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Race and Christian Interpersonal Relationships

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Race and Christian Interpersonal Relationships

Talking about a problem but never finding a solution is disheartening and counterproductive. This is why many people are sick and tired of talking about race relations in America. No one seems to have a workable and effective plan to resolve societal racial tension. When people discuss the role of the church in this conflict, they tend to focus on the impact a local church body, or even the church as a whole, can have on society. Seldom, if ever, do individual Christians receive guidance on how they should interact with race-related interpersonal conflict. This leaves them feeling helpless and can damage relationships between people of different races. People feel like there is an elephant in the middle of the room whenever they interact with someone of another race, and having a large pachyderm stumbling around always tends to make conversation hard, which tends to do the opposite of bring people closer together.

I recognize the need for societal solutions to the societal problems involved in race relations, but few people are in a position to take meaningful action on a societal level, so many people are overwhelmed by the thought of effecting societal change. In contrast, every person is in a position to effect change in his interactions. In this article I hope to cut the problem of race-related conflict down to size by focusing on the mundane, interpersonal aspects of race-related conflict. I argue that Christians need to (1) recognize that conflict stemming from racial

differences is real and normal, and (2) fulfill their biblical responsibility to resolve this conflict by applying biblical principles.

Race-Related Conflict is Real and Normal

I grew up in Hawaii, which means that I had the rare opportunity of being both white and a member of a minority racial group. I had friends from every racial group recognized by the U.S. Census Bureau.¹ This diversity led to a unique culture of race relations. My friends and I frequently discussed our racial heritages. I had no clue this was abnormal until my parents told me so.

Differences in race were not only talked about, they were lived. My friends found discussing race interesting because they, like nearly everyone in Hawaii, knew that your race affected who you were. Japanese people always removed their shoes before entering a home, and they would probably be offended if you did not do so before entering their home. Native Hawaiians (and sometimes other Pacific Islanders) were sensitive about the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy. Haoles (white people) tended to be somewhat blunt and impolite. Asians were usually less comfortable with open conflict than Caucasians.

People understood that there was a connection between your *race*, where the DNA you have comes from,² and your *ethnicity*, your background, interaction style, and culture.³ Put another way, people would infer certain things about you based on the way you looked. In my experience, this was primarily a good thing. This way of thinking helped everyone not find fault

1 "Race," Census.gov, last modified July 8, 2013, accessed November 15, 2016, <http://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html>.

2 "Race," Merriam-Webster, accessed November 15, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/race>.

3 "Ethnicity," Dictionary.com, accessed November 15, 2016, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/ethnicity?s=t>.

with seemingly strange or offensive things people of other races did. It also helped people avoid doing offensive things in the first place. For instance, knowing that many Asian people came from cultures where open conflict is avoided at all costs helped me not become frustrated with their reluctance to “get things out in the open.” On the flip-side, acknowledging that I did not have this background helped my Asian friends not take offense at my (perhaps overly) uninhibited inter-personal style.

Of course, not all race-related conflict was avoided. Some haoles did not remove their shoes. Some Chinese people did not overlook the haoles’ lack of cultural knowledge. Some Japanese people harbored grudges for years, and some white people did not bother to realize that their Japanese friends were still offended.

But this conflict stemming from racial differences was not different from any conflict stemming from any differences between people. One of my best friends growing up had a Chinese-Japanese-Hawaiian father and a mother from Alabama. I was far more racially similar to her than I was to many of my 100% Asian friends, but I had significantly more conflict with her than my other friends. This conflict had little to do with our racial differences—I know many 100% Chinese people who are far more comfortable with open conflict than she is—and a lot to do with the different interaction styles and ways of handling conflict which we both learned from our Caucasian mothers.

Interpersonal conflict stemming from racial differences is normal and is just one manifestation of the uncontroversial fact that different people are coming from different places in life, which means they will sometimes miscommunicate and clash. As Christians approach interactions with people of other races, they should acknowledge their differences and that these differences could create conflict. At the same time, they should not give these differences special

significance. While two individuals of two different races may have seismically different backgrounds, two people of the same race are also likely to have seismically different personalities and interaction styles. This is especially true if these two people of the same race are of different genders. Conflict is conflict, whether it stems from race, personality, or gender.

The Christian Duty to Resolve Race-Related Interpersonal Conflict

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul addresses legal conflict between believers:

When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare to go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you.⁴

Even as they were working to resolve legal disputes in Paul's day, unbelievers today are working to resolve conflict which stems from the differences between people of different races. But it was a shame to the church to rely on unbelievers to resolve legal conflict between Christians, and it is likewise a shame if the church relies on unbelievers to resolve race-related conflict. Paul argues that Christians will judge in the end times, so they are eminently qualified to judge now. Christians of different races will stand before God in complete harmony with one another,⁵ so we, of all people, are the ones who should be resolving race-related interpersonal conflict.

Achieving Resolution

How should this conflict resolution proceed? It should proceed along the same lines as the resolution of any other conflict between believers. Excellent resources on biblical conflict

⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:1-7, ESV.

⁵ Revelation 7:9-14, ESV.

resolution abound (try Googling “biblical conflict resolution”), so there is no benefit from me articulating the biblical process of conflict resolution here. There are, however, two dynamics which are present in resolving race-related interpersonal conflict between believers and are worth noting.

First, race-related conflict is often out of the offender’s awareness. The biblical principle of the offended bringing the offense to the offender’s attention is especially crucial in this circumstance.⁶ Keep in mind that the possibility that the offense is out of the offender’s awareness is not unique to race-related conflict. Most people who have dated can attest that this situation is not uncommon.

Second, our race can impact nearly every facet of our interactions. So, as in conflicts stemming from other causes, it is important to not try to solve all race-related interpersonal conflict at once.⁷ Here the principle should be to not disregard individual conflicts, but at the same time to not allow an individual conflict to expand into a bigger issue than it is in itself. It is most effective to resolve race-related conflict *as a whole* by resolving *one conflict at a time*.

Conclusion

Our races do effect who we are and how we interact. Ignoring any type of difference between people can create interpersonal conflict and hamper conflict resolution, so differences in race should not be ignored. But, race-related interpersonal conflict should not be singled out for special treatment. It, like other types of conflict, should be resolved according to biblical principles. This is the duty of every Christian.

⁶ Matthew 18:15, ESV.

⁷ “A Biblical Guide to Resolving Conflict: Tips and Tools for Healthy Conflict Resolution,” Focus on the Family, copyright 2008, accessed November 15, 2016, <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/lifechallenges/relationship-challenges/conflict-resolution/tips-and-tools-for-healthy-conflict-resolution>.

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