

# **NEITHER BLACK NOR WHITE BUT ALL ONE IN CHRIST**

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All human beings are made in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27, 9:6) and are descendants of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:20; Acts 17:26) through Noah, his sons, and their wives (Gen. 7:3, 22-23; 2 Pet. 2:5). Facilitated by the scattering from Babel (Gen. 11:8-9), the singular human bloodline differentiated through the ages into various racial and ethnic groups, and Satan seized upon those differences in his war against God's good intention for creation. He sowed hatred, anger, jealousy, envy, distrust, resentment, and division at all levels of human society, but racial and ethnic differences proved to be particularly fertile ground for that evil work. The pride of the fallen human heart made it easy for him to obscure our family bond, our unity as God's image bearers and our physical brotherhood in Adam, and to sell the lie that being different means being less worthy as a human being. And from that lie has flowed a dark history of cruelty, suffering, and injustice.

Racism, the negative prejudging of someone on the basis of their race, is sinful. It denies to a family member and fellow bearer of God's image the dignity inherent in that status, violates the command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18; Mat. 22:39; Mk. 12:31; Lk. 10:27; Gal. 5:14), and violates the "Golden Rule" (Mat. 7:12; Lk. 6:31) by treating another person in a way one would not like to be treated. No one wants to be prejudged or looked down upon simply because of their racial characteristics. Rather, to borrow the famous words of Dr. King, we all want to be judged by the content of our character, by who we are as an individual, not by the color of our skin.

There certainly is no room for racism in the body of Christ. The church in all its racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity is declared to be one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:27-28; Col. 3:11). Our mutual sharing in the Spirit of God is a unifying bond that transcends all our differences (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:1-6). Christ's sacrificial work created "one new man" not only from the diversity of Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:14-16) but from the diversity of all humanity. That is why Paul rebuked the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 11:17-32 for maintaining socioeconomic and class distinctions in the very assembly in which the Lord's Supper was shared. The fact they did so meant they had missed an essential aspect of the Lord's Supper. That ritual meal simply cannot be eaten in a segregated, class-conscious assembly. Doing so denies the very oneness, the division-transcending unity, that the Supper symbolizes (1 Cor. 10:17).

It is the unified diversity of the church, represented by the unity of Jew and Gentile, that proclaims the Lord's glory, his multifaceted wisdom, to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:4-10). No other ruler could succeed in forging a true unity, a unity of heart, from such different groups of people, but the Lord is so great that he causes members of all people groups to lift their eyes above their differences to their shared bond in him. Only he is worthy of that division-transcending allegiance.

This is so significant that in Rev. 5:8-10 the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders, who are exalted heavenly beings, sing praises to Jesus for his having ransomed people for

God "from every tribe and language and people and nation" and having made them a kingdom and priests to God (see also, Rev. 7:9-12). Given that this diversity in redemption redounds to the glory of God, resisting it by erecting barriers against saints from different people groups is to resist God.

It is a sad fact that the sinfulness of racism was not always recognized or proclaimed by Christians. Here as elsewhere too many floated with the culture rather than pay the price of standing against it, and some even twisted the Bible to justify that cowardice. But today there is virtual unanimity among believers in Christ that racism is immoral. One can lament the prior unfaithfulness and denounce whatever racism remains, but the past failure should not mute our joy and thankfulness for the new day. Praise God that he has brought us closer to where we need to be.

Some today minimize that progress and argue that white Christians continue to be guilty of racism because they are not sufficiently concerned about or working to eliminate racial disparities in the society. It is asserted that these disparities are the result of racism, and thus are monuments of injustice, and by not accepting that characterization white Christians are complicit in the racism that produced the disparities and are sinfully failing in their obligation to oppose the injustice they represent. I disagree with that assessment and fear it is the Enemy's attempt to hold onto race as a tool for dividing the church.

It is one thing to condemn a brother or sister in Christ for racially-based animosity toward another. That is a matter of sin as revealed in Scripture, and it should be rebuked with a force appropriate to the circumstance. It is another thing to condemn a brother or sister for not accepting the assertion that racial disparities constitute proof of racism or for not taking certain prescribed actions to remediate those disparities. That is a recipe for division because it amounts to binding on others one's personal opinions and political prescriptions as if they were the will of the Lord. It turns disagreements over those questions into spiritual defects, signs that one is not truly committed to the Lord's work, and thus breeds alienation in the church.

Jemar Tisby illustrates this approach in his [recent article](#) in the *Washington Post*. He cites as proof of ongoing racism among white evangelicals a poll which he says shows that they "still hold negative views about people of certain races and ethnicities." The supporting data he offers are that "54 percent of white evangelicals indicated that the country becoming majority nonwhite by 2045 would have negative effects on the nation. But 79 percent of black Protestant respondents and 80 percent of Hispanic Protestants thought this demographic change would be good for the country."

Despite the fact 21 and 20 percent of black and Hispanic Protestants, respectively, believed the likely impact of the hypothesized demographic shift would be mostly negative, it apparently never occurred to Tisby that the 54 percent of white evangelicals who felt the same way also could have nonracist reasons for doing so. For example, nonwhites statistically favor the Democrat party by large margins. Republicans generally believe that the policy prescriptions of Democrats would be harmful to the society. Since white evangelicals are disproportionately Republican, they naturally would believe disproportionately that the likely impact of demographic changes favoring the Democrat party would be mostly negative.

Other nonracist factors could explain the results. Perhaps white evangelicals, aware of having been blamed for the election of Donald Trump and believing that most nonwhites view Trump as a racist, are disproportionately concerned that a nonwhite majority would discriminate against them. (The poll question was whether the likely impact of the demographic shift "will be mostly positive or mostly negative." It was not limited to its effect on the nation.) The point is that one must be exceedingly careful in reading into poll responses reasons that are not stated. It is reckless not to be so when using those reasons to level charges of racism, especially against fellow believers.

Tisby's evidence for systemic or structural racism is reports that (a) the wealth of the median black and Latino family is far below the wealth of the median white family, (b) black males are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white males, and (c) blacks have the highest rates of unemployment (though they currently are experiencing record employment levels), and (d) black women die in maternity-related deaths at three times the rate of white women. Those statistics are depressing indeed and worthy of alarm. The question, however, is whether racism is indisputably the primary cause of those disparities, and if so, whether that justifies accusing white brothers and sisters of sin for the existence of those disparities or for not engaging in some specified level or plan of social action to remediate them.

Despite how strenuously some assert the contrary, there is room for disagreement regarding the role of racism in these disparities. The eminent public intellectual Thomas Sowell, an African-American, documents in his 2018 book, *Discrimination and Disparities*, that there are a multitude of potential causes of disparities between and within groups. One cannot without evidence and careful analysis declare discrimination the primary cause simply because that fits one's personal sense or preconceived narrative. Factors other than racism or social victimization – family structure and relationships, cultural values, location, marital status, age, education, skills, knowledge, personal choices, etc. – can be the dominant causes of specific racial disparities.

For example, income and wealth accumulation are related to age. On average, a person at age 50 will earn more and have accumulated more than when he was age 30 because he will have increased his knowledge, skill, and experience, making him more valuable to an employer, and will have had more time to gather wealth. The median age of whites in the United States in 2015 was 43; the modal age (most common age) was 55. The median and modal ages of blacks that same year were 33 and 24, respectively. The ages for Hispanics were 28 and 8 (see [here](#)). That factor alone certainly is not sufficient to explain the large disparities in wealth, but it illustrates the complexity and inconspicuousness of potential causes and thus the difficulty in declaring with certitude that racism is the primary cause.

Consider, for example, the fact that the greatest disparity of incomes *within racial groups* when comparing those at the 90<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> percentiles is among blacks (see [here](#)). Those at the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile earn almost 10 times (9.8) what is earned by those at the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile. This disparity must be attributable to factors other than racism, since it is a disparity within the black community itself, which raises the possibility that interracial disparities also may be due

primarily to nonracist causes. That possibility cannot be dismissed summarily as a figment of racist minds.

Sowell, an economist, has long pointed out that minimum wage laws have a devastating effect on black employment (see, e.g., [here](#) and [here](#)). If that is correct, it is not racism that explains the employment gap but a misguided policy intended to help low-wage earners. Larry Elder, an African-American social commentator, cited various studies in his [2018 article](#) arguing that a difference in criminal behavior, not racism, explains the racial disparities in crime statistics.

The [2018 report](#) from nine maternal mortality review committees identified 780 contributing factors among the 195 pregnancy-related deaths they examined, there being on average four contributing factors for every one pregnancy-related death. The largest proportion of these were patient/family factors, which include obesity, chronic disease, substance abuse, lack of knowledge about warning signs and the need to seek care, lack of adherence to medication or treatment plan, mental health conditions, cultural or religious factors, unstable housing, abusive relationships, and lack of social support systems. As these and other risk factors are not distributed uniformly across races, one cannot assume the disparity is attributable to racism. Indeed, the article cited by Tisby points out that the pregnancy-related death rate of white women (18.1/100,000 live births) is 50% *higher* than that of Hispanic and Asian women (12.2 and 11.6 per 100,000), which is not what one would expect if racism were a driving factor in the disparity.

The point is not that one must accept that factors other than racism are the primary causes of these disparities. Rather, the point is that one cannot demand that other Christians agree that the disparities are caused primarily by racism and then label those who are unconvinced as sinners for closing their eyes to the alleged social injustice. We have no revelation from God on the causes of these complex sociological phenomena and thus cannot insist that the church is obligated to work for the alleviation of these disparities as a matter of sin and justice. One may appeal to the church's compassion and mercy and work in the political sphere according to one's convictions, but one should not mistake for sin differing judgments about disputable matters of social science. That will breed resentment and division in the body of Christ.

Even if one could establish definitively that the racial disparities cited by Tisby were primarily the result of racism, it would not be right to accuse white Christians of sin regarding those disparities simply because they share the skin color of the group from prior generations that predominantly engaged in the disparity-producing racism. Whatever one makes of the concept of corporate sin, using skin color to hold a person accountable for sins committed by others is precarious business. It raises troubling questions, such as: Who gets identified with the whites who struggled at great cost to end Western slavery? Who gets identified with the blacks in Africa who kidnapped and sold the slaves to European traders? By what authority does one arrogate to oneself the right to make such decisions and assignments?

The whole notion of racially-imputed guilt seems to fly in the face of the principle of culpability expressed in Ezek. 18:4-22 (see also, Deut. 24:16; 2 Ki. 14:6; 2 Chron. 25:4):

<sup>4</sup> Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die. <sup>5</sup> "If a man is righteous and does what is just and right-- <sup>6</sup> if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman in her time of menstrual impurity, <sup>7</sup> **does not oppress anyone**, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, <sup>8</sup> does not lend at interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man, <sup>9</sup> walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully-- he is righteous; he shall surely live, declares the Lord GOD. <sup>10</sup> "If **he fathers a son who** is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things <sup>11</sup> (though he himself did none of these things), who even eats upon the mountains, defiles his neighbor's wife, <sup>12</sup> **oppresses the poor and needy**, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge, lifts up his eyes to the idols, commits abomination, <sup>13</sup> lends at interest, and takes profit; shall he then live? He shall not live. He has done all these abominations; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon himself. <sup>14</sup> "Now suppose **this man fathers a son who** sees all the sins that his father has done; he sees, and does not do likewise: <sup>15</sup> he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife, <sup>16</sup> **does not oppress anyone**, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, <sup>17</sup> withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no interest or profit, obeys my rules, and walks in my statutes; he shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live. <sup>18</sup> As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity. <sup>19</sup> "Yet you say, 'Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?' When the son has done what is just and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. <sup>20</sup> The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. **The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.** <sup>21</sup> "But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. <sup>22</sup> None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done he shall live.

And even if it were indisputable that the racial disparities were primarily the result of racism, it would be wrong to insist that Christians support any specific plan for addressing them. Ideas about the best solutions to racial disparities vary widely across the political spectrum, so demanding allegiance to one's favored approach as a mark of being a faithful disciple, one who properly reflects Jesus' concern for justice, would divide the body of Christ over disputable political, social, and economic judgments.

Finally, even if there was no room for disagreement about the causes of the racial disparities and the best course of remediation, there is the question of how much of a church's time, energy, and resources should be devoted to alleviating through political means the effects of sin on the society. Given the extent of social ills, there is, in addition to the difficulty in

prioritizing them, a clear danger of turning the church into a political action group at the expense of its historical and biblical focus on preaching, teaching, evangelizing, discipling, and worshiping. In the process, it easily could become captive to a partisan political agenda and find itself serving men rather than God. Finding as a church the right means for manifesting God's opposition to sin in the context of sinfully-induced social conditions and maintaining a proper balance within the overall mission of the church calls for much wisdom, humility, and prayer.

Nothing here is intended to diminish the ugly history of racism in America, to deny that racism still exists, or to deny the possibility that historical racism continues to have a negative impact on black Americans. I write out of concern for the unity of the church. That unity is a constant target of Satan because it so powerfully proclaims the Lord's glory. I think I see a cloud rising that poses a danger of pitting brother against brother and disrupting the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. I pray the Lord will not allow that to happen.