

Racial Reconciliation and the Christian Gospel

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In the thinking of many Christians, the notion of racial reconciliation does not have a direct relationship to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We may agree that Christians of different ethnicities ought to get along, but many would also be hesitant to recognize a demand in the gospel along this line. After all, the thinking goes, the gospel is the message that all people need to “get saved.” Each individual human is alienated from God because each of us is a sinner, and we need to ask Jesus into our hearts so that we’ll go to heaven when we die. And, while we might agree that it would be nice if there were all sorts of races in heaven, and we probably should do our best to get along here on earth, if we don’t, we can be thankful that this is no threat to the gospel.

I will argue in this article that this is not a proper understanding of the gospel message, and that rightly grasping the gospel entails a commitment to reconciliation of all types—including, perhaps most specifically, ethnic, or racial reconciliation. Let me first offer a definition of what I mean by “racial reconciliation”: Seeking to foster fruitful community life across racial and social boundary lines—lines of division that seem to be “normal” in some sense, but have been perverted by Satan and human sinfulness, so that communities do not regard each other with respect and dignity, seeking mutually fruitful relationships, but with suspicion and fear, which lead to exploitation and manipulation of all types.

I will argue, from Scripture, that racial reconciliation is not simply something nice that Christians should be doing, a sort of add-on to the gospel—nice, but not necessary. *It is at the very heart of the gospel.* Reconciliation *is* the gospel, and racial, or ethnic reconciliation—in a divided America, and in a divided world—provides a perfect arena to manifest and to live out the reconciling grace of God. Because of this, to persist in passive avoidance of racial/ethnic reconciliation is to misunderstand the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I will first sketch out the broad lines of the Bible’s story line and show how racial reconciliation—along with reconciliation across social boundary lines—is at the very center of what God is doing in the world—and what he has always been seeking to accomplish. The story climaxes, of course, in the Gospels and the ministry of Jesus, and here we will get a grip on what is the gospel message.¹ We will see that the gospel is not the proclamation that God is saving individuals and giving them a heavenly destiny, whereas he was never doing this previously; it is, rather, the announcement of the arrival of the long-awaited kingdom of God—the announcement that God has come in Jesus to begin his work of reclaiming and redeeming the world, which begins with a redeemed people—a holy people who will manifest *in their social practices* the very life of God on

¹ For a recent, and excellent, attempt to read the Bible as a coherent narrative, see Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). Cf. also Richard Bauckham, “Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture* (ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 38-53.

earth.² I will then direct our attention to a key passage in Paul in order to draw out and defend the claim that racism is not simply an unfortunate matter in our national experience, but a radical failure to understand the gospel.

The Biblical Storyline

That racial reconciliation lies at the very heart of all that God is doing in the world, that it is one of his chief concerns in redemption, can be seen clearly from the Biblical metanarrative—the story line of the Bible. The biblical drama may be rehearsed as follows.

God created all things perfect—there was beautiful harmony in the world, all things were perfectly integrated and whole; humanity’s relationship with God was characterized by full and complete fellowship. Adam and Eve, the first humans, enjoyed wonderful communion with one another, demonstrated in their being naked and unashamed. There was nothing to hide from one another—neither one had to cover anything from the other’s gaze, since there was no shame in being completely open and vulnerable to the other. There was no need to cover one’s body parts, nor to hide one’s thoughts. There was, therefore, no shame, no suspicion, no evil plotting against each other. Each person could fully delight in the other—in the other’s presence, which would have only enhanced one’s own experience, and in the other’s gifts, though the gifts of each would have been different from the other’s. And humanity’s relationship with creation was characterized by harmony and fellowship. They were to work the land, bringing forth and increasing the fruitfulness of the earth.

We know how the story goes. Adam and Eve sinned against God and this condition of bliss was radically broken. Sin has broken every relationship, corrupting and perverting everything totally. Humanity’s relationship with God has been broken, symbolized by Adam hiding himself in the Garden, something absolutely bizarre and unprecedented at this point in human history. “Where are you, Adam?” Those awful words that had never, to that point, been uttered.

Furthermore, Adam and Eve’s relationship is broken—they now are ashamed of their nakedness—something also unheard of, and completely unnatural to our original human condition. We are not supposed to be ashamed of our bodies, but now we are—we cover ourselves because our knowledge has been corrupted. If we look on each others’ nakedness now, outside the garden, we will “know” each other inappropriately—we will think sinful thoughts, so we cannot “trust” each other. Unfortunately, our present human experience demands that we utilize a sort of cleverness and healthy suspicion of each other, in order to keep sin at bay.

Sin has also, thirdly, broken humanity’s relationship to creation, so that now the earth does not easily yield fruit in response to our efforts, but work is now toilsome and difficult.³

² On the gospel as announcement of a royal victory, see N. T. Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 38-62.

³ For a rich development of the primacy of these three relationships and how they were broken at the Fall, see Michael Wittmer, *Heaven is a Place on Earth: Why Everything You Do Matters to God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

So, we are in this state of brokenness and disintegration. Whereas all aspects of creation and God's relationship to creation were fully integrated and characterized by trust and openness and full sharing and fellowship, things are now utterly broken, which has introduced fear and suspicion, hatred and evil scheming, and sin that is carried out within broken relationships, seen most immediately in Cain's murder of Abel. So even before we're out of Genesis, we have murder, incest, rape, racial strife, the enslavement of nations, and on and on.

In response to the hijacking of his good creation by Sin, God set about to reclaim his creation, and to do so through one man—Abraham, to whom he made the promise that “all the nations of the earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3). The story of the Bible, from this point forward, is the story of God fulfilling his promise to Abraham to bless the world through him.

God made an initial move to fulfill these promises to Abraham through the nation Israel. He wanted to re-integrate what had been disintegrated—humanity's relationship with himself, with creation, and with each other. Israel was chosen especially to enjoy the grace and goodness of God, to display what the restored creation was to look like, to be a new society, and to be the agent of God's redemption to the nations. They were called to be a kingdom of priests, spreading God's grace around to the nations so that they could be reconciled to God and display that reconciliation by having their national life ordered by love of God and love of neighbor. They were chosen to be God's own people, those who were reconciled to him and who displayed what the re-integrated humanity was supposed to look like. The nation of Israel was supposed to be the place on earth where God dwelled by his Spirit—his desire was to live and walk among them, seen most specifically in his presence in the Temple. This was to be a picture of that restored relationship that God and humanity had once enjoyed in the garden—full sharing with one another, God and man in complete communion.

From the very beginning of Israel's national experience, however, things went very badly. Israel took the privileges she enjoyed and kept them for herself, thinking that since God had chosen her especially from among the nations, this meant that she was better than the nations. Israel had made the mistake of identifying election by God with ethnicity, which led to racism and nationalism, and an intense superiority complex. Instead of regarding her mission as a light to the nations, an agent of God's redeeming work in the world, Israel despised the nations, and began to think that God felt the same way—that God hated the nations of the world and would come and judge the nations and redeem only her. So she shut herself off from the nations, and adopted an “us” versus “them” approach. Israel demonized pagan nations, instead of exhorting them to turn to the Lord and enjoy his salvation.

This is seen most clearly in Jonah, where the prophet of God refuses to go to those nasty pagans in Ninevah, for fear that if he were to preach to them and see them repent, God would prove himself to be the merciful, gracious and compassionate God that he is, and forgive them and withhold his judgment (Jonah 4:2). Because God does end up forgiving Ninevah, Jonah is utterly despondent and pleads with God to take his life (v. 3).

Ironically, even while thinking themselves superior to the nations of the world, the internal life of the nation of Israel completely mimicked the ways of the pagans—she adopted an idolatrous lifestyle, worshiping the true God along with a few others, *and*,

more to our point, adopting social patterns of behavior oriented by the world—manipulation, exploitation, making money at the expense of others, not caring for the poor, the orphan, the widow, spending money to make frivolous home improvements while people went hungry.

Things were radically broken, and the mission of Israel to be a light to the world was an utter failure. In the midst of this radically broken situation, God made promises that he was going to come himself and fix the whole thing—he was coming to reintegrate all facets of what was broken—humanity’s relationship to God (what we usually focus on), humanity’s relationship to each other (what we tend to neglect), and humanity’s relationship to the earth (what we have completely neglected).

And this is exactly how Jesus articulated his mission in the Gospels. The gospel message is the announcement of the coming of the kingdom of God. God is *now* making his move to restore his broken creation, and he’s doing it through Jesus. He’s coming to radically remake society according to his original design! The call, therefore, is to listen to him and repent from sinful social practices and to begin radically reorienting your life according to how he’s redeeming and restoring humanity.

This is a more holistic vision of the gospel message preached by Jesus than we often have. He did not come merely calling people to give mental assent to his teachings, nor to get individuals to commit to him so that they could have a heavenly destiny. Rather, he came proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God—the arrival of that new reality in which the brokenness of creation is being restored.

And notice how in Jesus’ ministry, he is constantly going to the outsider and to the ones who are broken, always challenging the social, ethnic, and racial assumptions of Israel—the Syrophenician woman, the Samaritan, the centurion, the tax-collector, the prostitute, his invitation of women into his inner circle. Jesus’ disciples, because they are sinful humans, are always wanting to draw lines around their privilege with Jesus, just as the Jews wanted to view themselves as having the inside track with God, excluding others, especially those despicable Gentiles. But Jesus announces the arrival of the kingdom to all people, and calls everyone to receive salvation, and calls his disciples to be servants of all—*especially* outsiders. And this should not be a threat to us, since before the grace of God invaded our lives, we too were outsiders!

Why does Jesus do this? Why is he constantly challenging our social and racial assumptions and relationships? We have often read passages in the Gospels in ways that protect us from the radical obedience to which Jesus calls us. We say things like, “Well, that’s just an *illustration* of the kind of love Jesus wants us to have in our hearts—it’s a picture of our motives—we should be willing to love all kinds of people, if we ever come across them.” But where—or with what—is our discipleship to Jesus carried out? Not only our motives, not only with our hearts or our intentions, *but with our bodies!* Jesus is modeling for us, and calling us, to actually embody and enact obedience to him by embracing outsiders, by breaking down racial and social barriers, reversing patterns of social sin into which we’ve fallen—to make manifest that his kingdom has actually arrived in power, and that the kingdoms of this world are becoming the kingdom of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ.

The story continues, of course, with the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and the sending of the Spirit to the church, and it is Jesus, by the Spirit, who

compels the church to break out of Israel and to go to the nations, forming one new people of God from every nation.

From the biblical story-line, then, we can see the broad scope of what God is doing in the world. What is God up to? He has set himself to reclaim what has been lost; to redeem what has been broken. He is restoring his world to make manifest that he is indeed the Creator, and *King of kings* and *Lord of lords*.

The gospel, therefore, has *individual*, *corporate*, and *cosmic* components. Neither one can be set over against the other, and to reduce the gospel to the message of individuals being saved by God and being given a heavenly destiny, is to tragically misunderstand the purposes of God in the world as set forth in Scripture. God is redeeming the whole of his creation, which is made up of individuals and communities. God has come to restore the three relationships—humanity to God; humanity to humanity; and humanity to the earth. And, from the biblical story-line, we can see that the gospel involves all three of these relationships. To neglect any one of these is to have a truncated gospel.

Social and racial, or ethnic reconciliation, therefore, is a central impulse in the biblical story-line, lying at the very heart of God's purposes in reclaiming his broken world.

Racial Reconciliation in Paul

While there are several places to which we could turn in order to demonstrate how this is a major emphasis in Paul's letters, I will direct our attention to Ephesians 2 in order to further demonstrate how close to the heart of God racial reconciliation actually is.⁴ Parts of this passage may be quite familiar to us, especially the description of our being dead in transgressions and sins and God saving us only by his grace. But these verses are part of a larger statement of the gospel, a broader depiction of the drama of God's triumph in Christ.

Ephesians 2 is actually an elaboration of Paul's statement in chapter 1, verses 19-23, where God's power has been shown in his raising Jesus from the dead and installing him as Lord over the entire universe, including the powers and authorities, those evil angelic figures, including Satan, that have perverted God's good creation, and which currently work to hold creation and humanity in slavery to death through transgressions and sins. God has triumphed in Christ, defeating these entities in the death and resurrection of Jesus, who is no longer in the grave, but rules from the throne of God in heaven.

But how is this victory demonstrated? What is Christ doing to make known his triumph over the powers of evil and over Satan? Paul answers this question in Ephesians 2, in two sections, vv. 1-10, and vv. 11-21, and we'll see that when Paul states the gospel of God's victory in Christ, it includes the reconciliation of socially and racially alienated groups of humanity.

⁴ We could also fruitfully discuss Romans and Galatians in this vein. Though these letters traditionally have been read as Paul's theology of the salvation of the individual, recent work by Pauline scholars has demonstrated that these are more properly read as specific pastoral letters to churches that are divided by ethnic tension, pointing to a profound misunderstanding of the nature of the gospel and the Kingdom of God.

In vv. 1-10, the passage with which we're more familiar, Paul states that God's triumph is demonstrated in snatching his people from the grip of Satan, who held us all in bondage to death through transgression and sin. We were all, at one time, trapped by Satan himself in spiritual death—and headed for eternal death—before *God*, driven only by his amazing grace, invaded our world, giving us new life from the dead, raising us up to share in the life of Christ. The reason God did this, of course, was to magnify his great grace for all eternity, as we see in vv. 7-10.

In vv. 11-21, Paul presents another aspect of God's triumph, an equally important facet of what God has accomplished in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, though this is often overlooked. An essential component of God's triumph in Christ involves the uniting of formerly divided ethnic and racial groups in Christ.

In vv. 11-12, Paul depicts how Satan and the evil powers have divided humanity, setting ethnic groups off against each other through animosity and suspicion. Paul is, of course, speaking from a Jewish perspective, noting how Jews manipulated the sign of their covenantal relationship with God—circumcision—and turned it into a racial label, calling gentiles “the uncircumcision”—i.e., the “unacceptable,” “the outsiders,” “sinners,” “gentile dogs.” Because of their sinful ethnic pride and their racism, Israel had cut off the nations from the grace of God. They were indeed called to be a distinct people, but they were set apart in order to serve the nations of the world. Instead, they turned their status as God's chosen people into a mark of pride and racial superiority, working against the purposes of God for the world.⁵

Paul locates the source of this racial animosity in the Law, in v. 15. But it wasn't the Law itself that was the problem, just as distinctions between races and ethnicities are good things in themselves. Community distinctions are a natural part of God's good creation, and humanity is meant to celebrate the grace and glory of God in a variety of ways. What is evil, however, is that Satan and human sinfulness combine to turn these distinctions between groups into divisions, so that we now turn against each other, labeling each other with horribly derogatory names and stereotypes that are meant to damn the other, rather than blessing the other.

Paul says that Christ came specifically to deal with this racially divided situation, to heal it *within himself*. In his death, Christ broke down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles so that both groups could become one *in Christ*. This has direct reference to all racial distinctions and ethnic groups. Christ took upon himself all the racial hatred and division in the world, and in his death, *he killed it* (v. 15). And in his resurrection he opened up a totally new humanity—he restored humanity to its true state, and this new humanity currently exists in the location called “in Christ, by the Spirit.” We who are “in Christ” live in the sphere of the resurrection power of God, which is communicated to us by the Spirit. We are “in Christ, and he himself is our peace,” according to Paul (v. 15).

And what is interesting here in v. 16 is that neither of these reconciliations is prior to the other. Paul says that Christ reconciled “both in one body to God through the cross.” It is one work of reconciliation—racial and ethnic groups to each other, and this one new humanity, made up of all races, to God. Black and white, Hispanic and Asian—all of us are caught up into the Trinitarian life and love of God, making the perfectly

⁵ For a recent scholarly discussion of Ephesians 2 along this line, see Tet-Lim N. Yee, *Jews, Gentiles and Ethnic Reconciliation: Paul's Jewish Identity and Ephesians* (SNTSMS 130; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

harmonious communal life of God himself manifest here on earth. Paul says in v. 18 that “through Christ we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.”

Conclusion

So, when Paul states the gospel of reconciliation, he does so in such a way that includes the reconciliation of humanity with God, *and* the reconciliation of formerly divided racial and ethnic groups. *It is one work*—a holistic work of reconciliation, so that to be part of the people of God in Christ is to be actively seeking to unify people across social and racial boundary lines that have been manipulated by Satan and human sinfulness to divide up and destroy humanity. As we foster such mutually fruitful relationships, we participate most strategically with God’s program of repairing and restoring what was marred at the fall—the image of God, which, as a number of theologians have demonstrated, is a relational concept.⁶ For Paul, and the whole of Scripture, the people of God do not merely *possess* the message of the gospel; the people of God *are* the message, *embodying* and making manifest the gospel of God’s reconciling all things under the loving Lordship of Jesus Christ. And to be rightly relating to one another across racial, social, and ethnic lines *is the proper embodiment of the gospel.*⁷

⁶ Humanity being the image of God involves our functioning in three fundamental relationships; our relationship to God, one another, and our proper stewardship of God’s good creation (Wittmer, *Heaven is a Place on Earth*, 80-83; Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 35-39; cf. also Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998]).

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