

RACE AND THE GLORY OF GOD

Revelation 7 present a glorious picture of eternity declaring that every people group on the planet will worship God together and forever. All of mankind standing in a unified state may be so glorious that only the majesty of God Himself would outshine it. For now, humanity longs for the beauty of unity as people struggle with one another in almost every human endeavor. In recent years, race has been one of the greatest places where individuals struggle with one another. The racial tensions, particularly in western culture, have become so great that the cause of unity may seem hopeless to some. However, the reality is that the current strife that exist in our culture represents an invitation from the Lord to shine the light of Jesus more brightly than ever into the darkness of cultural divisions. While unity between the races is certainly a most difficult goal; it is not impossible according to the Word of God.

We learn from Genesis 1 that all people are made in the image of God. All people also are subject to the brokenness of sin. This includes our culture which means that our unique culture has parts that reflect the heart of God, and parts that are broken. Therefore, the only way we can move forward in unity is if we don't fall into the extremes of thinking that our culture is superior or inferior to others. These extremes will either cause us to fail to see the sin that corrupts us or make us ashamed of our culture and reject the goodness of God that he has put in us. A healthy perspective on any culture is that it is uniquely made, carrying unique characteristics of God, but that it is also broken and thus needs to pursue unity with other cultures so that they can be healed and reflect more of God's diverse heart and character.

God's design for race and culture

The New Testament speaks directly to the issue of race and ethnic divisions in the world, and specifically in the Body of Christ. Paul's letter to the Galatians, which is commonly held to be the first letter written in the New Testament, highlights the centrality of right relationships between people from different ethnic groups. In the modern context, we can point to examples of strained relationships between different ethnic groups, but it is hard for us to grasp the depth of the strain between the Jews and all other ethnic groups (the Gentiles). For 1,400 years, the Law had marked out the Jewish people as distinct and separate from all the other ethnic groups of the world. Even today, the ancient prayer of Jewish men is still prayed, "God, I thank you that I was not born a Gentile or a woman."

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It is into that context of separation that Paul states that the faithfulness of Jesus Christ has changed everything. In his death and resurrection, He has secured forgiveness from sins and delivered us from this present evil age. In the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus is declared to be, not only the Messiah for the Jews, but He is the true Lord and King of the world—of all nations. We are now no longer separated by our ethnic backgrounds, but we are one people in Christ, with one common story as heirs in the family of Abraham, and that means that we eat at one table as the people of God—all ethnicities together in unity! Rather than being an isolated theme in Galatians, racial and ethnic unity is prominent in the story of the New Testament and the rest of Paul's greatest theological writing—from the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, to Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, and more. All these themes echo the prayer of Jesus in John 17 that we would be one and live together in the shared love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

How has the church missed the importance of our oneness in Christ? How have we been able to justify ethnic divisions in the Church—as if division is not opposed to the very heart of the gospel? Looking at Galatians is a great way to diagnose at least part of the problem. Since the Reformation, Galatians has played a vital role in emphasizing that we are saved and that we go to heaven, not through our works, but through faith in Jesus Christ. Although those points can be made from Galatians, the emphasis for Paul in Galatians is more concrete and present tense than simply “leaving the earth to go to heaven after we die.” He is saying that the gospel does not leave room for ethnic division in the church (we need to pause and let that sink in). The gospel means that there is now one table and not two tables in the Body of Christ (Think of Paul's famous confrontation with Peter when he pulled back from eating with the Gentiles). Gentiles have been made to be a part of the story of Abraham and are now heirs according to the promise and members of one family together with the Jews. The “end” that Paul is pointing to is new creation. That is what matters. Believers are to live signpost lives right now that anticipate and point to the reality of what is coming. Rather than being a story about my personal salvation, Galatians is about community, and is a deeply practical letter that urges the church to live together in unity—in the right now of everyday life.

When we begin to see that Galatians is about being the one people of God together, then we are prepared for a fresh reading of Galatians. A reading where we are not excused from working through the implications for race and ethnicity. A reading where we see that oneness with distinction is important in community because that reflects the image of the triune and relational God of love. We cannot read Galatians and the rest of the New Testament and think that race and ethnicity is an optional conversation on the periphery of the Church.

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From time to time, we experience the “one table” unity and distinction of the Church and we think, “This is the way it is supposed to be.” And like the time that Peter first confessed Christ, we did not get that on our own, it is a revelation from heaven. It is a vision of God’s heart for one, worldwide people together in the Messiah. It is a vision for the glory of God seen in and through the people of God. The reason that we do not experience the reality of this vision more often is the sin that has plagued humanity since the Garden of Eden. To that problem we now turn.

The impact of sin

People often use the phrase “in a perfect world...” to describe the way that a person or group has envisioned their world and experiences in it. Individuals use the phrase realizing the description following the phrase is never realistic. However, there was a point in time when life experience occurred just as it was planned. In Genesis 1, Adam and Eve’s relationship with God literally could not be any better. That is until they chose to disobey God and the ideal relationship was ended. Now, even the best of relationships experience pain and problems. We devalue, distrust and even destroy one another. This destructive behavior manifests in all kinds of divisions among people. Sin dims a person’s view of God, resulting in inaccurate estimates of one’s self and false ideas about others. These false ideas tempt us to classify and separate from each other. One of the many ways we classify humans being is by racially identifying them which has led to the sin of racism. Racism at its core is holding negative views of another person based on the person’s race or believing that one race is superior to another. Racial separation, primarily due to racism, is practiced by most of the world and is rigorously supported even by many Christians because of the commonly held believe that race is a God ordained natural form of classifying people.

However, the truth is that race is not a God breathed concept, but a man made one that reinforces divisions between people and allows one group of people to have power over another. Prior to the 15th century people were primarily identified from a geographical perspective. The terms white, black or brown were not used. The descriptions of Caucasian and Negro where applied to specific people groups by Europeans during the colonization period specifically for the purpose of determining land and property rights as well as regulating indentured and forced servitude (Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*). Once created, these racial distinctives became rigid and consistently applied throughout society. In this social construct, whiteness was awarded the highest status and therefore non-whites as well as whites with lower economic status were devalued and oppressed. These devalued individuals responded with hostility and mistrust toward higher status Caucasians, which further deepened divisions among people over time.

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The practical results of these social constructs in western society include more than two centuries of chattel slavery, decades of Jim Crow laws, socially sanctioned segregation and strongly held cultural and political views related to various races of people. Slavery and Jim Crow segregation have been legally removed from western culture but many hold that these discriminatory behaviors are still practiced in more subtle ways. It is widely debated, but some hold that subtle forms of discrimination are primary factors in people of color lagging far behind the white majority in economic achievement, academic success and health outcomes among other life experiences. Others contend that personal choice and individual effort are the main reason for the various disparities.

The term white privilege is a controversial term which for some explains dominance by whites in the aforementioned life experiences. Those that affirm this idea, point to unjust practices that gave white Americans economic advantage. For example, after World-War II, returning soldiers were given two valuable means to improve their economic status, which are the GI Bill (that gave them college education) and home loans (to build wealth through property ownership). Black soldiers were not given these two privileges establishing a wealth gap that would be passed along generationally. While this injustice no longer exists numerous research studies have shown that similar inequitable practices exist in real estate and bank lending practices (Taylor, *How Real Estate Segregated America*).

Critics of white privilege point to the vast changes in our laws since the Jim Crow era, and to the work ethic practiced by white Americans who have achieved their dreams. They also point to the many people of color who have succeeded in our American system. While concepts like privilege are hotly debated, what we know for certain is that sin corrupts all things, including our ability to perfectly analyze the success or failure of each individual in society. Therefore, compassion is critical when responding to the cries of suffering. The centuries of disparity and hostility between cultural and ethnic groups does not suggest hope for the groups experiencing peace with one another. However, despite humanity's tendency to divide there is good news!

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The reality of the gospel

The good news is that Jesus is the answer to racial strife, ethnic division, and even class division. God is no respecter of persons. The life and teachings of Jesus reflect this truth. One could very easily argue that the simplest application of His commands and way of life would work to dismantle any social system unfairly built on preference by ethnicity or skin color.

Here is a non-exhaustive list of just four practices of Jesus (basic Christianity) which would actively work to produce racial harmony and remove division. As you read these, imagine the impact on society if just these four examples of Jesus were practiced by believers who lived in times where things like apartheid, Jim Crow laws, or even subtle and systemic racial disparities prevailed:

1. Jesus prayed for us to be one. Jesus expresses a very clear desire for His followers to not be divided at all (let alone by skin color or ethnicity). To imitate the prayer of Jesus, believers would actively pray to be one with those of other ethnic groups “so the world may know that He was sent by the Father” (John 17:21). Followers of Jesus who carry His heart will reject division and actively pray for us to be one.
2. Jesus commands us to greet others saying, “And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others?” This is no light command. This scripture calls on followers of Jesus to intentionally greet those of a different skin color. Greeting is an act of mutual respect and acknowledgement. We use it to value others and we withhold it to express disdain. A greeting says, “I see you” and likewise to ignore others is to say, “You are of little or no value to me”. Followers of Jesus are commanded to intentionally seek to greet those that society would lead us to overlook or ignore.
3. Jesus rejects social walls. In places of racial division, it is socially unacceptable to dine with someone of the other ethnic group. Even the apostle Peter fell prey to this ungodly social behavior. The apostle Paul immediately called out Peter’s hypocrisy in front of everyone, because he was misrepresenting Jesus. Here is a telling question that exposes the most subtle (and even unintentional) heart prejudice: When was the last time you had someone of a different ethnicity in your home for dinner?

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As the reader ponders this question, we remember that there was a time when skin color determined whether or not you were served food in a restaurant. Jesus openly rejected social walls by asking the Samaritan woman at the well for a drink and taking the time to talk to her with dignity and respect. Eating and drinking together with those of other ethnic groups is a bold statement of equality and respect. Followers of Jesus openly and intentionally share the table with those of other ethnic groups.

4. Make disciples of all nations. The word nations is *ethnos* in the Greek, meaning ethnic groups. The command is to make disciples of every ethnic group. Obedience to this command would cause churches to reach more than just their own ethnic group, especially in cities that represent more than one ethnic groups. In the same way we seek to learn other cultures and build effective teams for world missions, we must also consider the same effort and wisdom for the communities in our home nations. Followers of Jesus seek not only to make disciples of their own ethnic groups, but of all nations. It is important here to stress, that to be an apostolic church planting movement that goes to the nations, we need to be comfortable and competent in building cross-cultural community. It is significant that in the book of Acts (Chp. 11), the first church in Jerusalem that was mostly homogenous, struggled to leave their comfort and obey the great commission. God had to allow persecution to get them out. But even then, it says, “they preached the Gospel to none except the Jews!” In contrast, the Antioch community, where the term Christian was coined, was made up of three of the major racial groups which were Jew, Greeks, and African. A study of the names of their first elders is our evidence. It is important to understand that every time we call ourselves a “Christian” we are referring to disciples of Jesus who originated from a multi-ethnic community. This church sent Paul and Barnabas to the nations and we consistently read in the Paul’s letters he taught the believers to live in unity in the midst of cultural distinctives.

Jesus knew that nations and generations would need the wisdom to bring change in societies where inequities, discrimination, and division prevailed. His wisdom equips us to live in such a way that our very lifestyles would impact society as we practice: 1. Praying that we may all be one in Christ. 2. Greeting those that aren’t from our communities. 3. Rejecting social walls and inviting those of other ethnic groups to our dinner tables and 4. Making disciples of EVERY ethnic group so our churches will look like heaven.

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The powerful witness of just these four ways of Jesus directly oppose divisive and discriminatory belief systems. They lay the groundwork for fairness and equality and they help build healthy socioeconomic systems. Unfortunately, these truths have been misrepresented through men who honored the ways of society and fallen man above the Scriptures. Despite the painful history of horrible oversights and intentional misuses of Scripture, we can be sure that laws establishing racial superiority, economic advantage for some over others, discriminatory practices, and favoritism based on skin color and ethnicity are NOT the teachings of Jesus. His commands and His example help to establish His desires on earth as it is in Heaven. These changes must begin with the house of God. Can we really walk in unity as the Church of Jesus Christ?

Unity in the Church

Jesus came to bring salvation to the world. It has been stated earlier that while salvation will ultimately result in an eternal relationship with Jesus, salvation is not limited to the eternal destiny of the redeemed. Jesus' mission to save mankind also includes the hope of God's provision, healing of infirmity, freedom from destructive behaviors and restored relationships. Eph 2:11-22 exhorts believers that Christ has broken down the barriers and hostilities between Jews and Gentiles. Christ's sacrifice sets an eternal precedent for believers of all geographical and ethnic expressions to walk in oneness with each other. Differences can seem to make life more difficult but in God's economy the opposite is true. Diversity demonstrates the beauty of God because a more complete picture of God can be seen. The various cultures, giftings and personalities seen in people come from and show the nature and character of God to the world.

Therefore, Christians should wholeheartedly love and honor one another, particularly Christians that have some kind of differences such as ethnicity, culture or some kind of social distinction that may tempt them to divide from each other. In our current society, believers are heavily divided along political lines and affiliation with certain social organizations. As has already been mentioned, John 17 tells us that when Christians love one another, it sends a powerful witness to the world about the love of God. Unity among believers is part of the Lord's evangelism strategy. Since believers come from every ethnic and cultural and racial group, then there should be unity among these various groups. Current expressions of this understanding of unity has led to the development of multi-racial and multi-ethnic churches. Most recent statistics show that approximately 12% of American churches are multiracial meaning at least 20% of the congregation represents a different racial group than the majority of the congregation (Emerson, Divided by Faith).

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It could be assumed that multi-racial churches experience tensions and conflicts that homogeneous congregations do not. However, research has concluded that multi-racial and homogeneous churches have the same amount of tensions; but sometimes conflict over different issues. Conflicts related to diversity can be intense, particularly in our current political climate but those conflicts can be overcome through consistent, prayer for unity and repentance from racism and ongoing dialogue and learning among church members of different races. It is also vitally important to have preaching and other forms of communication by senior leadership of the church.

Racial unity occurs in two different areas which are diversity and culture. Racial diversity occurs when people of different colors can be seen and noticed in a worship service or ministry setting. This results from intentional outreach and sometimes simply by people feeling drawn to the church. Cultural diversity occurs when diverse cultures can be experienced and felt in a service as opposed to just experiencing the majority culture. Cultural expressions vary but often center around styles of music, variation in upfront communicators and advocating social issues important to various cultural groups. The Scripture also clarifies that there is no unity without justice (distribution of food in Acts 6). Justice is established in many ways, but it is primarily advanced through power being used fairly, distributed evenly and used to eliminate partiality, instead of supporting it. Jesus was never angrier than when he cleared the Temple. His anger was directed at those in leadership positions, those that had power in the Temple. They were using their power to maintain an unjust system, one that discriminated against Gentiles and the non-Jews. Gentiles were only allowed to worship in their outer court where businesses were set up which created people trafficking through the middle of their worship experienced while the Jewish worship experience was protected and favored. Thus, Jesus explodes on them, “My house was built to be a house of prayer for all nations.” We should highlight again that this issue of racial division and ethnic unity is at the very heart of God and not a fringe issue.

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A number of churches in the Antioch Movement have experienced meaningful progress in racial and cultural unity and much more progress lies ahead. Through careful study and obedience to the Word of God and intentional efforts toward unity, the seemingly Goliath like issues of racial hostility and disunity can be overcome through the life of Jesus lived out through his followers.

Contemporary issues

The United States of America has experienced an upheaval in racial tension. The death of an unarmed black male named Trayvon Martin and the subsequent judgements concerning the “stand your ground” law ignited a wave of riots and protests amidst several other incidents. In the years following, the country and the Church has had to wrestle with race relations. The need for things such as diversity and implicit bias training have been made popular in the secular world. Church networks and Christian organizations have been challenged to make a clear break with any racism in their organization’s history. Incidents in the Christian community have also exposed a serious need for greater unity among the ethnic groups in the body of Christ. A stage has been set for anyone who can offer a bridge to tomorrow concerning the racial disharmony in the Church and in society.

Jesus has already taught and demonstrated the path forward. His wisdom concerning this matter is incomparable. In His day, the Samaritans were the people group the Jews hated. A simple search of every mention of the Samaritans as the focal point of a story offers us a glimpse into how intentional Jesus was in the face of ethnic division. He used wisdom. He made a Samaritan the hero of the story of how to “love your neighbor”. He used another Samaritan as the hero of the story of gratitude as the only one of ten lepers who came back to give thanks after being healed. He broke social laws by engaging the woman at the well and even refusing to go around Samaria instead going through it. The list goes on. So how can we apply His wisdom to today’s challenges?

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Jesus was aware of the ethnic division of His day and the reasons behind it. He was also clear on what part He would play to bring change. He initiated change in several different ways. He remained uncompromising and open in His posture towards Samaritans, the ones other Jews hated. He did things that a heart full of hatred for Samaritans would never allow, and He made sure it wasn't done in private. Today, the conversation around race needs that direct, clear and holy response from the Church. The conversation has been polarized by the two major political parties on the left and the right. One side delves deeply into the term racism and researches its ugly history and its impact on society today. The other side sees the very term racism as an excuse for failure and a victim mentality. It sees the American opportunity as a sufficient solution for all the sins of the past. Regardless of which side the reader may favor, society is divided, and that fault line has made its way into the Church.

Instead of remaining in a sound-byte war, let's find language that invites people to the table beyond their political affiliations and preferences. Consider being very selective before using terms that provoke others to close their hearts instead of hearing one another's stories. This is where Christian community is so powerful. We are an Acts 2:42 people. We come to the table. We break bread. We learn the stories of others from their own mouths and not from the news. Instead of building a belief system about others from a political commentator, we engage and sometimes even live among those who need us. We go after the least, the last, the lost, and the left out. We meet the prisoners, the poor, and the broken. We know them by name, so like Jesus, we can share great stories of virtue from communities that our typical social groups would never know or hear.

In all the Jews generational hatred for Samaritans, who would have known that "one of them" was the example of virtue above the Priest and the Levite? Who would have known that out of all the ten lepers that got healed, the one who returned to give thanks and was made whole was also "one of them"? If Jesus had not loved so intentionally, who would have known that God could use one Samaritan woman to bring out a whole village of men to meet and turn their hearts toward Him? We didn't come into this world to let hate and ignorance prevail. We are called to be light especially in hard and dark conversations. The wisdom of Jesus is applicable to every generation and they have the power to make things better for any person or group who will receive Him and His ways.

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Summary

In 2008, Jimmy Seibert penned the book “The Church Can Change the World.” Jimmy purposed to remind and encourage the Body of Christ and specifically the Antioch Movement of Churches that the Church is God’s plan A for reaching and restoring a broken world. This means that salvation extends beyond the promise of eternity for every person who believes in Jesus to the promise of experiencing the blessings of heaven in the here and now. Unity and oneness are a focal point of heaven and therefore all churches within the Movement are encouraged to heed the biblical mandate of oneness through racial and ethnic unity within their church and the communities in which they reside. This unity can be pursued but is not limited the following means.

1. Preaching – The scriptures offer plenty of instruction how people and groups who are different need to treat each other. Race can be a challenging topic for the best communicators to make clear but the Word of God provides the context from which to speak to the people of God. Majority culture communicators may even feel hesitant or out of place addressing the issue but the Bible calls for the believer to reach out to those most different from themselves (Matt 5: 44) and the struggles in culture invite and demand that the majority initiate this conversation in order to see meaningful progress.
2. Intentional efforts to create dialogue and build cross-culture relationships – Race often feels like one of those topics that should not be discussed publicly due to the tendency to create offense. However, no understanding, empathy or growth can occur without productive dialogue. Many resources exist to help churches facilitate conversations about race that will help everyone grow. Consistently challenging church members to meet and develop friendship outside their own race individually will significantly impact the corporate body. Developing rhythms of dialogue makes a difficult topic more accessible for any and everyone. Even though it is more comfortable to hang with people in the church like us, we trust Jesus’ words and get out of our ethnic comfort zone and persevere through the awkwardness until we learn how to have real relationship.
3. Increased diversity within Antioch congregations – The amount of diversity in the communities surrounding an Antioch congregation affects efforts in this area but diversity can also be expressed across economic, age, gender and giftedness lines.

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Most churches experience some diversity more organically but even those churches have to be intentional in their efforts to get beyond surface levels of unity. Openness to diverse styles of worship and ministry leadership development across ethnic lines would be critical to realizing this goal.

4. Learning – When Antioch missionaries engage in church planting, they begin the process by learning the language and cultural nuances of the church planting area. To advance racial unity the same kind of learning needs to take place. We encourage leaders in our churches to regularly sit down with members of the ethnic minorities and ask them “how is your experience in our church, as a ___ person (fill in Race)?” Explain that you want to learn from their experience and work together to build a church community for all nations.

5. Engage city transformation – Most municipalities address race from an equity standpoint and deal with systemic structural issues that attribute to people of color experiencing significantly less success in financial, educational, housing and health outcome areas. Determining appropriate areas to engage with can be beneficial to the church as well as the city.

Revelation 7 provides for the Church a picture what all believer’s eternal destiny. We believe this shows us what we should be working towards now! While John’s prophetic picture seems distant from the current state of society, we know because of Jesus’s sacrifice and the Holy Spirit, we will reach this destination. May the Antioch Movement of Churches be found faithful in pursuing the plan and purpose of God regarding racial unity and oneness within the Church and across the communities they serve.