
FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING:

Thinking Theologically About Racial Tensions

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Introduction | PART 1

One of the great needs in our day is for pastors and Christian leaders to think theologically about the pressing issues of race and justice. To be sure, general biblical principles are discussed and promoted. We know that every person from every race has been made in the image of God and has inherent worth and dignity. We know that the Bible presents a beautiful picture of heaven where people from every language, tongue, and tribe gather around the throne to worship the risen Christ. We know that we are called to love our neighbor and that the Lord hates injustice. These are precious truths, and we ought to be reminded of them often.

But once these important convictions are quickly affirmed, then what? Can theological reflection—relying on the Bible and the best of the Christian tradition—help us sort through any of the questions that divide us?¹ Do pastors—trained in Greek and Hebrew and steeped in centuries-old creeds and confessions—have anything meaningful to say? Should people who have spent years—in formal education and in daily study—learning 2,000 years of Christian doctrine (and only a few weeks reading articles about police brutality) try to contribute to the discussion?

Recently, I served on our denomination's study committee dealing with issues of same-sex attraction and identity. These are highly charged, personal issues just like race. But at least in talking about sexuality, one can find immediate help from our confessional documents and from the best of the church's theological tradition. Christians have done a lot of thinking over the centuries about marriage, sex, desire, temptation, original sin, actual sin, indwelling sin, and progressive sanctification. Even if the reason for the sexuality debate is new, many of the church's categories and careful nuances—developed over centuries of reflection, argument, and codification—overlap with the most important theological questions Christians are facing.

It feels different with the most vexing racial issues. And on the one hand, it is different. The Bible can tell us about injustice, but it will not tell us what is going on (just or unjust) in American policing. The Bible tells us clearly that racism is a sin, but it will not tell us the reasons for continuing racial disparities. This doesn't mean Christians shouldn't write on these issues. We should care about them deeply, read about them widely, and put forward our best arguments with open hearts and with open minds.

Are black men being killed at alarming rates² by police officers, many of whom have been shaped by a policing culture of brutality and dehumanization³? Or is there no evidence of anti-black disparities⁴ across shootings, and the basic premise that cops disproportionately kill black Americans is false⁵? Or might the truth be somewhere in between⁶, that the police use non-lethal force against blacks in greater numbers, but there are no racial differences in officer-involved shootings? Perhaps that is the way to make the statistics and the stories⁷ make sense.

And how should we understand persistent racial disparities in everything from income and education to health care and home ownership? Does the responsibility for disparate outcomes rest with systems of oppression⁸? Or are disparities largely due to excessive governmental regulation⁹ and cultural factors shaped by misguided social policy¹⁰? Maybe systemic racism isn't an all-or-nothing proposition¹¹ or even the best way to describe racialized systems.

These are difficult, complicated issues, and we shouldn't mistake our preferred YouTube explainer video as the final word on the subject or the way that all good Christians should think.

¹ Kevin DeYoung, "Racial Reconciliation: What We (Mostly, Almost) All Agree On, and What We (Likely) Still Don't Agree On," *The Gospel Coalition*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/racial-reconciliation-mostly-almost-agree-likely-still-dont-agree>.

² <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org>

³ David Brooks, "The Culture of Policing Is Broken," *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/how-police-brutality-gets-made/613030>.

⁴ David Johnson, "Officer characteristics and racial disparities in fatal officer-involved shootings," *PNAS.org*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/116/32/15877.full.pdf>.

⁵ Coleman Hughes, "Stories and Data: Reflections on race, riots, and police," *City Journal*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.city-journal.org/reflections-on-race-riots-and-police>.

⁶ Roland G. Fryer, "An Empirical Analysis of Racial Differences in Police Use of Force," July 2017, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/empirical_analysis_tables_figures.pdf.

⁷ Denny Burk, "Can We Weep With Those Who Weep?" *DennyBurk.com*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.dennyburk.com/can-we-weep-with-those-who-weep>.

⁸ Natalie Spievaack and Cameron Okeke, "How We Should Talk about Racial Disparities," *Urban Wire*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-we-should-talk-about-racial-disparities>.

⁹ Walter E. Williams, *Race and Economics: How Much Can Be Blamed on Discrimination?* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Thomas Sowell, *Discrimination and Disparities* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2019).

¹¹ Brandon Vaidyanathan, "Systemic Racial Bias in the Criminal Justice System Is Not a Myth," *Public Discourse*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/06/65585>.

These are massively important questions. And even if a basic consensus can be reached that we must do better in the areas above, we then have to determine how policing can be best improved (better training? end qualified immunity? break up police unions? get rid of the bad apples? rebuild from the ground up?) and how disparities can be best reduced (reform the criminal justice system? invest in education? teach personal responsibility?). All that to say, these are difficult, complicated issues, and we should not mistake our preferred YouTube explainer video—from the left¹² or from the right¹³—as the final word on the subject or the way that all good Christians should think.

NEED FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

So where is this argument going? My point is *not* to discourage Christians from caring about these things, becoming experts in these things, and working for change where change is needed. I am not calling for *less* engagement in the political and civic issues of our day. I am calling for *more* theological work to be done on a number of related issues. The issues swirling around us are not just about disputing policing data, about which the Bible says nothing. The issues are also about sin and guilt and holiness and justice, topics about which the Bible speaks an authoritative word.

Over the coming weeks I hope to explore several theological issues related to our ongoing racial tensions. I fear that we are going about our business in the wrong order. We start with racial issues we don't agree on and then try to sort out our theology accordingly, when we should start with our theology and then see how racial issues map onto the doctrines we hold in common. Good theology won't clear up every issue, but we might be surprised to see some thorny issues look less complicated and more hopeful.

Lord willing—and with the caveat up front that this list could change as we go along—I'd like to write about three topics over the next month:

- The image of God
- Sin and guilt
- Life together in the church

In short, I want to explore how Christian anthropology, hamartiology, and ecclesiology might encourage, confirm, clarify, and correct our thinking.

CONCLUDING THOUGHT

One last personal note as I wrap up this introduction.

I realize there is almost nothing harder to talk about in America than race. The pain is deep, the anger is often justified, and the fear on all sides—of being misunderstood, of being hurtful, of being hurt, of being canceled—is not irrational. For the past several weeks, my head and heart have been in constant turmoil. Like most pastors (or most people for that matter), I have wrestled with what to say and how to say it. Given the complexities and personal intricacies of these issues, I'm hesitant to say anything at all. There is no way to speak about these issues that can possibly hit all the right notes. Even among those who agree on the same big ideas, there is still the question of what to emphasize and which audience we are trying to reach.

- Are we trying to rebuke neo-Confederate sympathizers?
- Are we trying to guard against a godless, entirely mainstream, leftist agenda seen all around us in sports, media, and entertainment?
- Are we trying to correct Christians who see everything through the lens of electoral politics?
- Are we trying to convince black brothers and sisters that we care and that we are listening?
- Are we trying to help honest Christians worried about mobs and riots?
- Are we trying to encourage godly police officers who feel discouraged and abandoned?
- Are we trying to critique woke pastors dividing their churches?
- Are we trying to critique timid pastors who don't dare say anything?
- Are we trying to express lament for obvious racial injustices past and present?
- Are we trying to help confused white Christians who wonder if they are guilty of sins they didn't commit or if they can disagree with any part of the social justice agenda without being racists?

These are all important questions, and one would be right to address any of them. But short of an entire book, it would be hard to meaningfully address all of them. My aim is to work theologically through a few issues, trusting that many of the audiences can be appropriately addressed along the way. No approach will be without its critics. Like everyone else, my read of the current situation

¹² Systemic Racism Explained, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrHIQIO_bdQ.

¹³ Ben Shapiro DEBUNKS Viral 'Systemic Racism Explained' Video, <https://youtu.be/TBDfMQ27Asw>.

depends on an imperfect sense of what I see in my circles, among my friends, and on my social media feed. Inevitably, I will emphasize some points more than others, highlighting those points I think are either underappreciated or misunderstood. I'm sure I won't say everything that needs to be said.

And yet, sometimes it's worth saying something even if you can't say everything. As Christians we should always be eager to reason carefully and winsomely from God's Word. While I don't believe every controversial issue surrounding race in this country is theological in nature, I do believe that every culture-wide conflict is bound to have a number of theological issues at its core. The issues in the early church may have looked like practical disagreements about meals and food and ceremonies, but the apostle Paul saw in them the most important issues of the gospel. Paul always brought his best theology to bear on the most intractable problems facing his people. We ought to do the same.

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The Image of God | PART 2

The image of God seems like an obvious and already agreed-upon foundation for talking about race, but it has more to teach us and more ways to correct us than we might at first realize.

The doctrine itself is multifaceted. Considering its significance as a theological concept—highlighted three times in the opening chapters of Genesis (1:26-28; 5:1-2; 9:6-7)—the image of God has not always been easy to define.

Older theologians tended to emphasize the **structural aspects** of the image of God. They viewed man's capacity for intelligence, rationality, morality, beauty, and worship as that which distinguishes us from the animals. Even in unborn babies and persons with severe impairments, there is still a unique human *capacity* for these qualities, however limited by physical or psychological constraints.

More recent theologians have focused on the **functional aspects** of the image of God. That is, they identify God's image less with our essence than with our ethics. According to passages like Romans 8:29 ("predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son") and 1 Corinthians 15:49 ("as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven"), the image of God is not just what we have, it is our eschatological goal—what we are called to do and be (1 John 3:2-3).

Both aspects teach us something important about the image of God, but the Bible allows us to say much more about the functional (what we do) than the structural (what we have). Note, then, three further dimensions of how we live out the image of God.

First, human beings are **representatives** of God. Just as an ancient king would place statues of himself throughout his realm, marking his ownership and rule, so our presence as image bearers in the world marks out the earth as belonging to God. Further, as representatives, we are called to be rulers and stewards. We are set apart from the animals in that we are given "dominion over the works of [his] hands" (Psalm 8:6; Gen. 1:28).

Second, human beings are made to be in **relationship** with God. Unique among his creatures, Adam was created for covenant (Hos. 6:7). As Michael Horton observes¹⁴, the image of God is not something *in* us as much as it is something *between* us and God (p. 381). To be an image bearer is to be the sort of creature who can know, serve, and self-consciously worship the Creator.

Third, human beings are made to reflect the **righteousness** of God. The New Testament defines the image of God as true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (Eph. 4:24; WCF 4.2). Although sin has marred the divine image in man, we can still be renewed by God in Christlikeness so as to increasingly reflect his image (Col. 3:9-10).

This last point needs to be underscored. We will not understand what it means to be made *in* the image of God unless we know Christ, who *is* the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15-20). The gospel is the message about the "glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4-6), and by his Spirit we can be transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another (3:17-18). In other words, the image of God is now, first, and foremost about Christ.

IMAGE OF GOD AND RACE

That's only the briefest overview of a massive topic. But with enough of the big ideas in place, we can think about the implications of the *imago dei* for race and racism. Here are applications worth considering:

First, and most obviously, the image of God speaks to the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. We should not breeze by this foundational point. For starters, while the world talks often about individual worth and dignity, it is unclear upon what basis secular voices can make such an assertion. Is there any ontological and universal reason that every human being should be treated with respect? Does the worth of each person exist prior to and independent of our personal or legal determination? The Christian doctrine of the image of God can answer these questions. Secular assumptions do not rest on the same secure footing.

Furthermore, the sad reality is that at times Christians have denied or overlooked the image of God in those they deemed to be inferior. Sometimes this was accomplished by simply positing that the "other" was less than human. It could also be accomplished by locating the image of God structurally in, for example, the intellectual attributes, so that if you think the "other" is by nature intellectually inferior, then they also share in less of the image of God. In many occasions, however, the *imago dei* in the "other" has been affirmed on a basic dogmatic level without really penetrating the heart.

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¹⁴ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011).

We saw in the theological survey above that the image of God can be considered something we grow into, but on another level it is something inherently true of every human being—black and white, young and old, in the womb and out of the womb. Think of Genesis 9:6, where capital punishment is introduced on the basis of man’s irreducible status as an image bearer. James 3:9 is another key text—“with [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.” Here the image admits no degrees. Instead, we are given a universal command that depends on the universality of God’s image and likeness in man.

As I reflect on several racial flashpoints over the past few years, I fear I have been too quick to think to myself, *Yes, of course, image of God. Every Christian already knows that and believes that.* But white Christians in this country have *not* always believed that, or at least they have not always acted like they really believe it. Slavery in this country originated in greed more than in racism. As the institution endured, it drew racism out of the human heart. You could argue, tragically, that it was precisely because this country was so Christian that racism became so virulent. Most Americans knew what the Bible required in loving their neighbors as themselves and in respecting the image of God in other human beings. But instead of letting their theology correct their practice, they developed perverse ways to conclude that blacks were, in fact, not their neighbors, not fellow image bearers, and not fully human. For many white Christians, the way to make their Christianity and chattel slavery cohere was to convince themselves that the slave was not the same kind of human being they saw in themselves. Even today, we would all do well to examine our hearts and see if there is any part of us, when encountering someone of a different race or ethnicity, that wonders if we are not actually made of something more refined, more noble, and more divine.

Second, if the image of God reminds us who we are, it also directs us to what we ought to be. As image bearers we were made to know God and be conformed to the image of his Son. This gives us value, but it also gives us a vocation. As John Kilner puts it¹⁵, the image of God is both our dignity and our destiny.

If we focus only on our worth as image bearers, Christian doctrine can end up sounding the same as any worldly self-esteem mantra. Of course, the Christian has more consistent metaphysical reasons for concluding the same thing, but by itself “Black lives matter” or “All lives matter” captures only one aspect of the *imago dei*. The image of God is not only what we possess, it is what has been marred and what must be renewed. The image of God gives us dignity, and it gives us direction. It tells us that we matter and what we were made for.

What a wonderful thing it would be to see a recovery of the image of God in our culture, both as an antidote to racism against our fellow human beings and as an antidote to rebellion against God. We do not help people understand the image rightly unless we point them to righteousness, holiness, and a true knowledge of God. The image of God speaks to the worth of all peoples, and it calls every people from every tribe, language, and tongue to worship the One into whose image we must be transformed.

Third, we would do well to start with what we have in common rather than with what separates us. For all the talk of the same image of God in every person, we quickly fall into the habit of talking and acting as if there are different species of human beings separated by a vast epistemological and ontological gulf. I am not talking about a mythical colorblindness, as if we can collectively transcend all categories of race and all permutations of racism. While race may not exist as an essential biological category, it is an observable fact of human existence that skin color is not all the same. I am not eschewing every use of the word “race.” What I am suggesting is that Christians push back against any ideology that suggests that race is the first, and perhaps the ultimate, determination of what it means to be human.

Take a group of blacks, whites, Asians, Hispanics, and every other expression of racial or ethnic diversity. What can we say about everyone in the room? They are all made in the image of God, they all inherited original guilt and original corruption from Adam, and they all need the imputed righteousness of Christ. We need to be reminded that before there is the unique experience of being black or white in this country, there is a shared human nature. Make no mistake, for much of our nation’s history white people wielded an oppressive power over black people. That makes for different experiences, different pain, and different fears. And yet, those differences are not intrinsic to black and white. In other places and other times, the differences have played out between white and white, or black and black, or Arab and Jew, or Chinese and Japanese, or free Romans and enslaved Romans.

There is not a white nature, black nature, Asian nature, or Hispanic nature. There is a human nature. Any notions to the contrary only reinforce the sort of racialized ideas we are trying to overcome. When we start with black or white instead of the image of God, we shut each other out of our shared humanity, conducting ourselves as if we can hardly speak to one another, learn from one

Slavery in this country originated in greed more than in racism. As the institution endured, it drew racism out of the human heart.

¹⁵ John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015).

another, or love one another across the racial divide. When you meet someone of a different race, you should look at that man or woman as someone more like you than different—someone who, deep down, has the same sorts of fears, sins, needs, and aspirations. We ought to think, *This is my neighbor with an immortal soul. And though he may have experiences, for better or worse, that I have not had, I am face to face with someone who has been made in the same image as I.*

Fourth, as image bearers, we are free moral agents, responsible before God for our choices. By “free” I don’t mean to deny that the unregenerate will is bound to sin. I’m talking about the freedom we have as human beings to operate as our will desires. As I’ve said before¹⁶, if the intellect has the power of choice (freedom from physical necessity) and the will can be exercised without external compulsion (freedom from the necessity of coercion) then our sins can be called voluntary and we can be held responsible for them.

This means that while we want to try to understand why people make sinful choices (see below), we ultimately do not want to excuse those choices. This is true whether that environment is the Antebellum South, an Ivy League university, rural Appalachia, or an urban ghetto. No matter the cultural norms or social expectations, the lawless rioter is not excused in his sin, nor is the Jim Crow-era racist justified in his sin. We are always shaped by our history and our environment, but we are never mere products of them. To suggest otherwise is to deny who we are as moral beings made in the image of God.

Fifth, we should seek to understand our fellow image bearers as whole people, not as truncated versions of the worst parts of their life and character. This commitment is a necessary complement to the previous point. Think of the response when a black man with a criminal record has been killed by the police. Some voices are quick to recall (and repeat) the man’s rap sheet. The dead man is reduced to a list of mistakes he made or to the number of citations and arrests he received. To be sure, we need to understand the immediate context in which the shooting occurred, especially if violent criminal activity was taking place at that moment. But such activity has been absent with many of the high-profile shootings of the past few years. The recitation of the victim’s record, then, has the effect of communicating, if not “he had it coming,” then at least “see, he wasn’t a very good guy anyway.” The man is presented—implicitly, and often explicitly—as nothing more than a thug.

As Christians we know that our neighbors deserve to be treated with respect not just because they are image bearers, but because we are called to treat them as we want to be treated. This principle applies to the dead as much as to the living. The people of the past are, in many ways, the most foreign people we will ever “meet.” We may inhabit more of the shared assumptions and experiences with someone who lives on the other side of the world today than with someone who lived in our own country 200 years ago. What’s more, when dealing with the dead, we are dealing with people who cannot respond to our charges, cannot change anything they’ve done or said, and cannot demonstrate to us any further growth or change. That puts the object of our study in a precarious position and demands of the historian honesty and charity.

Does this mean we have to refrain from doing history “warts and all”? Of course not. But we should avoid doing history that is “warts and nothing else.” The complexities of the past are quickly reduced to simplistic talking points for the present. Even when persons from the past deserve severe censure, it is too easy for us to condemn them *in toto* with the same reductionist tendencies we disdain when it is used in judging us or judging the people we want to defend.

I am not calling for moral relativism, but for moral reasoning. There is a difference between the flawed man who accomplished great things and stood for a heroic cause and the flawed man who accomplished dubious things and stood for a sinful cause. Past, present, or future, no one wants to be defined solely by his or her failings. Dealing with our fellow image bearers as whole people—with honesty, sympathy, and charity—won’t eliminate racial tensions, but we might be able to bridge some of the divide that separates us.

Sixth, we should be slow to attribute to individual image bearers the unfavorable characteristics associated with a broader group identity—especially when that broader group identity was not freely chosen or the broader group denounces those unfavorable characteristics. This last point requires the most nuance, but it may also be the most important. Go back to the passage where James instructs the believer to tame the tongue because we should not “curse people who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:9). The warning against cursing is not identical with “attributing unfavorable characteristics.” I understand James is making a more serious charge, but the underlying logic is instructive. According to James, the person you are about to curse stands before you irreducibly as someone made in the likeness of God. Whatever else you might think about him or want to say about him, no matter what sins he has committed, you must first reckon with him as an individual who is in the image of the Creator before he is anything else.

We are always shaped by our history and our environment, but we are never mere products of them.

¹⁶ Kevin DeYoung, “Theological Primer: Freedom of the Will,” *The Gospel Coalition*, June 3, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/theological-primer-freedom-of-the-will>.

There will be little hope for healing in our land until we refuse to tear people down and shut people up based on the worst examples of their broader group identity. And lest you (or I) think this is someone else's problem, consider:

When 9/11 happened, did you think, *That's what Muslims are like*, or did it worry you that Muslims would be unfairly singled out because of the actions of a few Islamic extremists?

When someone points out that COVID-19 originated in China and that Chinese officials lied about what was going on, do you want to make sure that Asians in general are not mistreated?

When Christians are derided in the mainstream press, do you figure it was the result of a bad journalist or symptomatic of a profession that disdains religious conservatives?

If an actual noose had been placed in Bubba Wallace's garage—and the perpetrator was white—would you see this as an illustration of systemic white supremacy or the action of a single racist?

When a white police officer shoots an unarmed black man, are you likely to conclude that the officer was a bad apple or that this is just one more example of police bias against blacks?

I could go on and draw up scenarios involving almost any racial, religious, or ethnic group (and quite a few professions too). The fact is, we all hear news of certain bad guys and quickly think, *Yup, that's what those people are like*, while we hear news of other bad guys and want to say, "Hold on a minute. Most of those people are not like that." We could do with a dose of healthy individualism—not the lone-ranger kind, but the kind that allows a fellow image bearer to stand before us as an individual before he is defined by or deemed representative of some broader group. I know individualism can be problematic (aren't most isms?)—and maybe "individual agency"—is a better expression, but let us not forget that it was Christianity that taught the West to prize the individual. After all, God did not first create a community; he made a single man, and we will stand before him as an individual man or woman (Heb. 9:27). Rightly construed, there is biblical warrant for treating people as individuals.

I know this is easier said than done. As an absolute practice, it's impossible. We can't help but generalize based on some external factors and draw broader conclusions from anecdotal evidence. The clothes I wear, the way I talk, the job I have, the place I'm from, the color of my skin—they all give meaningful information about me. The goal is not to pretend we don't make generalizations and extrapolations. The goal is to do our best not to assume the worst and to let people belonging to broader groups—and that's everyone—surprise us with their individuality. Even if we cannot avoid powerful first impressions, we can hold these assessments provisionally, with an open hand and with an open heart.

Furthermore, to say we should be slow to attribute unfavorable characteristics to individuals based on group affiliation is not to say we must be slow to confront bad ideas, bad policies, and bad history that may exist in those groups. We can ask questions about the nature of policing, or the nature of Islam, or the nature of evangelical Christianity without imputing the worst examples to every police officer, Muslim, or Christian.

CONCLUDING THOUGHT

Several weeks ago, a Juneteenth street party in north Charlotte erupted in violence. Hundreds of shots were fired, with more than a dozen people either dead or wounded. Charlotte City Councilman Malcom Graham, who serves the district where the shooting happened, expressed sadness over the renewed violence in an area that has been making efforts to improve itself. "This does not define us, but is certainly something very tragic," Graham said¹⁷. "What happened last night in the city and on that corner, which has a history of being self-sufficient, a lot of good work going on by neighborhood leaders and organizations. Last night certainly won't define who we are, but certainly it is giving cause for concern about how we conduct ourselves."

I agree with Councilman Graham. The actions of a few should not define the character of the many. And what goes for north Charlotte, goes for the whole country. At the heart of our current racial tension is a feeling shared by almost everyone: Why are you judging me based on the worst examples of my skin color, my ethnicity, or my profession?

There are 330 million people in this country. If all our thoughts, words, and deeds were known, you could make the case for a horrifically dystopian America. If we look hard enough, we will find justification for our worst fears. We will always have examples of our tribe being picked on by the other tribe. We will always have examples of our side behaving nobly and the other side behaving dastardly. It assures all of us that our preferred narrative is utterly unfalsifiable.

We could do with a dose of healthy individualism—not the lone-ranger kind, but the kind that allows a fellow image bearer to stand before us as an individual.

Some of God's image-bearers commit acts of atrocious wickedness. They should be deterred, denounced, and punished. Some institutions and laws in God's world are unjust. They should be changed and their affects ameliorated. At the same time, surely loving our neighbors entails giving the benefit of the doubt¹⁸ to others wherever possible—not assuming the worst about the individual and not assuming the worst individual is indicative of the whole group. If we are going to burn the country down—figuratively and literally—every time we see their bad guys doing bad things, we give power to the worst people to set our agenda instead of to the best. We ought to reject any narrative that tells us that “those other people”—black, white, Hispanic, Asian, cops, protesters, Muslims, Christians, Jews, atheists, rich, poor, Republicans, Democrats, conservatives, liberals—are as bad as the worst people of their kind. We should not curse people made in the likeness of God. More than that, we should have a good reason before we castigate them too.

Sin and Guilt | PART 3

This article has been difficult to write. Of all the themes in this short series, this is the one that has literally kept me up at night. Every time I thought I knew *what* to say, ten more ideas bombarded my brain. Every time I thought I knew *how* to say what I wanted to say, a dozen caveats crowded out my earlier thinking. Part of what makes this particular post so challenging is that the themes here are so personal and so pervasive. At the heart of every discussion about racism is the reality of sin and guilt. Even among secular people, though they may not use the words “sin” and “guilt,” the moral energy behind anti-racism protests and the insistence on corporate diversity programs assumes that racism is ethically repugnant and that those who are guilty of racism deserve correction and censure, if not swift retribution.

Within the church this topic is an urgent matter, not only because overt racism still exists among professing Christians, but because there is confusion about (1) what constitutes racism, (2) whether most (or all) white people are guilty of racism, and (3) how confident we can be that individuals can ever be free from racism. While almost every Christian in this country would affirm that racism is a sin, that conviction alone has not clarified other important aspects of our faith and practice.

With that in mind, here are five statements (plus one concluding thought) to help us think personally, corporately, and existentially about sin and guilt.

1. Racism is a sin.

The Bible never speaks of racism *per se*. That doesn't mean we are wrong to talk about racism (our Bibles don't contain the words “Trinity” or “missions” either). But it does mean we would do well to start with explicit biblical sins and see how they relate to the modern category of racism rather than moving in the opposite direction.

There are more than 20 vice lists in the New Testament (Matt. 15:19; Mark 7:21–22; Rom. 1:29–31; 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:10–11; 6:9–10; 2 Cor. 6:9–10; 12:20–21; Gal. 5:19–21; Eph. 4:31; 5:3–5; Col. 3:5, 8; 1 Tim. 1:9–10; 2 Tim. 3:2–5; Titus 3:3; James 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:1; 4:3, 15; Rev. 9:21; 21:8; 22:15), which, when taken together, mention dozens of different sins. Here, for example, is Galatians 5:19–21, one of the most well-known and most comprehensive lists:

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Obviously, racism is not in this list of sins nor in any of the other vice lists. But, just as obviously, we can see how racism could map on to these works of the flesh. Look at the social sins in the middle of the list. Could we not say that racism is enmity (based on race), strife (based on race), fits of anger (based on race), rivalries (based on race), dissensions (based on race), and divisions (based on race)? Hating others is wrong, and race—groups of people sharing physical characteristic like skin color—can be a reason people hate. Pride and selfish ambition are wrong, and race can be a reason for pride and selfish ambition. Partiality and showing favoritism based on external appearances are wrong (James 2:1), and race has been *the* reason for the sin of partiality in this country. In other words, while racism is not implied in these various sins, it can be seen as a subspecies of them. Racism is a sin not just because of what it does to others, but because it is an offense to God and a transgression of the law of God (1 John 3:4; cf. WSC 14).

Racism has become a notoriously difficult word to define. And yet, the biblical categories of enmity, pride, and partiality still work with a common-sense definition. If you Google “racism,” the first definition comes from Dictionary.com and reads: “prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed at a person or people on the basis of their membership of a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized.” I believe this is how most people use the word. Racism is another way of not loving your neighbor as yourself—a particularly heinous way because it denies that the other person is even a fully human neighbor in the first place.

2. Racism is the result of original sin, but not original sin.

As a historical event, original sin can refer to Adam's first transgression in the Garden. Theologically, however, original sin refers to the guilt and corruption every human being

Racism is a particularly heinous way of not loving your neighbor as yourself.

¹⁷ Mark Becker, “CMPD: 181 rounds fired during deadly Beatties Ford shooting,” WSOC-TV.com, June 24, 2020, <https://www.wsocv.com/news/local/police-block-party-north-charlotte-leaves-two-dead-12-others-hurt/4NTMURR3V5BB71GF2XT4QVJLHI>.

¹⁸ Greg Morse, “Seeing the World in Black and White,” *Desiring God*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/seeing-the-world-in-black-and-white>.

has inherited from Adam. From original sin springs forth actual sins—not “actual” in the sense of real or “actual” as opposed to “internal,” but “actual” because they proceed from an act of the soul. Every sin, both original and actual, brings guilt upon the sinner (WCF 6.6). Racism, then, is a manifestation of our original corruption “whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil” (WCF 6.4).

Racism (or slavery) is often said to be our country’s “original sin,” meaning that racism has infected American society from its inception, producing centuries of pain and suffering, the legacy of which we have not yet moved past. While we can affirm “original sin” in this context as a historical euphemism, we must be careful lest we construe racism as if it were literally original sin. In Christian doctrine, original sin is imputed to us by virtue of our union with Adam, our federal head. It is unclear by what mechanism the sins of white ancestors are automatically imputed to white people today, especially when “white” can now include Hispanics, Jews, the Irish, Southern Europeans, Eastern Europeans, recent immigrants, and others groups who do not stand in direct lineage with earlier white racists and were often discriminated against by those same whites.

Think of the way racism functions like original sin in some secular ideologies: every white person inherits the original guilt and corruption of racism, everything white people do is tainted by racism, and every white person must be awakened to the reality of racism in his life. This is anti-racism as religion. Furthermore, the life of anti-racism requires constant repentance and discipleship and demands a zeal to convert those whose eyes have not been opened and to condemn those who “don’t get it.”

To be clear, the problem is not in calling people to repent of racism and considering how it may infiltrate various aspects of their lives. We should do that! The problem is in parroting the Christian story as many secular voices do—often unwittingly borrowing Christianity’s religious purpose and fervor, while preaching a new doctrine of original sin that applies only to some, and in a way that fails to present the free offer of the gospel to any.

3. Racism is an insidious sin, but not the unforgivable sin.

Think again about the passage from Galatians 5. On the one hand, there is a war within each Christian between the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit. There are things we want to do in the flesh that the Spirit will keep us from doing (v. 17). On the other hand, Paul expects the Christian to be free from the works of the flesh as a habitual way of life. If we do such things—more precisely if we make a practice of doing such things—we will not inherit the kingdom of God (v. 21).

So as a *desire* of the flesh, any enmity based on race or pride based on race is something Christians should war against and confess regularly. But as a *work* of the flesh, racism will not define us, any more than any other sin should define a Christian. Paul understood that Christians might fight fleshly desires for sexual sin (v. 17), but he didn’t expect them to say in false humility, “Yeah, we are orgy Christians and will be the rest of our lives.”

Once we remember that racism is a *sin* in the Christian story, and not, by itself, *the* Christian story, elements of racism can be demystified. Like any other sin, racism, as part of the indwelling corruption of our nature, may remain in those who are regenerated (WCF 6.5). And like any other sin, racism can be forgiven, mortified, and sanctified in Christ.

For the Christian, sin is still pervasive but less powerful. We shouldn’t be surprised, therefore, if we find racism still rooted in our hearts, nor should we deem it impossible that racism can be rooted out of our hearts. Christians who quickly dismiss any consideration that they may have racist tendencies may need to be reminded about the continuing allure and deceitfulness of sin. On the other hand, Christians who quickly dismiss any consideration that they, or others, can ever be not racist, may need to be reminded of the forgiving and transforming power of the gospel. As born-again Christians, we can be obedient to God and do that which is truly good¹⁹, even if not perfectly good (WCF 16.2, 6).

4. Racism is a serious sin, but not the only way to sin.

The church must make clear to its members—often fixated on justifying oneself before sympathizing with others—that racism is a serious sin. The church must also make clear to the world—often fixated on a handful of preferred transgressions—that there are many ways to sin, and all of them deserve the just wrath of God. If racism is one way to breach the sixth commandment, there are dozens of ways we can break that commandment, and nine other commandments besides. To reduce Christianity to anti-racism is no better than reducing Christianity to being anti-fornication or anti-abortion. Truth be told, most of us focus on the sins that those in our social circle already know to be sins. Being “prophetic” usually means denouncing the sins we don’t see in ourselves but do see in others. It’s an easy way to look good, feel good, and convince ourselves we are good.

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¹⁹ Kevin DeYoung, “Five Questions About Faith and Works,” *The Gospel Coalition*, October 30, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/five-questions-faith-good-works>.

But this point about “not the only way to sin” cuts in both directions. Sin is more varied than we think, and the law of love is more encompassing than we imagine. We might find more common ground on the topic of racism if we expanded our moral categories just a bit. The world knows only a few sins, and racism is one of them. So it’s not surprising that a hundred different errors—some of them sins of commission, some of them sins of omission, and some of them not sins at all—get pushed into this one category called racism. As a result, the world wants to say there is nothing worse than racism, and at the same time, the majority of people should confess to being racists. It’s a recipe for confusion, self-righteousness, and constant disagreement.

Thankfully, the church can be more nuanced. What if, instead of perpetuating the binary logic that makes every moral discussion a question of racist or not-racist, we talked about all the ways we are called to love one another and all the ways we can fail in that calling? This doesn’t mean we don’t use the word racist or we don’t treat the sin seriously. It means we concentrate less on that one label and focus more on the dozens of related ways we ought to live as Christians.

Take the Heidelberg Catechism for example. It tells me “I am not to belittle, insult, hate, or kill my neighbor—not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds.” It also says, “I am not to be party to this in others” and that “I am to put away all desire for revenge” (HC 105). Furthermore, it is not enough that I refrain from hating or killing my neighbor. No, positively, “God tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly to them, to protect them from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies” (HC 107). In all things I should do “whatever I can for my neighbor’s good” and “treat others as I would like them to treat me” (HC 111).

The Heidelberg Catechism summarizes how all of us should treat everyone, and it is more involved than being racist or not racist. When our moral reasoning boils down to this binary logic, we are often too hard and too soft at the same time—too hard in labeling those with the scarlet letter “R” for something far less than racism and too soft in not calling each other to all the obligations that the law demands of God’s people. The Westminster Larger Catechism, for example, lists more than 30 duties required in the sixth commandment—obligations like charitable thoughts, courteous behavior, readiness to be reconciled, forgiving of injuries, comforting the distressed, and protecting the innocent—and more than 20 sins forbidden in the sixth commandment. We do not have to settle for our culture’s stunted list of forbidden words and thoughts, when we have the church’s much richer moral vocabulary and moral imagination at our disposal.

5. Racism has been a great sin of white people in this country, but that doesn’t make all white people today guilty of those historical sins.

While enmity, pride, and partiality are sins that everyone commits, we have to acknowledge that the racist expression of these sins has been most notoriously and most destructively a sin of white people in this country. What’s more, we have reason to believe these sins have been especially egregious in God’s eyes. Contrary to popular evangelical notions of moral equivalency, some sins *are* worse than others. The Westminster Larger Catechism explains that sins are made more heinous (1) from the persons offending, (2) from the persons offended, (3) from the nature and quality of the offense, and (4) from circumstances of time and place (WLC 151). On all accounts, racism in American history has been a particularly heinous sin: it has often come from persons of “greater experience or grace” and from those “whose example is likely to be followed by others.” It has often been against fellow saints, against “the common good of all,” and has often entailed sinning “on the Lord’s Day.”

We could go on, using the catechism’s forceful language. The long history of slavery and Jim Crow were sins “against the express letter of the law,” “not only conceived in the hearts, but break[ing] forth in words and actions.” Sins were committed against the “light of nature” and “conviction of conscience.” They were done “deliberately, willfully, presumptuously, impudently, boastingly, maliciously, frequently, obstinately” and “with delight.” Racism looms large in our national consciousness because there has been no sin in our history that was perpetuated by as many people over as many years with as much destructive force.

So what does that mean for white people today who denounce all the sins listed above? Does a shared skin color make one culpable for the offenses of those who have gone before?

As I’ve said before²⁰, I believe the Bible has a *category for corporate responsibility, but there are important limits to the use of this category.*

The book of Acts is an illuminating case study in this respect. On the one hand, God may hold people responsible for sins they may not have directly carried out. In Acts 2, Peter charges the “[m]en of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem” (v. 14) with crucifying Jesus

Being “prophetic” usually means denouncing the sins we don’t see in ourselves but do see in others.

²⁰ Kevin DeYoung, “Toward a Theology of Apology,” *The Gospel Coalition*, June 7, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/toward-theology-apology>.

(v. 23, 36). To be sure, they did this by the hands of lawless men (v. 23). But as Jews present in Jerusalem during Passion Week, they bore some responsibility for Jesus's death. Likewise, Peter charged the men of Israel gathered at Solomon's Portico with delivering Jesus over and denying him in the presence of Pilate (Acts 3:11–16). While we don't know if every single person in the Acts 3 crowd had chosen Barabbas over Christ, Peter certainly felt comfortable in laying the crucifixion at their feet. Most, if not all of them, had played an active role in the events leading up to Jesus's death. This was a sin in need of repentance (v. 19, 26). We see the same in Acts 4:10 and 5:30 where Peter and John charged the council (i.e., the Sanhedrin) with killing Jesus. In short, the Jews in Jerusalem during Jesus's last days bore responsibility for his murder.

Once the action leaves Jerusalem, however, the charges start to sound different. In speaking to Cornelius (a Gentile), his relatives, and close friends, Peter relays that *they* (the Jews in Jerusalem) put Jesus to death (10:39). Even more specifically, Paul tells the crowd in Pisidian Antioch that “those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers” condemned Jesus (Acts 13:27). This speech is especially important because Paul is talking to Jews. He does not blame the Jews in Pisidian Antioch with the crimes of the Jews in Jerusalem.

This is a consistent pattern. Paul doesn't charge the Jews in Thessalonica or Berea with killing Jesus (Acts 17), nor the Jews in Corinth (Acts 18) or in Ephesus (Acts 19). In fact, when Paul returns to Jerusalem years after the crucifixion, he does not accuse the Jews there of killing Jesus; he does not even charge the council with that crime (Acts 23). He doesn't blame Felix (Acts 24) or Festus (Acts 25) or Agrippa (Acts 26) for Jesus's death, even though they are all men in authority connected in some way with the governing apparatus that killed Christ. The apostles considered the Jews in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion uniquely responsible for Jesus's death, but this culpability did not extend to every high-ranking official, to every Jew, or to everyone who would live in Jerusalem thereafter. The rest of the Jews and Gentiles in the book of Acts still had to repent of their wickedness, but they were not charged with killing the Messiah.

Does this mean there is never any place for corporate culpability across time and space? No. In Matthew 23:35, Jesus charges the scribes and Pharisees with murdering Zechariah the son of Barachiah. Although there is disagreement about who this Zechariah is, most scholars agree he is a figure from the past who was not killed in their lifetimes. The fact that the scribes and Pharisees were treating Jesus with contempt put them in the same category as their ancestors who had also treated God's prophets with contempt (cf. Acts 7:51–53). It could rightly be said that they murdered Zechariah between the sanctuary and the altar because they shared in the same spirit of hate as the murderers in Zechariah's day.

Similarly, there are several examples of corporate confession in the Old Testament. As God's covenant people, the Israelites were commanded to confess their sins and turn from their wicked ways so as to come out from under the divinely sanctioned covenant curses (2 Chron. 6:12–42; 7:13–18). This is why we see the likes of Ezra (Ezra 9–10), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4–11), and Daniel (Dan. 9:3–19) leading in corporate confession. The Jews were not lumped together because of race, ethnicity, geography, education level, or socio-economic status. The Israelites had freely entered into a covenant relationship with each other and with their God. In all three examples above, the leader entered into corporate confession because (1) he was praying for the covenant people, (2) the people were as a whole marked by unfaithfulness, and (3) the leader himself bore some responsibility for the actions of the people, either by having been blind to the sin (Ezra 9:3) or by participating directly in the sin (Neh. 9:6; Dan. 9:20).

Christians do not deny that the sins of one person can be reckoned to another. How else do we explain the imputation of Adam's sin to us or the imputation of our sin to Christ? We can be considered guilty for sins we did not commit in ourselves. But on what grounds? Francis Turretin explains, “No imputation of another's sin can be granted, except on the supposition of some peculiar connection of the one with the other” (Elenctic Theology, IX.ix.11).²¹ He goes on to argue this union may be threefold: (1) natural, as between a father and his children, (2) moral and political, as between a king and his subjects, and (3) voluntary, as between the guilty person and a substitute who consents to be punished for the sake of another. These distinctions make sense of the imputation of Adam's sin to us (natural and moral), the imputation of our sin to Christ (moral and voluntary), and the other examples of corporate responsibility and punishment in the Bible—which usually focus on nations (a moral and political union) or on families (a natural union).

To sum up: the Bible has a category for corporate responsibility. Culpability for sins committed can extend to a large group *if virtually everyone in the group was active in the sin or if we bear the same spiritual resemblance to the perpetrators of the past*. Furthermore, the sins of others can be imputed to us if there is a natural, moral/political, or voluntary union.

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²¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997).

And yet, the category of corporate responsibility can easily be stretched too far. The Jews of the diaspora were not guilty of killing Jesus just because they were Jews. Neither were later Jews in Jerusalem charged with that crime just because they lived in the place where the crucifixion took place. And we must differentiate between other-designated identity blocs and freely chosen covenantal communities. Moral complicity is not strictly individualistic, but it has its limits. All white people today are not automatically guilty of the racist sins of other white people.

CONCLUDING THOUGHT

As I bring this already too-long article to an end, I'm reminded of something I read in Shelby Steele's remarkable book *The Content of Our Character*.²² "I think the racial struggle in America has always been primarily a struggle for innocence" (5). According to Steele, one of America's most honest and trenchant voices on these matters, both races understand that to lose innocence is to lose power, and given the way the racial debate has been fostered in this country, one's innocence depends on the other's guilt. Consequently, racial difference has become the currency of power. To maintain their innocence, "blacks sting whites with guilt, remind them of their racial past, accuse them of new and more subtle forms of racism." And in return whites try to retrieve their innocence by discrediting blacks and denying their difficulties, "for in this denial is the denial of their own guilt" (145).

For whites, it can feel like redemption is always out of reach. If you don't have animus in your heart, you have implicit bias that you can't see. If you haven't personally done anything against black people, other whites have, and you bear their shame. If you speak out, you should have listened. If you stay quiet, your silence is violence. If you do nothing tangible to counter injustice, that's sinful indifference. Try to take the lead in fixing things, you may want to check your privilege. Your institution shouldn't be all white, but it shouldn't engage in tokenism. You should celebrate diversity, but without cultural appropriation. And any disagreement with the fundamental contours of this one-way conversation is just another manifestation of white fragility.

In other words: guilty, guilty, guilty.

And for blacks, it must feel like even the barest recognition of the ongoing effects of racism is a bridge too far for most whites. Because whites are often preoccupied with their search for innocence, they fail to muster even meager sympathy or understanding for black pain. If you want to talk about policing in America, we will bring up black homicide rates in Chicago. If you want to talk about criminal justice reform, we will mention the black abortion rate. And if that doesn't adequately move the guilt from our shoulders to yours, we can always talk about our black friends, insist that we are color blind, or weaponize pull quotes from Thomas Sowell.

In other words: guilty, guilty, guilty.

There will be no moving forward in these matters if every step forward for one side means a step backward for the other. We have a common ancestor in Adam, and, if believers, we have a common Savior in Christ. Our way forward must be a common morality that appeals not to racial difference, but to the best in what we can be by the Spirit working through the word. Our identity, our strength, our power must come from our character, and ultimately from Christ.

If our racial tensions are everywhere about sin and guilt, then it stands to reason that one of the most essential things we can do as Christians is to rest in Christ and encourage others to do the same.

If I am truly free and forgiven in Christ, I can be honest with my indwelling sin.

If I'm genuinely secure in my adoption as God's precious child, I can choose to love others—undeterred by their misunderstandings of me—rather than using them for my own sense of superiority, righteousness, or absolution.

If I know how much God has forgiven me, I can eagerly give to others what they don't rightly deserve from me.

To be clear, there is no comparing the aggregate sins of white people against black people versus the sins of black people against white people. This is not a Pollyannaish plea for all of us to just forgive and forget. But it is a plea for the gospel to occupy the center of any Christian conversation about race. Not just the gospel for others—yes, that of course. But the gospel for ourselves too—the gospel that searches, the gospel that saves, the gospel that sanctifies. How might your participation (and mine) in our racial tensions be different if we didn't instinctively prepare, in every racial encounter, for some combination of recrimination for guilt and reestablishment of righteousness? What if we encountered others not as a means to securing our identity—be that as victim, as innocent, or as absolved—but as an opportunity to meet a whole person with our whole person? What if the good news of Christ's death and resurrection—while not the only thing we need to talk about—is the one thing that can make all the rest of our conversations meaningful, honest, and hopeful?

If sin and guilt got us into this mess, perhaps justification by faith alone through grace can get us out.

Racial difference
has become the
currency of power.

²² Shelby Steele, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

Life Together in the Church | PART 4

When I talk to my seminary students and pastoral interns about preaching, I often warn them against the sermon whose organizing principle is basically, “Here are a bunch of things I’ve been thinking about related to this passage.” Well, after reading this post, my students and interns will have every right to say, “Physician, heal thyself!” because I want to finish this series by offering a smattering of loosely connected suggestions related to race and racism.

If there is an organizing theme, it is, as the title indicates, about life together in the church: how we can maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3) and grow into maturity together in Christ (vv. 13–16).

My 15 suggestions apply to race most specifically, but I hope that most of the reflections can serve as helpful reminders for our polarized, politicized, and digitized world more generally.

1. Don’t lose sight of the mission of the church.

I won’t repeat the arguments Greg Gilbert and I made in *What Is the Mission of the Church?*²³, but even if one does not agree with everything in our book, surely most evangelical Christians want to affirm the central importance of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20). When Jesus launched his public ministry, he called people to repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:15). When Jesus sent out the disciples in mission, he called them to be witnesses to the resurrection and heralds of repentance and forgiveness in his name (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). And when we see Peter and John and Paul carrying out the mission of the church in Acts, we invariably see them teaching the word and preaching about Christ.

We are finite people with finite time and finite resources; let us stay committed to the ordinary means of grace—the word of God, the sacraments, and prayer—those things that if the church does not do them, no one and nothing else will.

2. Don’t lose sight of what it means to be a fully formed disciple of Christ.

Nothing in the paragraph above should be taken to mean Christians never talk about justice or current events or issues that might be labeled political. We ought to take every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5), we are called to live as salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13–16), and in fulfilling the Great Commission, we teach the nations to obey everything Christ has commanded (Matt. 28:20).

As I’ve said before²⁴, social justice—by which I mean treating people equitably, working for systems and structures that are fair, and looking out for the weak and the vulnerable—is not a “gospel issue” if that means adding to *sola fide*, making anything else as central in our preaching as Christ crucified, or insisting that everyone be as fired up about my preferred issues as I am.

But if “gospel issue” means “a necessary concern of those who have been saved by the gospel” or “one aspect of what it means to keep in step with the gospel” or “realities without which you may not be truly believing the gospel,” then social justice is certainly a gospel issue (Lev. 19, 25; Isa. 1, 58; Amos 5; Micah 6:8). It is part and parcel of being a disciple of Jesus.

3. Love one another and aspire to live a quiet life.

First Thessalonians 4:8–12 is a forgotten passage in our day. But in a world that sometimes encourages violent upheaval, we need to hear Paul’s exhortation that the Thessalonians “aspire to live quietly” and “to mind [their] own affairs” (4:11). Clearly, Paul does not mean “be an island unto yourself” when he says, “mind your own affairs.” He commends the Thessalonians for their brotherly love and urges them to serve one another more and more (4:9–10). He doesn’t want us unconcerned for the needs of the body. At the same time, you get the distinct impression that working hard, providing for your family, and caring for the body of Christ is a life well-lived.

Sometimes quiet faithfulness is the most revolutionary thing we can do.

Sometimes quiet
faithfulness
is the most
revolutionary
thing we can do.

4. Be careful we don’t make good things for us requirements for everyone.

Your passion may be for adoption, or eradicating racism, or ending abortion, or for clean water, or for criminal justice reform, or for a thousand other good things. Not everyone will be into the same thing. We must allow

²³ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

²⁴ Kevin DeYoung, “Is Social Justice a Gospel Issue?,” *The Gospel Coalition*, September 11, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/social-justice-gospel-issue>.

for others to have a different sense of calling on their lives. Even a quick scroll on our social media feed can be overwhelming. There simply aren't enough hours in the day to do everything we are told we *must* do. I refuse to believe that obedience to Christ requires a 35-hour day.

I have to attend to my primary vocation—which is to first be a happy and holy follower of Christ, then to be a husband and father, and then to be a faithful pastor (and there are actually quite a few hats I have to wear after that).

We should feel guilty for disobeying the commands of Scripture; we should not feel guilty for not living the life someone else wants us to live.

5. Let us model compassion toward others along with a dispassionate analysis of the facts.

It is rare that you find both of these things in the same person, but the Spirit can work miracles. We should be people who feel deeply and think carefully. We must not bully people with arguments (even right ones), and we must not allow emotions (even sincere ones) to substitute for logic and evidence.

6. Let us rigorously attend to the definition of words.

We are people of the Word inscripturated, worshipers of the Word incarnate, and believers in the importance of faith-energizing and faith-defending words in creeds and confessions. Of all people, Christians should care about definitions.

Systemic racism, social justice, cultural Marxism, diversity, privilege—these terms and phrases beg for definitions. We should also realize that labels often function as signposts to solution. The words we use suggest the remedies that should follow.

7. Remember the online world is not the primary world we should inhabit.

When younger people say, “You need to do something” (whatever that something may be), they are often thinking about doing something online (making a statement, joining a hashtag, posting a symbolic gesture), and that's one way to do something. But praying is also doing something. Educating yourself is also doing something. Raising kids in the fear and admonition of the Lord is also doing something. Giving money in secret is also doing something. Correcting and encouraging others in private is also doing something. Teaching and preaching and praying in public is also doing something. Being salt and light in the work place is also doing something.

We should not think that the digital world is the only one that counts or that it is most important.

8. Don't use labels and buzzword to shut down honest conversation and intellectual inquiry.

This happens on the left and the right. In some contexts, if you talk about racism or the lingering effects of injustice, you will immediately be labeled a “cultural Marxist” or a “Social Justice Warrior” or someone who is adding to the gospel. In other contexts, if you talk about personal responsibility or pathologies that may contribute to lingering disparities, you will immediately be labeled a racist or accused of white privilege or “not getting it.”

We can debate whether cultural Marxism is a thing and whether white privilege is a thing, but the operative word here is *debate*. Labels have their place at the conclusion of arguments. They are less helpful in the place of arguments altogether.

9. Consider that there is more than one legitimate way to assess the current state of racism in America.

I'm convinced the elephant in the room in so many discussions about race is that we don't agree on how bad racism is in America. To a large extent, we have to admit that we aren't all going to see eye to eye on this one. But perhaps we can inch toward some common ground if we realize that there are various ways to frame the issue.

Are we comparing racism in 2020 to racism in 1960 or comparing ourselves with other countries? Are we looking at the gains blacks have made since 1965 in absolute terms or the persistent disparities when measured against whites? Should we measure blacks in this country today against whites today, or against where black people were in the past, or against black people everywhere in the world? Will progress be marked by increases in personal wealth or in income or education? Should we look for increases in raw numbers or a narrowing of the gap between blacks and whites? Does the story we are telling start in the 1960s or the 1600s? Do our statistics look at blacks as a percentage of the population or blacks as a percentage when controlled for other factors? Is anti-racism a matter of an equal process, an equal opportunity, or an equal outcome?

You get the point.

We should not think that the digital world is the only one that counts or that it is most important.

Asking these questions does not solve the problem, but maybe it helps us see that there are different facts which can be used to tell different stories.

10. Distinguish between biblical principles and prudential judgments.

What makes the questions above so difficult is that they depend on prudential judgments. The Bible tells us that racism is wrong, but it doesn't tell us the reason for continuing disparities or what the policy solution might be. Christians should not be tolerant of sin, injustice, and immorality (Rev. 2:18–29). At the same time, Christians should not assume that every disagreement is a matter of sin, injustice, and immorality. We need the category of each being “fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5).

I fear that in the months and years ahead we will see Christians and churches and gospel movements reshuffling their associations based upon a unity not in shared Christological and soteriological truths but in the sameness of our political and cultural instincts.

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11. Consider that you may not know as much as you think you do.

The fancy term is epistemic humility, which means admitting that most of us are not experts on American history or law enforcement or economic policy or political legislation (or viruses!) or all the other things that we are agitated about at present.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't get informed or that we can't have convictions. But something is wrong if we hold these weeks-old or months-old convictions with the same enthusiasm and resoluteness with which we hold our Christian dogma.

Let's be more sure about the Apostles' Creed than we are about what is going on in Portland.

12. Clarify whether your main concern is explaining how we got racial disparities or thinking about how to move forward.

This is an oversimplification to be sure. But I've noticed in reading liberal black writers and conservative black writers, that the former tend to focus on where racial disparities came from, while the latter tend to focus on what they think will help black communities improve here and now.

Liberals say, “Look, we can't understand what's going on in lower test scores and higher unemployment and higher rates of crime without understanding the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.”

Conservatives say, “But those things are in the past. Black communities will not improve until they see themselves as having agency and responsibility in their own story.”

Both discussions have their place, and neither can be fully separated from the other. But clarifying what we are talking about is a step toward better understanding one another.

13. Beware of monocausal explanations for why people are the way they are.

Think about your life. How did you become the person you are? How did you get to the place you're in? How would you explain your successes or failures? I look at my life and see good choices I made and a lot of hard work. I also see mistakes that didn't cost me as much as they could have. And I see a whole lot of things—for good or bad, but mostly for good—that I didn't choose: my godly parents, my good schools, my safe neighborhood, my middle-class home, my upbringing in church, my sex, my height, my Celiac, my bad eyes, my less-than-hoped-for athleticism, my easier-than-for-most-people good grades, the fact that no one ever offered me drugs, that no one ever introduced me to porn, that, for the most part, I've been treated fairly by others, and on and on.

My life cannot be reduced to my choices, my environment, or my race. But neither are these elements irrelevant. We are all complicated individuals who are who we are (and where we are) by a complicated string of events, people, decisions, and opportunities (or lack thereof)—some of them stretching back into the past in ways that profoundly shape the present.

I am responsible for my sins, the Lord is responsible for my blessings, and who I am is a mix of a thousand other factors. We ought to be skeptical of any explanation for a human life, or for a group of human beings, which suggests either (1) we all basically get what we deserve or (2) we are all the inevitable product of systems and structures outside our control.

14. Probe your head and check your heart before speaking out or staying silent.

The world wants quick, immediate, now—and sometimes fast is the necessary speed of the hour. But as a general rule, slower is better. Probe your head: Have I thought this through? Do I know what I'm talking about? Do I really believe what I'm about to say or sign? And check your heart: Am I speaking (or staying silent) out of love for myself or love for others? Would I say what I'm about to say if the opposite side loved it and my side hated it? Am I seeking to build up the body of Christ? Am I speaking the truth in love?

15. Don't lose hope.

It's one of the reasons for our intense polarization: both sides feel like they're losing. One side feels like the racists are in charge, while the other side feels like the Marxists are in charge. Despair is the order of the day. Christians, however, are people of hope. We are not going to move past race or racism in our lifetimes, but that doesn't mean you and I and the church of Jesus Christ can't move in the right direction. At some point along the way, you may get offended. You may inadvertently do the offending (or on purpose!). You may discover more sin than you knew was in you, or more freedom than you knew you could have in Christ. But let's not give up believing all things, hoping all things, and enduring all things.

Whatever you think and fear in the present moment, believe that God hears and sees and knows (Ex. 2:24–25). Believe that he can bring beauty from ashes. Believe that Christ is still on the throne. And as we revel in that confidence, let us move toward others to learn from them, listen to them, and love them as we would want to be loved.

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ADDENDUM:

With Liberty and Justice for All

What should we think of America?

In an important sense, that's not a question I can answer as a pastor. The Bible won't settle any debates about the meaning of the Constitution or the failure of Reconstruction or the legacy of the New Deal. It's important to say that up front, lest we make a particular interpretation of American history—either one that sparkles sunshine or one that sees little more than a long list of atrocities—a de facto standard for friendship and fellowship. No American history test is required for entrance into the church universal, and hopefully none is required for our local churches either.

And yet, the issue of race in America—so much in the news these days—is inescapably historical. Anytime we talk about these matters we have in our head some outline of who we are as a country, some sense of where we have been and how far we have (or have not) come. So even though there is no single Christian response, most of us have an answer in our heads already, so we ought to talk about how that answer shapes our thinking and how some answers are better than others. We can be humble about our interpretations without being historical relativists.

So what is my view of America?

Well, it's complicated. The more you look deeply into any person, any time period, or any nation, the more you realize that the “good guys” and the “bad guys” are usually more of a mixture than we'd like to admit. History on the cheap goes digging through the past with the goal of bringing some weapon of judgment back to the present. A better approach, in the Quentin Skinner school of intellectual history, is to try to “see things their way²⁵.” As Christians we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. That means our dead neighbors too, even the ones we think we wouldn't have liked very much.

If earlier generations were guilty of telling the American story as nothing but a mighty tale of noble triumph moving from strength to strength, I fear we are in danger of trading one reductionist interpretation for another. To be sure, we need to look injustice squarely in the eye. The slave ships, the beatings, the lynchings, the fire hoses, the Trail of Tears, the internment camps, the dehumanizing treatment that Native Americans and blacks and other minorities (sometimes white) have been made to endure in this country cannot be ignored. This is our history as Americans. We need to own it and grieve over it.

There is also more that must be said. The history of God and race in America is, as Mark Noll puts it²⁶, a “tangled history” filled with “moral complexity” (181). On the one hand, the Christian faith has been a prominent feature in American history and has often been a beneficent force at home and abroad. “Christian altruism, Christian philanthropy, Christian consolation, and Christian responsibility are not the only forces for good in American history, but they loom very large and have had very positive effects” (177). And yet, Noll admits that “the American political system and the American practice of Christianity, which have provided so much good for so many people for so many years, have never been able to overcome race” (178). If we are honest about ourselves and honest about our faith, we must conclude that Christianity in America has done much at times to promote racism, while offering hints of redemption as well (181).

SLAVERY AT THE AMERICAN FOUNDING

History is rarely simple, and it is rarely static either. The American experiment is not the story of steady moral uplift and courage nor the story of constant declension and depravity. We must not be ignorant of the contours of our own history, lest we forget, for example, that by the time the Constitution was ratified—effectively the beginning of the United States as truly united states—slavery had been abolished in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and in all the future states north of the Ohio River in the Northwest Ordinance.

As Christians we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. That means our dead neighbors, too.

²⁵ Brad S. Gregory, *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

²⁶ Mark A. Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

As for the Constitution itself, while it was undoubtedly a compromise document that mollified the concerns of Southern slaveholding states, it also held the line—thanks to James Madison—that there would be “no property in man²⁷.” At the time of the drafting of the Constitution, Northerners who opposed slavery assumed (wrongly) that slavery would fade away. They did not know that slavery in the South would be revolutionized and re-energized by the invention of the cotton gin in 1793.

To be sure, none of the Founding Fathers got the race question right in the way we wish they would have. They were men of their age, in ways that made them better and worse than our leading thinkers and statesmen today. Nevertheless, it is important to see how the Founding generation was viewed in their own age. The Constitutional provision allowing for the abolition of the slave trade in twenty years was greeted by many free blacks as a great triumph. Two generations later, Alexander Stephens, vice-president of the Confederacy, lamented the fact that the American Founders had believed in the equality of the races, a mistake (as Stephens saw it) that the Southern states would not repeat²⁸:

The prevailing ideas entertained by him [Jefferson] and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old Constitution were, that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally and politically. It was an evil they knew not well how to deal with; but the general opinion of the men of that day was, that, somehow or other, in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent and pass away. This idea, though not incorporated in the Constitution, was the prevailing idea at the time. The Constitution, it is true, secured every essential guarantee to the institution while it should last, and hence no argument can be justly used against the constitutional guarantees thus secured, because of the common sentiment of the day. Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the idea of a Government built upon it—when the “storm came and the wind blew, it fell.” Our new Government is founded upon exactly the opposite ideas; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition.

Granted, Stephens was no unbiased interpreter of history. He is surely giving the Founders too much credit, if not in terms of their loftiest ideals, then certainly in terms of their actual practice. But still, his reading of America should not be quickly dismissed. Stephens believed the Confederacy stood for something profoundly different than the vision laid out in the Declaration of Independence. For Stephens, the idea of the Confederacy was fundamentally about the subordination of blacks to whites and the enduring good of slavery, whereas the fundamental idea of the United States was that all men were created equal and that the disagreeable institution of slavery would eventually disappear.

In Frederick Douglass’ powerful Fourth of July address²⁹ from 1852, he castigated his fellow citizens, and especially the churches, for their failure to mount up with zeal for abolition. “The existence of slavery in this country,” he said, “brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence, and your Christianity as a lie.” Douglass did not spare his country the verbal chastisement it deserved. And yet, these moral evils were not an indictment of America’s ideals but of its “national inconsistencies.” Although five years earlier in London, Douglass denounced³⁰ the duplicity of the Founders and the Constitution’s failure to deal honestly with slavery, in his 1852 address he lauded “the fathers of this republic” and “the signers of the Declaration of Independence” as “brave men” and “great men too.” “They were statesmen,” he opined, “patriots and heroes, and for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory.” Douglass’ complaint was not with the Fourth of July and what it stood for, but with the brutal reality that it was not *his* Independence Day and that the “great principles of political freedom and of natural justice” had not been extended to all.

In hindsight, the compromises made at the founding of our country were tragic, but in the 1780s they made sense to most free Americans as necessary provisions for political Union and national unity. Take the mainline Presbyterian church, for example. A resolution from the Synod of New York and Philadelphia (May 16, 1787) approved of “the general principles in favor of universal liberty that prevail in America; and the interest which many of the states have taken in promoting the abolition of slavery.” Although the Synod did not try to dis-fellowship slaveholding churchmen and did not advocate for immediate abolition, it did encourage educating slaves, giving them a share of property, and teaching them to be self-sufficient so that they might be useful freemen someday. Moreover, the Synod went on to “recommend it to all the people under their care to use the most prudent measures, consistent with the interest and the state of civil society, in the parts where they live, to procure, eventually, *the final abolition of slavery in America*” (emphasis in original).

²⁷ Sean Wilentz, *No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation’s Founding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

²⁸ Paul Halsall, “Stephens’ Cornerstone Address,” Primary Source Reading, July 1998, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-ushistory10s2xmaster/chapter/primary-source-reading-stephens-cornerstone-address>.

²⁹ *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999), 188-206. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july>.

³⁰ Frederick Douglass: Farewell Speech to the British People, (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester), <https://rbcp.lib.rochester.edu/4395>.

A MORE PERFECT UNION

Obviously, the racial views of many Presbyterians, especially in the South, would get worse instead of better in the nineteenth century. The point is not to exonerate Presbyterians, but to dispute the telling of American history that reads the worst aspects of Southern slavery into our national story from start to finish. In his famous campaign speech³¹ on race, then-Senator Barack Obama rejected “the profoundly distorted view of this country” that “sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America.” The speech, with a nod to the Constitution, was fittingly entitled “A More Perfect Union.” While America at its worst has been brutally far from perfect, that doesn’t mean that in our imperfect Union there is nothing worth celebrating, even when it comes to race.

If we are not careful, we can reinforce racial stereotypes by telling American history as the story of what white people have done to black people in the past and what white people can do to help them in the present. As Shelby Steele argues³², blacks have often been rendered a “contingent people” without personal agency in the story of America, a people first oppressed by whites and now dependent upon the goodwill of whites for their success. “Thus it relegated us to the sidelines of our own aspirations” (179). Feelings of white guilt should not obscure the fact that³³ “as a group, black Americans have made the greatest gains, over some of the highest hurdles, and in a shorter span of time than any other racial group in history... As such, it speaks to the intestinal fortitude of a people. Just as important, it speaks to the greatness of a nation in which such gains were possible.”

LAND OF LIBERTY

The founding documents of this country were based, in part, on a Judeo-Christian understanding of the fallenness of man. That’s why Hamilton believed in checks and balances, and why Madison insisted that ambition must be made to counteract ambition. They did not trust men with too much power. Unfortunately, as is the case with all nations, we have our examples of those in power acting unjustly toward those without power. But that doesn’t make the promise of the Declaration that “all men are created equal” a lie. It makes our national sins more painful.

We do not have to believe we are as bad as we’ve ever been to acknowledge that we aren’t what we can be. There has been racial progress in this country that few whites or blacks would have imagined sixty years ago. Yes, there is still racism and injustice. Yes, there are self-deceptions in every human heart. But there are also declarations in our history that can still inspire. The ideals of liberty and justice for all are not less noble or less indicative of the American story because we have so often failed to live up to them.

The genius of Lincoln and MLK is that they appealed to the best of America instead of the worst. They understood that a relentless focus on America’s original sin without a surpassing hope in America’s original ideals would not move any of us closer to the better angels of our nature or to the dream of being judged by the content of our character instead of the color of our skin. Shame can arouse the conscience, but for the long-haul people need better motivation than disgust and despair. A people cannot long endure without some sense of shared identity and purpose, some sense of mutual striving together, some sense of an idea that defines them³⁴. In other words, being an American must mean something, and I still think “We hold these truths” and “We the people” can be that something.

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can be.

³¹ Barack Obama, “Barack Obama’s Speech on Race,” March 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>.

³² Shelby Steele, *Shame: How America’s Past Sins Have Polarized Our Country* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2015).

³³ Walter E. Williams, “Insults to Black History,” *Creators Syndicate*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.creators.com/read/walter-williams/06/20/insults-to-black-history>.

³⁴ Kevin DeYoung, “Thank God for the Idea of America,” *The Gospel Coalition*, July 4, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/the-idea-of-america>.