Racism and pastoral leadership

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by

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Our world has an amazing variety of people groups living across the globe. They vary in physical appearance, languages, and cultural behaviors. Unfortunately, these differences are often considered and used by individuals of one group to devalue another. This attitude, known as racism, is a common behavior that has existed from the earliest recorded histories. This examination will review God’s Word in the Old Testament and the New Testament in order to understand what God meant to be the normative behavior of Christians as they interact with others. Consideration will be given to God’s action to create man in His own image, as well as to the inherent value that each man has, and these will be discussed and illustrated by Holy Scripture. This examination will then consider the current racial situation in the world at large, in the United States, and more specifically in the Southern States. Biases which are typical of human interactions will be compared to biblical guidance. The examination will consider what steps should be reviewed as pastors attempt to provide biblical leadership to their congregations, in view of God’s direction to Christians and the current conditions. This examination will conclude that church leaders must take proactive steps to communicate biblical truth about the value of each individual without regard to their race, and to influence those they lead by providing loving accountability and consistent messaging of God’s love for all men. It will be presented that racial tensions are significantly impacted by the actions of leaders who not only assert the value of each person, but who lead their followers to actively resist devaluing others according to arbitrary measures such as heritage, race, or physical attributes, but instead give proper valuation to others, aligning with God’s valuation of individuals created in His own image.

Racism Common to Man

Racism has been defined as the belief that all members of each race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races.[[1]](#footnote-1) Interestingly, the first recorded use of the word racism was not seen in print until 1902. The Bible does not use the word racism but does discuss prejudices that people held toward other nations. Racism is an attitude that has been normative to mankind not only as one looks back through history, but also as one considers current behaviors. People tend to seek a comfortable gathering of like-minded individuals so that they can develop harmonious, trusting relationships with others. Those trusted relationships allow people to conduct business with each other, coordinate with one another on projects, find mates, and provide mutual support to each other in times of threat or illness. Since people have the tendency to evaluate their environments to assess risk, they are prone to assign risk to conditions which are unfamiliar to them or of which they have been taught to be wary. People who have a different appearance from the risk assessor or who behave differently are often considered to be a threat to be avoided. In addition, people who have for one reason been devalued in a person’s mind tend to be assigned additional negative attributes, such as incompetence, feeblemindedness, or other deleterious qualities. This happens because prideful men wish to feel superior to those they feel threatened by, so that they can feel in control of and emboldened to engage in a future confrontation with the “risky” individual. Unfortunately, racism arises as people perceive differences between themselves and others and misconstrue those differences as inferiorities. Distrust and friction can set people at odds with each other and are often the basis of on-going conflicts between people groups. Ironically, the differences between people groups are often indiscernible to an outside party. Genetic research has shown that all human genetic material is extremely similar and seems to indicate that all humans are a mixture of many unknown ancestors, and that there have never been boundaries among peoples that prevented the birth of children of mixed ethnic backgrounds.[[2]](#footnote-2) This scientific evidence aligns with the biblical story of Noah recorded in Genesis 6–10, which describes how God had become angry with sinful mankind and flooded the Earth, killing all men except for Noah and his family. This singular biblical event explains that all of the current tribes of the world came from a single family at a specific point in time. This narrative also describes how the sons of Noah established their families and those “tribes” were ultimately scattered as God confused their languages after their arrogant attempt to build the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9).

God’s Perspective on Racism in the Old Testament

God created mankind (Gen 1:26–31)[[3]](#footnote-3) and was very pleased with His creation. Man was created in God’s image and derives great worth simply by existing in His image. God actively pursued relationships with men and loved them, continually acting to bless them and to provide for them. As He provided direction to mankind, He encouraged them to value their relationship with Him and also to value their relationships with others (Exod 20:1–21). He created a special covenant relationship with the Jewish nation, but His intent was for the Israelites to engage in behavior that would draw the other nations into a relationship with God as well (Exod 19:3–6). God did enact judgment on certain tribes of people, but these actions resulted from those people choosing other gods and engaging in behaviors which God condemned (Deut 20:16–18). He did not judge them based upon their appearance or family tree. God created one race of humans and equally extends His love to all members of the human race.[[4]](#footnote-4)

God’s Perspective on Racism in the New Testament

God continued to demonstrate His love for all nations as He sent His Son, Jesus, to provide salvation from spiritual death and the ability to be adopted as His heirs (John 3:16–18). As heirs who are justified and saved, redeemed mankind will be able to spend eternity in God’s presence. Jesus was born into a Jewish family (Matt 1:1–17), yet He consistently considered non-Jews worthy of his time and attention. He asked a Samaritan woman who lived a self-destructive lifestyle to get Him water at a well (John 4:7). This simple act crossed several societal boundaries, but for this discussion, we can see a Jew conducting a very close and relational conversation with a Samaritan, who would have been generally considered by the Judean Jews to be an unclean person to be avoided at all costs. Jesus’ actions spoke of His concern for her as a person, without regard for her race or heritage. Jesus presented a different mindset for His followers to consider as they evaluated others’ worth compared to their own. He directed His followers to consider others as more important than themselves (Phil 2:3). This challenge to be humble directly addresses any thoughts which might lead a person toward a choice of devaluing another because of his race. Finally, Jesus gave His followers a directive known as the Great Commission (Matt 28:19–20) as He left them and ascended into heaven. This “final word” directed them to make disciples of all nations. Obviously, if Jesus had intended for some tribes to be excluded from His kingdom, He would have limited the expansive directive He gave them.

Racism in the World at Large

The attitude of racism has continued to operate among the nations throughout history. In Europe, territorial barriers have supported the concepts of distrust of and superiority over other people groups. The British, Scottish and Irish peoples all speak a common language, yet harbor resentment and ill will because of past wars and political differences. The French, Danish, Polish, German, Finnish, Spanish, Italian, and several other European ethnic groups display similar distrust and enmity based upon the same kinds of past disputes.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Middle East has simmered in conflict for centuries as the disparate tribes of people attempt to protect their territories and religious systems. The Arab countries blatantly state their objective to remove the country of Israel, while they battle internally over differing sects of Islam. The Asian continent also remains embroiled in conflict as countries such as China, Russia, India, Pakistan, North and South Korea and many others defend their territories. They view one another suspiciously and are separated by their cultures, their languages and dialects, and their memories of past military conflicts. The same is true in the African continent and the South American continent.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Even though one can see the common symptoms of territoriality, religious differences, language barriers, and cultural dissimilarity, ethnic hatred can also be seen in our world. In recent years, the world witnessed the tragic conflict between the Tutsi and Hutu tribes in Rwanda. The Hutu leaders encouraged their people to engage in a practice called ethnic cleansing. The Hutus systematically attempted to kill all of the Tutsi people that they could identify. The goal was not just to seize land or push back an aggressor; it was to completely kill off a despised ethnic group. Sadly, we have seen other terrible examples of this attitude throughout history, most notably when Nazi Germany killed an estimated six million Jewish people living in Germany and the lands they conquered, deeming the Jews unworthy to live.

Racism in the United States

North America, and specifically the United States of America, has been thought of in current times to be a world leader in allowing personal freedoms to its people. The Statue of Liberty is engraved with a poem expressing the desire of the United States to be a land where freedom can be found.[[7]](#footnote-7) Yet, citizens in this land of freedom have consistently displayed racist behaviors. European immigrants came to America to escape religious and political persecution, but they viewed the indigenous people as simple heathen and whom they considered “lesser” men. As Europeans continued to expand their governed territories, they began a war of attrition and conquest against the American Indians and viewed it as their “divine destiny” to take the land. As the American nation expanded, immigrants from Ireland, Spain, Germany, China, and Italy came and were viewed with suspicion by those already in the country. Derogatory names for these groups, such as “Wops”, “Chinks”, “Dagos”, and “Paddys” became part of the everyday nomenclature. The natural tendency of these groups was to gather together and establish mono-ethnic communities of mutual support and defense. As time has progressed, one can observe that religious institutions have also become naturally segregated.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is extremely common to see church congregations comprised of a super majority of one ethnic group. The pastor Dr. Martin Luther King famously said that “11:00 on Sunday mornings is the most segregated hour of the week” as he observed the behavior of the evangelical church attenders in America.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Racism in the Southern United States

Another significant issue which aggravated the racist attitudes in America was the practice of slavery. The early settlers chose to move beyond the practice of using indentured servants to the enslavement of workers who were seized in Africa. The inhabitants of that land had a different skin color and other physical differences such as hair texture. It became common for people who lived in the slave owning regions to consider slaves as less than human. The majority of slaves were held in the southern states of the United States. After the American Civil War the slaves were set free, but the racist attitudes have persisted for several generations. Even though slavery has been illegal since 1865, the descendants of slaves and slave owners have continued to struggle to reconcile with one another.

Sadly, the Southern Baptist Convention is remembered for its stance which supported slavery during those days.[[10]](#footnote-10) Distorted theology was presented arguing that the African race was cursed by God and that it was appropriate for Africans to be subjugated as slaves.[[11]](#footnote-11) Clearly, that doctrine does not stand up against critical analysis of the biblical text, but it was used to allow citizens of the slave states to rationalize what they were doing to another people.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This racist attitude easily extended to other groups, and the Eurasians in power practiced racial intolerance against Africans, Latinos, Asians and American Indians. Likewise, since those groups were subjected to such intolerance, they developed reciprocal intolerant attitudes towards the Eurasians and among themselves as they competed for opportunities and resources.

Pastoral Leadership and Racism

Pastors in evangelical churches, specifically in the southern states of America, must maintain an awareness of the pervasive nature of racism. Racism is often at work within the people of a church, but the culture has encouraged them to disguise the basis of their attitudes. They are likely to be distrustful of others who are not like themselves, either in physical appearance, socio-economic level, or cultural behavior. Due to their distrust, they will consciously or unconsciously be on guard and will be less likely to act generously in welcoming a new person into their community. As described in the prior sections, this is a “default” reaction of most humans; however, God has challenged His people to be priests to all the nations. He wishes for His people to be hospitable to the foreigner, to be willing to view others as important, and set aside inclinations toward self-interest and vain conceit (Deut 10:19; Phil 2:3).

Pastors must bravely and confidently speak to the need for God’s people to purposely choose to be inclusive of all ethnic groups. The pastor must challenge the societal norms presented by the culture they live within, and fight to encourage God’s people to live as they will in the future when they gather before His throne in heaven (Rev 5:9–10; 7:9; 22:2). All nations will be present as they worship Him together.

John Maxwell, a respected and recognized expert on pastoral leadership, said “everything rises and falls with leadership.” [[13]](#footnote-13) This concept speaks to the need for pastors to actively lead their people toward adoption of a humble attitude toward all ethnic groups, and to diligently work to see that their churches reflect the diversity of their communities.[[14]](#footnote-14) It should be expected that resistance will arise as people move from their perceived places of comfort. Wisdom would dictate that pastors move with caution.[[15]](#footnote-15) Even though conflict might arise, it is imperative that pastors address racism diligently, as this lingering negative attitude will undermine the efforts of congregations to evangelize their communities. Accusations will be presented that the people of the church are hypocrites if they describe a loving God who transforms sinners, but continue to treat others with disrespect and contempt. Pastors must lovingly seek out those who struggle with accepting others due to their racist beliefs, and clarify what Scripture has to say regarding each person’s value and the believer’s need to have a humble posture towards others. Pastors need to recognize the incorrect assumptions people may have about different ethnic groups and speak directly to expose misconceptions. Pastors must also demonstrate their beliefs by living a racially reconciled life.[[16]](#footnote-16) They should pursue relationships with individuals of differing ethnic backgrounds so that their actions are consistent with the words they have shared. Importantly, they should communicate their passions toward inclusion and Godly valuation of others in a manner that sets their people’s hearts afire. The people of the world will not believe that God’s people were sent by Him if they do not demonstrate unity among themselves.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Conclusion

God demonstrated His love to all men as He sent His son to die for their sins and provided salvation to all those who chose to follow Him. This amazing gift encompassed all men and confirmed the value which God places upon each person. God expected His people to live according to His directions for their lives. This love for each other would make them distinct from other people, and their servant attitudes and loving hospitality toward others would be attractive to the lost world. Racism is a default attitude that is exhibited in all nations, including the United States of America. Pastors must intentionally lead their congregations to understand God’s value of all men and help them address their prejudices and fears. This groundwork of changing peoples’ attitudes is a crucial task that will enable congregations to humbly serve others, and demonstrate unity among believers that will amaze and challenge those who do not know Christ to seek out how the church is able to love others in such a manner. The church can then respond to the seeker of truth by explaining the gift of salvation and the grace given by the loving Father to all who seek Him, confess their wrong-doing, and repent.

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1. "racism, n.". OED Online. September 2014. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/157097?redirectedFrom=racism (accessed December 01, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dave Unander. *Shattering the Myth of Race: Genetic Realities and Biblical Truths*. (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 2000), 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I have used the NIV translation throughout this paper, unless otherwise noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John MacArthur and Grace Community Church (Sun City Calif.). *Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong*. (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2009), 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*. (Princeton University Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," *Historic American Documents*, Lit2Go Edition, (0), accessedNovember 30, 2014,<http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/133/historic-american-documents/4959/the-new-colossus/>.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Steven L. McKenzie. *All God's Children: A Biblical Critique of Racism*. (1st ed. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminister John Knox Press, 1997), 120-132. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Robert K. Vischer, *"Racial Segregation in American Churches and its Implications for School Vouchers."* Florida Law Review 53 (2001), 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Southern Baptist Convention formally apologized for this behavior at the 1995 Convention held in Atlanta, Georgia. The resolutions of the Convention shared that Southern Baptists lamented and repudiated the positions taken during the slavery years by Southern Baptists and apologized to all African-Americans for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism. Forgiveness was asked for and a commitment was made to eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. E. Luther Copeland, *The Southern Baptist Convention and the Judgment of History : The Taint of an Original Sin*. (Rev. ed. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2002), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jefferson D. Edwards, *Purging Racism from Christianity: Freedom & Purpose through Identity*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 23–29. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Norman Anthony Peart, *Separate No More: Understanding and Developing Racial Reconciliation in Your Church*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Alan T. Davies, *Infected Christianity: A Study of Modern Racism*. (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology, and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship*. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Peart, *Separate No More*, 147–151. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Daniel J. Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)