

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
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The Role of the Church is Fostering Racial Harmony

by

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Introduction

COVID-19 has taken center stage across the world. The United States of America battles the disease, but it is not the only fight the country is in right now. Keeping Americans safe remains a high priority for the newly elected political leaders. They have need to bridge the great racial divide. The politicians have an important and necessary role to play in addressing the race problem. But they cannot do it on their own. The church must be part of the conversation and the solution to this age-old race problem.

The church is at crossroads. How it responds to race and race relations will significantly impact its fulfillment of the Great Commission. In God's master plan of final redemption, there will gather before the throne of God worshippers from every nation, tribe, and people (Rev. 7:9).

The challenge for the church today is to demonstrate how to love God and others amidst cultural differences. Loving God and others requires being intentional when engaging with fellow believers and non-believers. It is recognizing that God loves diversity, and He is the creator of all humanity. Christianity is not an exclusive club but rather a journey of walking with God through the curves and turns of life. It is modeling the heart of God when engaging with others. It is the church sharing and living the heart of God with every nation, tribe, and people.

God's Heart in the Creation of Humanity and Diversity

God is the author of diversity and His love for diversity is traced back to the Garden of Eden. In the beginning, God was pleased with the human beings He had created as well as the world in its vastness and diversity (Gen. 1:31). God formed Adam and Eve from the dirt in the ground (Gen. 2:7; Gen. 2:22-23). They were not created identical but as opposites who would complement each other. God also created the animals, birds of the air, and trees to be part of His great big and diverse world (Gen. 1:24-25).

In His master plan, God was not looking for uniformity but unity amidst diversity. This is evident by the command He gave to Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28). For the father and mother of all humanity to procreate, they needed to unite. Though their body parts were different, God expected that they would come together to reproduce and bring into fruition His plan. God wanted there to be people from every nation, town, and tribe. The Bible does not specify the race of Adam and Eve. However, the scripture details that God created Adam and Eve in His own image and likeness (Gen. 1:27). Every human being regardless of color is a descendant of Adam and Eve sharing the image and likeness of God. Being created in the image of God is what sets man apart from animals. It is also this very image of God that ought to drive all of humanity towards love and appreciation for each other. In God's master plan there is no room for racial disharmony.

Diversity is also traced to the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel. As God gave people different languages they were scattered to various parts of the world (Gen. 11:9). They formed

various nations, towns, and tribes. These same nations, towns, and tribes will be gathered before the throne of God at the culmination of the world. In Revelation 7:9 John described the apocalypse. He saw a great multitude gathered before the throne of God in worship and adoration. The number of worshippers who represented every town, nation, and tribe was so great that it was impossible to conduct a headcount. This glimpse of heaven shows that God inhabits the praises of His people and that everyone, regardless of their race, social and financial status, will be part of His final plan of redemption.

A Surge of Racial Tension in the US

The first African American President, Barack Obama, was elected as 44th President in 2008. In 2012, Obama gained a second term as President. Following these historical events, it may have been felt by some that the United States had become a post-racial society. This was on the assumption that Obama could not have won the election without the white votes¹.

Leading up to the 2016 General Elections, it became evident that the issue of racial division was very much alive. Tumultuous times started again in the United States of America as political parties wrestled for power. Real estate tycoon, Donald Trump, secured the nomination as the candidate for the Republican Party and started his campaign under the slogan “Make America Great Again.” Trump gathered large followers with whom his slogan resonated well. However, in the process of speaking his mind, Trump’s words stung some people. Across various spectrums many felt that Trump’s verbiage was divisive.

Deaths in Ferguson, Baltimore, Charlestown, Cleveland, and Cincinnati brought to light cases of police violence and injustices². A rise in the killing of Black Americans resulted in the prominence of Black Lives Matter³. However, as quickly as Black Lives Matter was growing so was the group of White Supremacists. This led to the realization that the country had not become a post-racial society and that the race problem is humongous, alive and needs a remedy.

The Role of the Church in Fostering Unity

Jesus, prior to His ascension, gave the commandment, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). Jesus addressed the issue of diversity by commanding His disciples to seek after those who were different from them and teach them His commandments.

¹ Kathleen J Fitzgerald, “Recognizing Race and Ethnicity: Power, Privilege, and Inequality. Hachette UK, 2014, p.4

² Stefan M Bradley, "The Rise of #blacklivesmatter," *American Book Review* 37, no. 3 (2016): 5 [doi:10.1353/abr.2016.0037](https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2016.0037).

³ Bradley, Stefan M. "The Rise of #blacklivesmatter." 5

The big challenge for the church is to convince people different from them to listen to what they have to say about faith and God. Raising funds and traveling to far-flung communities is just a small part of what it takes in fulfilling the Great Commission. The biggest challenge is getting people who are different from you and your sending church to listen to you. It is even more challenging if the evidence proves that your message and deeds are contradictory.

What Must the Church Do?

The church is the body of Christ Jesus and is made up of His disciples. A disciple is committed to the teachings of the leader. Therefore, it is expected that the church is made up of disciples of Jesus who would be committed to His teachings. Jesus's core teaching is love for God and others. Jesus said to His disciples that by their love for one another people would know that they are His disciples (John 13:35). Jesus did not limit love to those who are deserving or who would reciprocate love. He said to His followers that they should love their enemies and do good to those who hate and mistreat them (Luke 6:27-28). This is unorthodox teaching and contrary to the human nature of wanting to render evil for evil. However, Jesus' instructions on how believers should live with each other provides context for what is expected to bridge the great racial divide.

The church, as followers of Jesus, has a leading role to play in advancing a Christ-centered approach in bringing about racial harmony. The solution for America's race problem must start in the church; believers are called to be salt and light in this dark world (Matt. 5:13-14). Salt adds flavor and light illuminates. In like manner, believers must add flavor and shed light. To foster racial harmony the church must be intentional.

Here are some steps that can be taken to address the race problem.

Admit that the Race Problem Exists. The Word of God encourages believers to confess their faults one to another (James 5:16). Confession is not always easy, but it is necessary and mandated by God. The elimination of racism is linked to the church acknowledging that the problem exists. The church did not do a good job in addressing the problem of racism. However, the time is now for believers to take a bold stand. Annie Brown (2019) noted, "The church as an institution failed from the beginning to take a moral stand against oppression. And that persists even though this nation perceives itself as a Christian nation answerable to the higher authority of moral law."⁴

⁴ Annie W Brown, "Racism and the Christian Church in America: Caught between the Knowledge of Good and Evil," *Social Work in Public Health* 34, no. 1 (2019): 136, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2019.1566111>

Believers who struggle with seeing someone of a different race as equal and as a child of God must seek help. The help must come from the Holy Spirit and the body of Christ. A candid conversation is necessary and a commitment to change are rudimentary steps in acknowledging the problem and advancing a solution. Making excuses for being racist dishonors God and stands in the way of racial harmony.

Leading up to the 2020 General Elections some church leaders failed to admit that comments being spewed in political circles were racist. Except for pockets of people publicly speaking up against racism, many prominent Christian leaders remained silent or made excuses for the racist comments. God's Word is clear concerning diversity and unity. Believers who continue to advance a racist agenda will feel the wrath of God. The Bible clearly states that those who know God's will and fail to do it will be beaten with many stripes (Luke 12:47). The time is now for confession and next steps in bridging the destructive racial divide.

Educate the Congregation. Misinformation in the church continues because of the absence of sound teaching concerning diversity, the heart of God and His love for all humanity. Susan is typical of one who grew-up in a Christian home. She was taught that she should only marry her own race. One family member said, "You can eat and drink with them, but you cannot marry them." It was communicated to Susan that God does not want His children to marry outside of their race.

Some professed Christians have advanced a racist agenda while the church has been silent on the issue. At times, they spoke when it seemed convenient. Often conversations about race and racial harmony are superficial. They serve the purpose of checking the box for a sermon or lesson on diversity that had been presented. This superficial approach, if present in any congregation, must be addressed. Leaders must begin to teach about God's creation and His love for diversity. Why has the church not been more vocal on race and race relations? Is it because such discourse and teaching may cause congregants, including big tithers, to become uncomfortable? Is it because the leaders themselves are racists? Is it because attendance may plummet if the church takes a stand that goes against the popular belief? There is no justification in the eyes of God for not actively advancing a Christ-honoring approach to racial harmony.

The superiority of one race above another is a lie from the pit of hell. The Bible clearly states what the expectation is for believers. According to Micah 6:8, God requires justice, and a love for kindness and a humble walk before Him. Walking with God means doing His will and advancing His agenda. Jesus died for all people - regardless of their culture, skin color or any other attribute. God saw beyond race; he saw the need of all humanity for a savior. God is seeking followers who will see people through His eyes of love.

Genuine love for God is evident by genuine love for others whether black, white, or brown. Love is not blind to color. It sees the person's color and the image of God in the other person. There is

no need to ignore a person's color. Seeing someone in the image of God does not mean treating that person's color as a means of distinction or separation. Instead, color should be acknowledged as part of God's great diverse world and the church must see people for who God created them to be and for how He wants them to serve in His plan.

Live Out the Word of God. The Bible provides numerous scriptures calling believers to be examples in their word, conduct, love, faith, and purity (1 Tim. 4:12). Far too often the words and deeds of Christians do not match. This disconnect is particularly evident in matters pertaining to racial harmony. It seems easy to confess love with the mouth but exceedingly difficult to live a life of love towards people of a different race. Believers are called to practice what they preach (James 1:22).

Sonia was born into a Christian home. She loved the Lord and served Him with her whole heart. She fell in love with a believer from the church, but he was of a different race. She thought her family would be thrilled that she was in love with a believer. She did not expect that she would be disowned by members of her family. Some of her family members were seminary graduates who led a multi-ethnic congregation. She thought for sure, they would not mind that she was in love with someone from a different race. Sonia decided that she would honor God and continue in the bi-racial relationship. Because of her choice to have a relationship outside of her race, Sonia lived as an outcast, scorned, and disowned by some people of her race and her family. Sonia's family publicly interacted with believers of different races. However, behind closed doors it was a different story. Sonia's experience is just one example of how professed Christians and leaders practice racism. God is calling His followers to not just be preachers and hearers of His Word. He is calling them to be doers.

Some church leaders may be comfortable receiving tithe and offerings from all races but find it hard to welcome people from another race into their home or family. God is a rewarder of those who do His will (Matt. 7:21). Doing God's will means loving everyone regardless of their differences.

Live in Love and Harmony. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). Love is a central pillar of the Christian faith. Jesus demonstrated the greatest love ever when He died for all regardless of their race (John 3:16). Believers are not called today to die for each other but to live in love with one another. It is unreasonable to think that believers can love God who is unseen when they do not love other humans who they can see (1 John 4:10). Jesus commanded His disciples to show love. He said to His disciples that they will be known as His followers because of their love (John 13:35). God is calling His church to love each other and show respect for one another.

The church must learn to live in harmony with others (Rom. 12:16). Divisiveness in the church is evident in many ways including across denominational and doctrinal lines. It appears believers have not yet mastered the art of getting along with each other much less getting along with someone who looks different, speaks different or behaves different. God's word makes it clear that believers are all united through the bond of Christ. "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (Colossians 3:11 ESV).

Address Racism and Instances of Injustice. Believers have a responsibility to speak for those who are being oppressed. God in His Word specifically mandates the church to act when there is injustice. "Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and the rights of all who are vulnerable. Speak out in order to judge with righteousness and to defend the needy and the poor" (Prov. 31:8-9). Sandy was one of the few persons of her race at the church where she fellowshiped. Sandy was placed in a leadership role at the church and it was hard for some members of the dominant race in the congregation to accept her leadership. She was called derogatory names and at times insulted. She was hurt by how she was treated but did not receive the support of other leaders in addressing racism.

When God places people in leadership they have a responsibility to serve with the heart of God. When racism raises its ugly head the church (members and leaders) must open their mouths and speak forth God's truth and love.

Fear of retribution continues to hinder many people from speaking out against racism. However, Christians need to ask themselves if they would rather be an accomplice and be silent, or honor God. It is never easy to stand alone and to call out sin. However, people who boldly declare God's truth concerning His love for all humanity will be rewarded by Him. God's eyes are roaming the earth to identify who is fully committed to Him and is blameless before Him (2 Chron. 16:9). A fully committed heart to God is evident by a stand for righteousness and love for God and others. Such a stand involves creating opportunities for equal service in God's kingdom and in society regardless of race.

A course correction is what is needed right now to address the problem of racism. This message may be hard for the church to receive because it is not easy to accept that sin is in the camp. However, the sooner the church acknowledges the problem and commits to being part of the solution, the easier it will become to condemn the sin of racism. Yes, racism is sin.

Conclusion

There is no better time than now to be the hands and feet of Jesus by bridging the gap and promoting racial harmony. The church cannot remain silent and must speak God's truth concerning racial harmony. In the most recent past, division and divisiveness raised their ugly head and the effects have left scars. These scars can and must be healed. The church has a new task before it

which should be embraced through the eyes of God. Now more than ever, the church must be prepared to discuss race, God's heart in the creation of humanity, and the role of the church in fostering unity.

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