the lens of our ethnicity instead of the gospel. This will only bring animosity and division. In addition, the grace and mercy given to us by Christ, when we were undeserving and guilty, forms the basis of our giving grace and mercy to our fellow man. Because we are forgiven, we must be forgiving. This is true for all men.

CHURCH: We believe the church's history in America is very mixed on the issue of racial equality and justice. Early on, many churches led the way in the abolitionist movement, the Quakers in particular. Yet many other churches and entire denominations condoned slavery and created elaborate justifications for doing so. This we see as a tragic failure which did not reflect the church's mission of reconciliation. The civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's was largely based out of the church, yet too many churches were silent or uninvolved in the struggle against segregation. In both of these instances we see the church's failures as wrong and inconsistent with Christ's character. We believe that all human beings, born and unborn, regardless of color, regardless of their socio-economic status, have equal value and worth in the eyes of God (Romans 2:9-11, Galatians 3:28, James 2:9), and should be viewed the same way by all who follow Jesus. Today we believe the answer to racial injustice is not political, nor does it involve a change in economic theory. The answer is the gospel of Jesus Christ which should lead us, individually and collectively, to initiate building relationships

across ethnic barriers that can model reconciliation and forgiveness. This must start with God's people, the church.

FUTURE: We believe the gospel gives us HOPE (Romans 15:13). Our future is not determined by our social context, or whether we are privileged or oppressed (Luke 16:19-31). Neither is our future dependent on achieving a flawless, utopian society. The future of the human race is determined by a sovereign God who is working all things according to His good plan (Romans 8:28). When we see our future as continuing on into an eternity where God rights every wrong and balances the scales of injustice, we truly see that our destiny is not determined by our skin color or any of other circumstance, but by His grace and mercy.

Summary

A biblical worldview understands that each of these summary points effects our understanding of race relations.

- The loving God, Creator of the universe, made man and woman.
- All men and women have equal value and worth before God.
- Our primary identity is who we are before God as individuals.
- God's law applies to all men and women. This involves the command: "love your neighbor as yourself."
- All men and women have a common sin problem which results in death.
- All men and women answer to God for their sin as individuals.
- All men and women are called to repent of their sin as individuals and be forgiven through Jesus.
- God commands all men and women to forgive one another as God in Christ forgives them, regardless of skin color.
- All those rightly related to God through Jesus share a common life stretching into eternity.

Conclusion

God's plan is to bless all "peoples" (Acts 3:25). In the end, these different people groups will gather around God's throne together, in unity, praising God. This is the common end point from which we must re-evaluate our attitudes towards people of a different culture or ethnicity.

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

Revelation 7:9-10

Our future then is a diverse group of worshippers unified under God's leadership. May that "kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven!"

Finally, if all this paper leads to is theological discussions, it has failed. The God-honoring, gospel-displaying healing we long for will only happen when men and women of God intentionally cross the cultural barriers, and live out the gospel together. It is not easy. It is costly. It takes time. We will be misunderstood. Yet the church is meant to be a "living display case" of reconciliation, both vertically with God and horizontally with man. To that end, we must constantly challenge ourselves to initiate conversations and build bridges. The starting place for that effort is earnest prayer.