

Biblical Thoughts on Race¹

We've finished our study of Elijah and Elisha, and next week, we'll resume our study of the book of Luke. But before jumping back into Luke, I thought it might be good to consider a topic that has been and remains a major issue in our culture.

Frankly, I'd rather not address this issue. There's so much misinformation and controversy over this topic that it's hard to know where to start. I don't think it's a problem in our church. I don't know that anyone here is guilty of abuse in this area. The Bible doesn't say much about it directly. I have not said much about it over the years. I'm not suggesting that we need any radical changes in our behavior or our ministry.

But it is a large, controversial issue in our world today. Parts of the country are experiencing incredible turmoil because of it. The culture is deeply divided by it. Large organizations have sprung up claiming to address this issue. Political parties and candidates talk about this issue all the time. Even athletes and media people are making statements on this issue. It is an important topic that the church really ought to address so that we understand what the Bible says about it.

What I'm going to be talking about today is race. I'm *not* going to talk about racial reconciliation or racial justice or critical race theory. If we understand and apply what the Bible says about race, then we've won half the battle. If people would simply follow the biblical guidelines on this issue, things would be far more peaceful.

First, let's consider a couple of definitions:

What do we mean by the word "race"? In common, popular thought, race is the idea that there are natural, biological differences between various people groups. The differences between people are fundamental and deep. E.g., skin color, hair color and texture, eye shape, and other physical markers are rooted in major biological differences. That's what people usually mean by the word "race." There are many races because there are many differences among people.

¹ Some of this material based on a message by Thabiti Anyabwile at the 2008 T4G conference. Use does not imply endorsement. <https://t4g.org/resources/thabiti-anyabwile/bearing-the-image-identity-the-work-of-christ-and-the-church-session-ii/>

Ethnicity is a bit different. It's more based on language, culture, nationality, citizenship, and religion. Ethnicity has to do with where you came from, your people-group, or your ancestral background.

We sometimes use the terms "race" and "ethnicity" synonymously, but they are not precisely synonymous terms.

Let's consider several things the Bible teaches us about this important topic.

I. Race is not a biblical category.

I did a search through the Bible and never found a single instance of the word "race" as referring to differences among humans. Biblically speaking, race is not a thing. There is only one race—human. All people are part of the same group—human.

Several biblical facts make that clear.

A. Everyone is made in the image of God.

Genesis 1:26–27 *God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; ... So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*

Gen 9:6 *Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.*

1. The image of God is a set of features that that God has and that humans share. Humans are like God in certain respect, e.g.,
 - a) We have intellect, emotion, and will;
 - b) We are persons and not things;
 - c) We all have a soul;
 - d) We have spiritual capacities. We can know and love God.
 - e) Humans are the only creatures made in the image of God.
2. Humans reflected the image of God *before* the fall.
3. Humans reflect the image of God *after* the fall. The image of God is marred/*defaced* because of sin, but it is not *erased*.

Even the worst human, even the oddest or most eccentric, even the most different, the most diseased and the most deformed still bear the image of God. The oldest and the youngest, the best and the worst all share the image of God.

4. And that's what gives humans value and dignity. It's not what we can do or contribute or how we look that makes us valuable. We have value because God stamped his image on us. And that value remains with all humans of every kind, from the womb to the tomb. Every human at every stage of development or decay bears the image of God.
 5. Since every human is made in the image and likeness of God, every human has the exact same value.
- B. Further, everyone traces his biological descent from Adam and Eve. They are the original parents of everybody. We all trace our ancestry back to them.
- Gen 3:20 tells us that Eve is the mother of all living. So we all trace our lineage back to our first parents.
- C. Beyond that, every human traces his ancestry back to Noah and his family. They were the only ones to survive the flood, so we all go back to them.
1. Noah had three sons (Shem, Ham, Japheth).
 2. Genesis 10 is often called "The Table of Nations," because it gives us lists of various people-groups that developed from the three sons of Noah.
 3. So it appears that ethnic distinctions developed in the generations after the people spread out after the flood.
- D. Further, the NT tells us that we are all "from one blood" (Acts 17:26). So even though we recognize obvious ethnic distinctions, we are all still one race.

- E. Since all of this is true, then there is no biblical reason for valuing one people-group over another. Everybody is the same—“red and yellow, black and white....” No one is superior, no one is inferior. That’s a proper biblical conclusion that all Christians should share—everybody has the same value in the sight of God.

App: The culture today wants to make much of the differences between people. They claim that humanity is divided up into many races, and some claim that one race is better than another. But biblically speaking, we are all related; we are all one race.

We must allow the authority of Scripture to identify us, not what the culture or someone else says. We know who we are because God tells us who we are. God made us in his image and likeness, and we all descend from one man and his wife. That makes us all equally valuable in the sight of God.

Trans: So the Bible emphasizes unity within humanity based on the image of God and our common descent from Adam and Eve and from Noah’s family. The Bible clearly implies that every human is a member of the same race.

II. Race is not a scientific category.

- A. There is no scientific basis for race. In fact, the person who did the first sequencing of the human genome, Craig Venter, declared, “The concept of race has no genetic or scientific basis.”² All the differences in ethnicities are based on very small differences in a small number of genes.
- B. The differences in skin colors come from incredibly small genetic differences—often just one base pair in a gene consisting of 20,000 base pairs controls skin color.
- C. Genetically, the differences between people are exceedingly small and the similarities exceedingly large.

² “There’s No Scientific Basis for Race—It’s a Made-Up Label.”

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/04/race-genetics-science-africa/>

- D. So to say that someone of a different skin color is better or worse than others is ridiculous. We are much more biologically similar than different.
- E. Where did we get the idea that different races exist and that some races were better than others? In the modern era, that idea comes from Darwinian evolution. Darwin taught that some races were more developed than others. Hitler based his ideas of racial dominance on Darwinian evolution.

Darwin divided humanity into distinct races according to differences in skin, eye or hair color. He was also convinced that evolution was progressive, and that the white races—especially the Europeans—were evolutionarily more advanced than the black races, thus establishing race differences and a racial hierarchy.³

Darwin claimed in his book *The Descent of Man* that "the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world".

The "civilized" races were the white, European people, and the "savage" races would be the black and aboriginal peoples.

So when people talk about different races, that's an evolutionary idea.

- F. If evolution is true, and if the fittest survive, then it would make sense that the most powerful groups of people would dominate and enslave the weakest groups. And there's nothing wrong with that from an atheistic, evolutionary point of view. The strong survive while the weak die out; that's nature, "red in tooth and claw."
- G. But, ironically, evolution also teaches us that we're all just a bunch of animals. So if we are all animals trying to claw to the top of the food chain, then differences don't really matter. A race of people may be more or less developed, but they are still just a pack of animals, no better or worse than dogs or rats. So on evolution, there really is no basis for claiming that any one "race" is better than any other.

³ Steven Rose, "Darwin, Race and Gender." *EMBO Reports*, 2009 Apr; 10(4): 297–298.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2672903/#>

Trans: In any case, there is no scientific basis for believing that race is a real category. When you look at the genetics, all people everywhere are virtually identical. There is no basis for race in science.

III. Race is not a factor in one's unity with Christ.

- A. All people share the image of God. But sharing the image of God does *not* make everyone a child of God.
- B. Christians have something else that brings them into a greater sense of unity, and that is that all Christians are united in their bond with Christ. Christians are all "in Christ," and that's the primary bond that unites all Christians everywhere.

Rom 8:1 *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, ...*

- C. All genuine Christians have the same experience—we've all been born again. We heard the Gospel, the HS^p convicted us of our sins, and we repented and received Christ as our Lord and Savior. That's what makes us "in Christ."
 - 1. If you have *not* had that experience, you are not a Christian. You still have the image of God, but you do not have unity with Christ. You are not a child of God; heaven is not your home; God is not your Father if you've not been saved through faith in Christ.
 - 2. If you have had that experience, you are "in Christ" and united spiritually with all other believers in Christ.
- D. The NT clearly states that ethnic or national distinctions have no spiritual significance.

Galatians 3:28 *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

Colossians 3:11 *there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.*

- E. “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.” Spiritually speaking, it doesn’t matter where you come from or what you look like. All Christians are equally saved; we are all forgiven of our sins and we all have a home reserved in heaven. We are all new creations in Christ.
- F. Unity in Christ is more important than any physical or ethnic distinction. Unity in Christ is more significant than color of skin, eye shape, or place of origin. Because we are united in Christ, physical differences are not spiritually important.
- G. Ethnic distinctions are real, and we may value our ethnic heritage; but ethnicity has no spiritual value within the Christian faith. Believers of all ethnicities are united in Christ. What matters is our relationship with God through Christ, not our skin color or ethnicity.

Trans: For Christians, our identity ought to be in Christ far more than in any ethnicity or group membership. All believers are united with Christ no matter what their skin color, eye shape, or place of origin.

IV. Race is not a factor in the church.

Is there a place where we can enjoy spiritual unity in spite of physical differences, where red, yellow, black, and white are all of the same value? Yes, the place where all believers are on the same footing is the local church. The unity we have in Christ should be on bold display when we gather to worship God in church.

What is the basis for unity in the church? We’ve already talked about our unity in Christ. Beyond that,...

- A. All Christians are baptized by the HSp into the body of Christ.

1 Cor 12:13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

- B. There is no distinction in the church between Jew and Gentile.

The division between Jews and Gentiles at the time of Jesus was very large. But that division is removed in the church.

Eph 2:14-16 *[Christ] is our peace, who has ... has broken down the middle wall of separation, ... so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, 16 and [reconciling] them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.*

If Jews and Gentiles are unified and at peace in the church, then all ethnicities are united and at peace in the church. Slaves and slave holders are united and at peace. The rich and the poor, employed and unemployed, educated and uneducated—all Christians are in spiritual unity in the church.

- C. Further, the Bible commands us not to think about others from a worldly perspective anymore.

2 Cor 5:16 *From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. ...*

Skin color, hair color and texture, eye shape—these physical markers do not divide Christians. We don't regard people one way or another because of such physical features or ethnic markers. We are not united because of them, nor are we divided because of them. Our unity is based on Christ, not on our physical features or ancestry.

- D. What brings us into unity in the church is that all believers are part of Christ's universal body, and local assemblies gather regularly to fulfill Christ's commands. We assemble as a unified congregation for worship, instruction, fellowship, evangelism, and service.
- E. Admittedly, some churches will naturally reflect an ethnic flavor. A church in Africa is not going to be the same as a church in India or in America. Cultural expressions will be different from place to place. That's OK.
- F. What's *not* OK is rejecting someone in the church based on skin color or eye shape or ethnic background. Spiritually speaking, physical differences have no bearing in the church; we are all one in the body of Christ.

- V. Race will make no difference in the coming kingdom or in eternity.
- A. The Bible promises that people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation will be part of God's coming kingdom.
- Rev 5:9 ... You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,*
- Rev 14:6 Then I saw another angel ... having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth — to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people —*
- B. In the coming kingdom of God, every ethnicity will be represented. People from around the world will be there, and they will all be on an equal footing.
- C. Further, we know that in the resurrection, the physical body will be reconstituted. It will be a perfect, glorified body, but it will still have many of the same characteristics of our original bodies. That means that if you were white, you'll still be white after the resurrection. If you were black, you'll be resurrected black. If you were Asian, you'll still be Asian in the resurrection. So those physical distinctions will remain even in eternity.
- D. We'll be spending eternity together with those ethnic distinctions intact. They won't divide us then, and they should not divide us now. We may not be able to achieve such perfect unity here and now on earth, but we should be trying to experience as much unity as we can, despite our ethnic differences.

If all of what I've said so far is true, then we must not treat people differently based on characteristics like skin color, hair texture, or eye shape. As someone famously said, we should *not* judge people on the basis of the color of their skin, but on the content of their character. We must understand ourselves biblically; we are all made in the image of God and we are all equal in our value/worth before God.

So we disavow the common, worldly, Darwinist viewpoint on race. Race has no basis in the Bible or science. There is no good reason to believe that any people-group is better or worse than any other people-group. We judge people on their character and behavior, not on their appearance or their ancestry. We are all part of the same, one-and-only human race.

Some distinctions are normal. Similar people tend to fit better with those like themselves. There is a reason that black Christians often attend church with other black Christians. There is a common culture or experience that bonds people together. So if Korean people want to have a Korean church, that's OK with me. If a church attracts mostly white people, that's OK. If a church attracts mostly black people, that's OK. People tend to go where they fit in best or most naturally. We don't have to force people to go where they don't fit in or where they are uncomfortable.

And we should realize that eventually all Christians will be in heaven together, and we'll all get along just fine together. If that will happen in the kingdom of God and in eternity, then we ought to be working toward that goal now in the church.