

RACIAL HEALING IN AND THROUGH THE AMERICAN CHURCH

Kelly L. Hamren, Ph.D.
Culture and Crisis Conference
April 6, 2021

Dr. Kelly Hamren is an assistant professor of English at Liberty University. She received undergraduate and graduate degrees from Liberty University and doctorate from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Most of her research has emphasized placing literature in historical contexts and includes a primary focus on Russian poets and novelists.

Because the Church in America has often elevated race as a criterion for exclusion and dehumanization of fellow believers, many American denominations have begun publicly acknowledging their historic failures to affirm God’s image in men and women of color, especially African-Americans. However, these goals of racial reconciliation have become entangled with strands of political discourse that have often led to increased tension and polarization instead. The racially-charged unrest, violence, and counter-violence in the news have reinforced the temptation for many to minimize the damage done to people of color by both individual and cultural forces in the US—and to focus on calming things down on the surface rather than addressing the issues that created the unrest in the first place. It was this same temptation which led Martin Luther King, Jr, in 1963, to accuse “the white moderate [of being] more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice [and choosing] a negative peace which is the absence of tension [over] a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”¹ Suppressing expressions of racial trauma and reinforcing the practices which led to it will only make things worse. And yet, it is vital that the church in America develop a theology of race based on biblical truth. Frameworks such as critical race theory (CRT) have assisted many in their attempts to document racism in the US, but while not all of their insights should be dismissed, many of their foundational assumptions are inconsistent with the biblical worldview. As a result, this project will explore how churches who recognize their past complicity with the sin of racism can develop a theology of race consistent with the tenets of their faith, actively teach that theology to their congregants, and provide theologically-grounded applications for both personal and systemic racial healing.

First, it is important not to assume that fellow churchgoers have a clear theological understanding of how the Bible frames questions of ethnicity. Issues of race and racism are so often framed through a political and/or national-historical lens that even Christians who have read the Bible their entire lives can have their vision clouded by public discourse. It is also true that the evangelical world has a tendency to elevate questions of individual salvation and spiritual growth over questions of communal well-being. There are even those who balk at the term “social justice” because of its having been co-opted by leftist political discourse and turned into an equally politicized insult by the right—i.e., “social justice warrior.” But because the Bible defines and contextualizes the concept of social justice differently, on some levels, than progressive, twenty-first century Americans, it makes more sense to wrestle with the biblical framing of social justice rather than swallowing the culture’s definition or resorting to a wholesale dismissal of the term. Either way, we are surrendering to cultural forces rather than acting as catalysts for positive change—biblical justice warriors, if you will.

Whether one is a pastor, an elder, or a congregant willing to lead a Bible study or Sunday School class, it is possible to help other church members explore these concepts and raise questions within a biblical context. At the heart of biblical justice is the Lord’s second great

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” ed. Ali B. Ali-Dinar, Ph.D, African Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania, https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

commandment, to love our neighbors as ourselves,² but while much emphasis has been placed in evangelical pulpits and Sunday school rooms on how individuals can love and serve other individuals, it would be worthwhile to mine the Scriptures for those neglected passages which address how this works on congregational, communal, and societal levels, as well as how it intersects with questions of ethnic and racial identities. The Bible speaks, for instance, to questions of inter-racial marriage—Moses marrying a Cushite, for instance,³ as well as Boaz marrying a Moabite (a union affirmed by inclusion in the genealogy of Christ).⁴ And while the Israelites were instructed to annihilate the Canaanites for their sin-saturated culture,⁵ they were also given clear instructions on what the default method of treating foreigners should be—that is, the kind of life-giving hospitality meant to run counter to the oppressive treatment they themselves had received as enslaved descendants of refugees in Egypt.⁶ They were even instructed to set up structural safeguards—such as leaving behind grain in the fields during the harvest—for those whose status as sojourners would have made them vulnerable to exploitation under normal circumstances.⁷ The New Testament confronts prejudice against Gentiles in the church, such as when Peter is challenged to receive Cornelius as a fellow convert⁸—and challenged again by Paul for his failure to practice consistent fellowship with Gentile believers.⁹ In the teachings of Jesus himself, the story of the Good Samaritan¹⁰ would have been troubling to its original audience by its elevation of a racially-mixed man for his compassion and selfless service, not merely for its call to inconvenience oneself for others. These aspects of Scripture have always been there, but they beg for exegesis by American Christians, not only because they have sometimes been neglected in favor of other passages or read with individualistic or de-contextualized emphases but also because they can provide much-needed layers of nuance and life-giving principles to frame current cultural conversations about racial justice.

Furthermore, since all Scripture serves as a “double-edged sword”¹¹ that cuts through layers of self-protective complacency in the human soul, an honest study of Scriptural principles on matters of racial and ethnic prejudice ought to expose difficult truths about individual, congregational, and denominational complicity in unbiblical treatment of image-bearers based on race. Many denominations, including my own—the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)—are currently undergoing processes of collective repentance over past wrongs. Confronting Scriptural truths within particular congregations ought to lead congregants on the same difficult journeys of personal and communal soul-searching and, ideally, produce fruit on individual and communal levels. For those willing to lead the way on this journey, challenging fellow members of the body

² Mark 12:31 (NIV).

³ Numbers 12:1 (NIV).

⁴ Matthew 1:5 (NIV).

⁵ Deuteronomy 20:17-18 (NIV).

⁶ Exodus 23:9 (NIV).

⁷ Leviticus 19:9 (NIV).

⁸ Acts 10 (NIV).

⁹ Galatians 2:11-12 (NIV).

¹⁰ Luke 10:25-37 (NIV).

¹¹ Hebrews 4:12 (NIV).

of Christ might include calls for personal repentance, as well as suggestions for how to actively and consistently love our neighbors of a different color.

These calls to action will differ from individual to individual, or from congregation to congregation. An all-white congregation in a diverse neighborhood, for instance, may need to have some hard conversations about why they have not successfully reached out to neighbors of color. A congregation with some diversity, on the other hand, may need to look hard at why its elders, deacons, Sunday School teachers, or ministry leaders don't reflect that diversity. When a local group announces that a protest march against police brutality will be passing through the neighborhood of a local church, does the church leadership reach out to the organizers to ask what principles are guiding the protest and whether they can help, or do they immediately ask the deacons to install an extra security system in anticipation of vandalism? Some individuals may need to ask hard questions about lack of diversity in their friend groups, and others may need to question customer service practices in their businesses. Did they fail to invite the Latinx family at the end of the street to the block party, perhaps assuming they wouldn't speak good English or might feel out of place anyway? If they reviewed resumes for their company and recommended calling Greg Thomas in for an interview but not Shaquan Jackson, was their decision based on credentials alone? How would they feel if the new youth pastor at their church was in an interracial marriage?

These questions are not easy, but most of us know that the Bible, rightly read, is not supposed to make us feel consistently good about ourselves. Nor does defending biblical principles involve confronting unbiblical bases for justice only within secular culture; it also means letting biblical bases for justice shine lights into the dark corners of our own hearts and expose failures within our own churches. The Lord was never telling us not to remove the speck from our neighbor's eye—it is, in fact, an act of mercy to do so. But we will not even be able to see that speck without addressing the two-by-four in our own eye first.¹² The church in America has, historically, been an agent of grace within larger American culture, but it has also been guilty of great sin in many areas. While some believers denounced chattel, race-based slavery as evil, others entrenched themselves in that system with defenses based in Scriptural eisegesis. While some believers marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., others denounced the Civil Rights Movement as unbiblical and dangerous. It is just as true in the twenty-first century as it was during the 1860s and 1960s that the Church is called to be salt and light. And it is my prayer that we will heed that call by first confronting the inroads that flavorlessness and darkness have made within the body of Christ, that we might then confront the flavorlessness and darkness within the larger culture we inhabit. Brothers and sisters, let us get our own house in order, that we might be ready to speak with prophetic fervor into a world confronting a great cultural evil in sometimes helpful, sometimes clumsy, and sometimes downright harmful ways. The world needs the voice of the Church to do more than point out the clumsiness and harmfulness of its efforts to dismantle individual and systemic injustice; it needs to see what the right way looks like, and it needs to see that by looking at us.

¹² Matthew 7:3-5 (NIV).

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