

# What is wrong with racism?

A biblical and theological answer



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## Introduction: What does the gospel have to do with racism?

In my teaching at Spurgeon's College, I lead a seminar on racism as part of my module on Christian Ethics. At the start of the class, I try to open the discussion by asking the students a provocative question: *What exactly is wrong with racism from a biblical/theological perspective?* I'm often surprised at the inability of even the brightest students to articulate a clear response to this urgent question. The responses I hear from the students tend to mimic the patterns of the contemporary media. Racism is wrong, students say, because it leads to discrimination and inequality. Rarely are students able to formulate a robust biblical case against racism, using the full weight of Scripture and Christian tradition.

The problem is not that the students' answers about discrimination and inequality are wrong per se. The problem is that, lacking a clear grounding in biblical teaching, they do not really get to the heart of the matter. Even students who had no allegiance to Christ or no understanding of the gospel would be able to give the same kind of answers as my students, most of whom are deeply committed disciples and ministers. Many of them will go on to become significant leaders in their churches and communities. The question, therefore, is what difference does the gospel make, firstly, to our understanding of racism and, secondly, to our determination to combat racist ideologies in today's divided world?

As a teacher with a vocation to form students for ministry in the contemporary world, I regard it as an essential part of my calling to help the students to understand exactly why racism is wrong from a biblical/theological perspective. My hope in writing this article is that these questions will be asked not only inside the lecture rooms of theological colleges, but in church pulpits and house groups, Christian businesses and charities, as well as in Christian media and in ordinary conversations between friends.

## What is racism?

The main point that I wish to make in this article is that racism is deplorable, not only because it promotes injustice and inequality, but because it is a blasphemous violation of the sacred dignity of a human being who bears the divine image. Before expanding this main point, it is important to be clear about what racism is. Racism posits a 'differentiation and evaluation of superiority and inferiority based largely upon physical characteristics such as skin colour, eye shape, hair texture, and visible cultural characteristics such as language and clothing.'<sup>1</sup> Racism is a complex phenomenon that comprises a range of psychological, social, cultural, economic and political elements. Racism is not simply a matter of individuals expressing bigoted beliefs, but is also a disposition, or a worldview, that manifests in subtle forms and operates on many different levels, including ideological, behavioural and institutional levels.<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the diverse manifestations of racism, there are several characteristic traits that

## NOTES

1. EA Robinson, *Race and Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2012), p. 16.
2. DR Sharp, *No Partiality: The Idolatry of Race and the New Humanity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), p. 52.
3. JH Cone, *Epilogue: An Interpretation of Debate among Black Theologians* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), p. 437.
4. ML King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 70.
5. GD Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man* (New York: Scribner, 1965), 1965). Kelsey claimed that the denunciation of racism as a blasphemous form of idolatry is not hyperbole or a mere figure of speech, but a true description of the spirit of racist ideologies that purport to be based on biblical teaching.
6. R Niebuhr, cited in P Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), p. 12.
7. P Tillich, *Systematic Theology. Volume 1* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 13.
8. P Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 1.
9. Kelsey, *Racism*, p. 27.
10. Kelsey, *Racism*, pp. 27–28.

are common to racism, such as dehumanisation, oppression, discrimination, hostility, exploitation and degradation.

When viewed from this perspective, I contend that racism is not merely a social problem, but a sinful and blasphemous deviation from the gospel of life, as proclaimed and enacted by Jesus Christ. Racism is not merely a harmful social ideology, but also a spiritual pathology – a metaphysical disease or an ontological malady.<sup>3</sup> Racism is like a spiritual virus that gets inside the worldview of an individual or an institution, hijacking its thought processes, replicating itself and producing patterns and behaviours that perpetuate the racist culture. Racism is sickness and morbidity masquerading as health and vitality. Racism is the ‘absurd dogma that one race is responsible for all the progress of history.’<sup>4</sup> The very assumption that a person’s skin colour renders that person inherently superior to a person of a different skin colour is itself a symptom of this sickness of the soul.

When racism is endorsed by Christians and when the Bible is invoked to promote racist dogmas, then the sin of racism spills over into outright *blasphemy*.<sup>5</sup> This is why racism is always an anti-Christian phenomenon. Racism blasphemes against the sacred dignity of human beings who bear the stamp of God’s image – the *imago Dei* (Genesis 1.26). Racist ideas can flourish only in a moral vacuum of ignorance and fear. Racism originates not in biblical ideas of a chosen people, but in pagan myths concerning the supposedly mystical qualities of blood and ethnicity. Even when such myths carry a Christian banner, the discerning eye sees the blasphemous spectacle for what it is: namely, a demonic lie perpetuated by deceivers who, by either ignorance or malice, have made themselves into enemies of Christ and his cross.

What, then, is wrong with racism from the perspective of the gospel? I think there are three main reasons why racism is sinful, which I will explain in the next section.

### Three main reasons (from a biblical perspective) why racism is a sin

Firstly, racism is sinful because it is a form of idolatry. Idolatry was defined by Reinhold Niebuhr as the elevation of ‘some finite element of existence into the eminence of the divine.’ The idol thus becomes ‘the ultimate principle of coherence and meaning.’<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich argues along similar lines, noting that idolatry occurs when ‘something essentially conditioned is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted into universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance.’<sup>7</sup> According to this understanding, racism is idolatrous to the extent that it elevates the concept of race to the unmerited status of the ultimate and immutable defining characteristic of what it means to be human.

From the perspective of racism, race is a matter of ‘ultimate concern.’<sup>8</sup> This means that race is deified into an idol. Race is regarded as an ultimate reference point that purports to give life meaning and purpose. Race thus assumes the guise of an idol to the extent that it becomes ‘the source of value, and ... is at the same time the object of value.’<sup>9</sup> The tendency of ‘Christian’ racists towards

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idolatry led George Kelsey to categorise such persons as ‘Christian polytheists’ to the extent that they worship both Christ and the idol of race.<sup>10</sup> The purpose of an idol is not merely to serve as an object of misplaced devotion, but also as a means for one race or social group to assert its dominance over another. There are numerous examples of this in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, where power-hungry kings deploy idols to establish political control. For example, in the same way that the idolatrous King Jeroboam made golden calves to establish and consolidate his social and religious domination of Israel (1 Kings 12.25–33), so racists today likewise manufacture the idol of race in order to establish and consolidate their economic and social dominance.

Secondly, racism is sinful because it defines human beings in terms of superficial biological characteristics. Rather than recognising the essential spirituality of all people, racism reduces human beings to their biological identity. Christianity defines the human being primarily in terms of spirit, rather than biology. For the racist, a human being is little more than a carbon-based biochemical phenomenon. For the Christian, by contrast, every person, regardless of their particular biological characteristics, is ‘an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God’s great universe’ – to quote the words of Dallas Willard. Racism is therefore both anti-Christian and anti-human.

From a biblical-theological perspective, the value of a human being consists in his or her relationship with their transcendent Creator who has invested them with the sacred dignity of bearing the divine image. Human worth and dignity are not derived from biological characteristics, such as skin colour, that people inherit through their genes. The deification of race is an illegitimate attempt to achieve redemption without Christ, to build a tower of Babel on a foundation of lies, aspiring to reach heaven without the aid of the Holy Spirit. Racism involves the kind of idolatry that would fall under the condemnation of the Apostle Paul who denounced those who ‘exchanged the truth

about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator' (Romans 1.25).

Therefore, racism has no basis whatsoever in Christian anthropology. Racism is based on the principle of biological inheritance, which regards humans not as essentially spiritual beings with certain biological characteristics, but as essentially biological beings with certain immutable character traits derived from a base of biological reality. When anthropology is reduced to biology and when the essential spirituality of human beings is

**the Bible narrates a story of the fulfilment of God's purpose to liberate the world from all forms of injustice and oppression**

disregarded, human life is reduced to a Darwinian-Hobbesian struggle for existence, devoid of dignity, freedom and compassion. Expanding on this point, the Russian Orthodox philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev, explained that there are two antithetical ideas that contend for mastery in the world. The first idea is based on the selection of the strongest and those who assign value to the qualities of blood and race and are animated by a will to power. The second idea is based on the brotherhood of all people, the spiritual dignity and inherent worth of all people, regardless of their biological attributes or social status.<sup>11</sup> Berdyaev identifies the first idea with the racial spirit of paganism; the second with the fraternal spirit of the gospel of Christ. The first idea leads to a politics of blood and soil (which are biological elements); the second leads to a politics of compassion and justice (which are spiritual qualities). The first kind of politics is essentially racist; the second is essentially Christian.

Thirdly, racism is sinful because it destroys community. The Bible makes clear that God has ordained community as his primary means of building his Kingdom on Earth. Scripture testifies to God's plan to reconcile diverse people into a healing unity in Christ by the redeeming power of the Holy Spirit. This reconciled community stands in stark contrast to the sinful politics of today that exclude people in the name of race, gender, class, ethnicity, nation, etc. This is the essential theme of the Epistle to the Ephesians. The author refers to the creation of this new redeemed community as 'the mystery of Christ' (Ephesians 2.14). This mystery refers to the once-hidden yet now-revealed plan of God to establish a new humanity through the reconciling power of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Those races and nations who were once regarded as 'foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world' have now been brought into a healing

unity by the reconciling power of Christ's blood (Ephesians 2.13). Christ has thereby broken down the walls of hostility and enmity that once divided people of different races and has now established a covenant of peace between them.

## The Bible as the primary resource for combating racism: Clarence Jordan's 'Translation' of Ephesians

Of all the diverse biblical texts, the Epistle to the Ephesians, with its emphasis on the 'new humanity' in Christ, offers the most sustained and focused rebuke of racist idolatry. Ephesians demonstrates how racism is totally opposed to the gospel in so far as racism perpetuates division and enmity by dividing humanity into groups, whereas the gospel promotes the universal solidarity of all peoples within the all-encompassing love of God. As Douglas R Sharp remarks, 'The new humanity disclosed in Jesus calls into question our ways of forming and expressing our oppositional humanity.'<sup>12</sup> The anti-racist Christian activists involved in the struggle for civil rights in America in the 1950s and 60s understood how Ephesians' message of emancipation could be applied to the anti-Christian system of racial segregation in many parts of the USA.

Before Martin Luther King, Jr. started to come into prominence in the late 1950s, one of the leading anti-racist Christian voices was the lesser-known preacher and activist, Clarence Jordan. Jordan translated the language of the New Testament into the racially charged idioms of modern American English. In his *Cotton Patch Gospels*, Jordan rendered the biblical notions of 'Jew and Gentile' as 'White Man and Negro'. 'Crucifixion' was translated as 'lynching.' Jordan translated not only the text of Paul's letters, but also names of the towns and congregations to whom they were addressed. 'The Epistle to the Romans' is thus rendered as 'The Letter to the Christians in Washington' and 'Ephesians' becomes 'The Letter to the Christians in Birmingham [Alabama].'

Jordan's translation of Ephesians 2.11–13 illustrates the rhetorical force of these provocative and challenging renderings of New Testament imagery into the language of his contemporary context:

So then, always remember that previously you Negroes ... were at one time outside the Christian fellowship, denied your rights as fellow believers, and treated as though the gospel didn't apply to you, hopeless and God-forsaken in the eyes of the world. Now, however, because of Christ's supreme sacrifice, you who once were so segregated are warmly welcomed into the Christian fellowship..<sup>13</sup>

Jordan employed these provocative renderings of familiar New Testament passages to make explicit the implicit anti-racist message of the Christian gospel. Jordan's rigorous engagement with Paul's

11. N Berdyaev, *Ekzistentsialnaya Dialektika Bozhestvennogo i Chelovecheskogo* (Moscow: Astrel, 2011), p. 453.

12. DR Sharp, *No Partiality: The Idolatry of Race & the New Humanity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), p. 273.

13. C Jordan, *Cotton Patch Gospel: Paul's Epistles* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2004), p. 108.

14. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity International, 1990), pp. 89–113.

15. [www.newsweek.com/martin-luther-king-jr-was-not-always-popular-back-day-780387](http://www.newsweek.com/martin-luther-king-jr-was-not-always-popular-back-day-780387).

16. S Thernstrom & A Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 170.

epistles nurtured in him a deep conviction that racism is inherently destructive of community. When we use such categories as Black, White, Arab, Jew, Gentile, etc. to define ourselves in opposition to those whom we perceive to be inferior, we impede the coming of God's Kingdom. We obstruct will of God and frustrate his ultimate purpose to create a new reconciled humanity. Clarence Jordan did not merely preach against racism. In 1942 he and his wife, Florence, established an interracial Christian community, called Koinonia Farm, in the heart of segregationist Georgia. Inevitably, Jordan's community was attacked not only by vigilante groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, but also by the official governing authorities, which falsely alleged that Jordan and his community were radical socialists, whose support for racial integration was simply a cover for their supposed allegiance to communism.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, the same charge of 'socialism' and 'communism' was made against Dr King in the 1960s, as well as against the Black Lives Matter Movement in recent years. It is important to note that at no point during his lifetime did Martin Luther King Jr. enjoy net-positive approval ratings among the white population in America. Among the American population, King's approval ratings never exceeded around 33 per cent.<sup>15</sup> Although King's approval ratings were expectedly higher among Black Americans, the proportion of white evangelical Christians who supported King was even lower than the general white population. Like the opponents of the Black Lives Matter movement today, many of the white people who opposed Dr King's alleged 'radical socialism' in the 1960s would have vehemently refuted the allegation of racism. It is remarkable to note how little capacity many people have to learn the difficult lessons of history, which affords countless examples of how the bogus charge of 'radical socialism' has been employed to undermine individuals and movements that campaign for racial justice and equality.

The message of the healing unity of Christ which permeates the Epistle to the Ephesians reminds us that our primary resource for formulating a theological response to racism is to be found not any new fad in critical theory, but in the ancient texts of Holy Scripture. This means that Christians do not need to get distracted by the contemporary 'culture wars' concerning Critical Race Theory and identity politics, which purport to unmask the racist foundations upon which our society has been built. The gospel imperative to root out and destroy racism does not always have to be about innovation or looking for the latest concepts or buzz words in academia or the media. Sometimes the prophetic mandate to challenge racist attitudes can be as simple as the injunction to 'Stand at the crossroads and look for the ancient paths' (Jeremiah 6.16). These ancient paths can be found not in Marxist

ideology or critical theory, but in the rich resources of Scripture and Christian tradition.

The Scriptures are clear on the point that racism is sin. This point is illustrated not merely by quoting biblical prooftexts, but by reading the whole narrative of Scripture in its proper context. The Bible narrates a story of the fulfilment of God's purpose to liberate the world from all forms of injustice and oppression. God fulfils these purposes not merely by saving individuals from sin, but by uniting the diverse people of the earth into a new humanity through the reconciling power of Christ's love.

## Conclusion

So, finally, let's return to the same place where we began this article: to the classroom of my Christian Ethics seminar at Spurgeon's College. I will pose the question again: *What exactly is wrong with racism from a biblical/theological perspective?* How would you answer if you were one of the students attending the seminar? What resources would you draw on from Scripture and Christian history to offer a clear and compelling answer to this provocative question?

I hope that we (the diverse-yet-united Body of Christ) would begin to appreciate that our own Scriptures and Christian tradition furnish us with the tools we need to combat racism. Once armed with this key insight, we will be much better equipped to respond to the urgent problems of racial injustice that afflict our society today and which incur divine judgement upon our nations. I pray that in the power of the Holy Spirit, our churches will reap a mighty harvest of emerging leaders who are committed to fighting for justice for our black brothers and sisters. It is essential that this new generation recognises that the struggle for racial justice is not merely a social requirement, but also a non-negotiable biblical mandate and an urgent gospel imperative.