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Ethnic Diversity in the Church and in Marriage
Revelation 5:6-10
Acts 17:26

Anyone who thinks that we've made substantial progress in resolving the problem of racial disharmony and animosity in our society is simply not paying attention. The violent events that have filled our streets in the past year together with the response from both the white and African-American communities clearly demonstrate that mistrust, suspicion, and even hatred across the racial divide are rampant in virtually every sector in our society.

Tomorrow, as many of you know, is Martin Luther King, Jr., Day. People respond to this in any number of ways, including churches. Today, here at Bridgeway, I want to make a few comments that only scratch the surface of our subject. We will devote the majority of our time to an interview of one family in our fellowship: Jason and Crystal Partee.

In order to conserve our time and give opportunity to the Partees to speak freely, I want to summarize my thoughts by making 10 observations. As you will quickly see, each of these is probably deserving of an entire sermon in itself. Perhaps in the future we can re-visit this subject. By the way, I fully anticipate that some of my comments will upset and offend some of you.

(1) *There is only one race. It is called the "human race".* All men and women of every color, from every tongue, tribe, and nation are descendants of the same father and mother: Adam and Eve. All human beings, therefore, are united by blood. Look at the words of the apostle Paul in Acts 17:26 –

“And he 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” (Acts 17:26).

The physiological *differences* that exist among humans, whether it be color of skin or texture of hair or accent in speech, are nothing in comparison with the fundamental *unity* that we share by virtue of our descent from the same original pair: Adam and Eve.

It will come as something of a surprise to most of you that the word “race” never appears in the Bible in reference to different people groups or ethnicities.

Technically speaking, there is no such thing as “race”. As noted above, there is one “human race” of which all men and women are members. *Within that one human race, all of whom are descended from the original pair, Adam and Eve, there are multiple diverse ethnicities.* The word “*race*” differentiates between people based largely on a single physical attribute: skin color. But “*ethnicity*” is more than the color of one’s skin. It also entails a variety of cultural factors: dress, language, food, beliefs, attitudes, customs, etc. Race as a way of classifying human beings based on physiological differences is not found in the Bible.

There is a very real sense in which every person is of mixed “race”. There is no pure race that is free from the mixture of multiple ethnicities. There are varying degrees of “race”. I am a blonde-haired, fair-skinned, blue-eyed Caucasian. But I’m also 1/16 Creek Indian who for years voted for the tribal chief. Race, then, is a fluid concept with no clear, definable boundaries. Race is always a matter of degree.

Having said that, I don’t think it is possible to eliminate the term “race” from our common vocabulary. It is too deeply embedded in our society. But as much as I am able I will use the term “ethnic” and “ethnicity” to draw a distinction among the many peoples of the earth. However, if I end up using both “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably, I trust you’ll understand.

(2) What is “racism”? Or we could also ask, what is “ethno-centricity”? How should we define these words? The PCA (Presbyterian Church in America) in 2004 defined it as follows: “Racism is an explicit or implicit belief or practice that qualitatively distinguishes or values one race over other races.”

So, if you find in your heart and mind a **belief that one group of people is qualitatively different from or better than another, you are guilty of racism. If your behavior is such that you place a higher value on one group of people above another, primarily based on some physical attribute, such as the difference in color of skin, you are a racist.**

So how do we measure the presence and influence of racial prejudice in our land? We can’t. We can only measure it within our own hearts. So permit me to ask several probing questions:

Are you instinctively **suspicious** of the **motivation** of another person simply because their skin is a different color from yours?

Do you draw conclusions about the **moral integrity** or **honesty** of another person based solely on the fact that their skin is a different color from yours?

Do you doubt the **intelligence** of another person because their skin color is different from yours?

Do you question the **initiative and work ethic** of another person because their skin color is different from yours?

Do you immediately become **concerned about the safety and value of your home** when a person of a different skin color moves into your neighborhood?

Do you find yourself **avoiding direct social and verbal interaction** with a person because their skin color is different from yours?

How many people whose skin color is different from yours can you honestly say are **close personal friends**?

Personal faith in Jesus Christ and a saving relationship with him is the end of ethnocentrism. The people of God are no longer defined by their ethnicity, as was the case since the call of Abraham during the OT. Since the cross and resurrection of Jesus the people of God are defined Christo-centrally, by virtue of their response to and relationship with Jesus:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

(3) What is the cause of racism or ethno-centrism? Racism may be traced to a failure to understand the meaning and implications of saying that all human beings are created and fashioned in the image of God. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, **the fundamental cause of racism is a denial that God is the Creator of all mankind.** Now, few professing Christians would ever deny that God is the Creator, but when they fail to acknowledge that all humans are created and fashioned in the image of God, and that no one ethnicity is any more God’s image than another, they will display racist tendencies. Consider Psalm 139.

“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them” (Ps. 139:13-16).

Psalm 139 is talking about all human beings of all ethnicities and of all colors and nationalities. Each and every one, whether black or white or brown or yellow or red, are shaped and fashioned by their Creator and thus bear his divine

image. ***They are of intrinsic worth because God has made them.*** To treat any human being, of any ethnicity, as of less worth than another is therefore tantamount to blasphemy.

My point is simply that we must never lose sight of the fact that value or worth is tied to creation, not education, achievement, or physical appearance.

(4) The individual personal dignity and worth of a human being is grounded not merely in creation, not merely in the fact that he/she is fashioned in the image of God, but is also grounded in redemption. The death that Jesus died and the blood he shed was for people of every ethnicity. His blood did not avail more for one ethnicity than it did for another. As Paul says in Acts 20:28, it is the “church” that God purchased with the blood of his Son, a church that is by divine design ethnically diverse.

(5) God loves ethnic diversity as is clearly evident from the purpose of Christ’s sinless life, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection. God’s aim is to have a redeemed bride for his Son from more than one or two or ten ethnic groups, but from all ethnic groups. Ethnic diversity is at the very heart and core of God’s saving purposes in Christ. This we see in Revelation 5:9-10.

“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:9-10).

And his purpose is that they will live and worship and serve in Christ-centered harmony. All of them are priests, none more so than others. All rule and reign, none more so than others.

White Christians are not one kingdom of priests and black Christians another. Chinese Christians do not constitute their own kingdom of priests while Arab Christians comprise another. We are all, regardless of ethnicity, regardless of physiological differences, one kingdom of priests. You cannot have a functioning, God-glorifying kingdom of priests if they despise one another because of racial differences or live in suspicion of the worth and value of the other based on racial differences.

So let me sum up these last two points:

When you permit feelings in your heart of dislike and suspicion and disdain toward a person of a different skin color, you are blaspheming the majesty of the Creator God. You are denouncing the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. You are despising the shed blood of the cross. You are slandering the power of God in shaping men and women of all ethnicities in his image. You are denigrating and denying the purpose of God in redeeming men and women of all ethnicities and colors and making them a kingdom of priests. Racism is blasphemy.

You cannot worship and glorify the majesty of God or embrace his redemptive purposes in Christ while treating his supreme creation with contempt – whatever color or culture or age that creation might be.

(6) Ethnic diversity is eternal. Ethnic diversity will exist forever in the new heavens and new earth. We read in Revelation 21:3 – “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples [the word is plural!] and God himself will be with them as their God.’” Certainly there is only one people of God: the elect from all ages. But within that one body of the elect are a multiplicity of ethnicities.

(7) Why should Bridgeway believe in and strive for ethnic diversity? The primary reason is that ethnic diversity honors God’s saving purpose in Jesus Christ and more effectively glorifies God and his grace than do ethnic and racial uniformity.

Unity in diversity serves to magnify God better than unity alone, in much the same way that a choir of diverse voices sounds better than a single person singing only bass or soprano or alto. An orchestra of diverse instruments produces a richer and more gratifying sound than one with only violins or with only trumpets or with only cellos.

Furthermore, “the fame and greatness and worth of an object of beauty increases in proportion to the diversity of those who recognize its beauty. If a work of art is regarded as great among a small and like-minded group of people, but not by anyone else, the art is probably not truly great. . . . But if a work of art continues to win more and more admirers not only across cultures but also across decades and centuries, then its greatness is irresistibly manifested” (Piper, *Bloodlines*, 197).

There is something about God that is so universally praiseworthy that he will evoke passionate admirers in every diverse ethnic group in the world.

(8) Judgment will be based on one’s personal relationship with Jesus Christ. “Color and ethnicity will count for nothing in the court of heaven” (Piper, *Bloodlines*, 68).

(9) Racism can never be legislated out of the human heart. No amount of legal or structural change can transform how you think and feel about a person of a different ethnicity. The cure for racism is the miracle of divine, saving grace in the human heart.

This does not mean that we should oppose whatever structural or systemic changes might serve to diminish inequality of opportunity. But our trust for lasting transformation must be grounded in the power of God’s gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

(10) Inter-racial marriage, or marriage of mixed ethnicities, is not merely to be tolerated but celebrated!

As late as 1958, only 4 per cent of American whites approved of inter-racial marriage. It was against the law in 16 states as late as 1967.

The legislature in Alabama took until the year 2000 to remove this from the state constitution: “The Legislature shall never pass any law to authorize or legalize any marriage between any white person and a Negro, or a descendant of a Negro.”

“I would argue that opposition to interracial marriage is one of the deepest roots of racial distance, disrespect, and hostility in the world. Show me one place in the world where interracial or interethnic marriage is frowned upon and yet the two groups still have equal respect and honor and opportunity. I don’t think it exists. It won’t happen” (Piper, *Bloodlines*, 213).