

A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO RACISM

A biblical response to racism begins with the understanding that we are all one human race (Acts 17:26). All human beings are created by God and bear his image and his likeness equally (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6). While the Bible does not provide us with a concept of race in the scientific anthropological sense of the term, it does speak to the various divisions among people groups, ethnicities, and cultures, and is well acquainted with the realities of disharmony and alienation that exist along these lines.

Scripture teaches us that this alienation is a direct result of the fall, where sin initially entered our world through our first parents (Gen. 3:14-24). This led to envy and strife (Gen. 4:8-16), the radical corruption of our hearts being bent toward evil (Gen. 6:5-6), and widespread division among people (Gen. 11:1-9).¹ We understand the sin of racism as a specific form of alienation from the fall. It can be defined as prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism toward a person of a different race based upon the belief that one's own race is superior. Racism is a pervasive evil that disparages other image bearers on the basis of differences in physical appearance, cultural practice, or certain behavioral traits that correspond to such differences. It is a sin that divides both humanity and the church. And like other sins, it can be both intentional and unintentional and come in forms of both commission and omission (Jas. 4:17; Lev. 4:27).

Insofar as racism violates the image of God in a person, it is first and foremost a sin against God (Gen. 9:6; Ps. 51:4). We are all equally bearers of God's image, and to be prejudiced against another image bearer is an affront against what God has created. Yet racism is also a sin against our neighbor. In the Old Testament, God revealed his intention to bless every nation and people on earth through Abraham's offspring (Gen. 12:3; Gen. 22:18). The New Testament also urges us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:31), and to honor the image of God in our fellow persons (Jas. 3:9; 1 John 4:20).

When it comes to a cure for racism, Scripture reminds us that the mind "set on the flesh is hostile to God" (Rom. 8:7). With this mind we cannot submit to God's law in our own power. Only by being united with Christ in his death can the power of sin be broken—and this includes the sin of racism (Rom. 6:6-7). Christ himself is our peace, having broken down in his flesh the dividing walls of hostility among different ethnicities, cultures, and races (Acts 2:1-11; Eph. 2:14; Col. 3:11). His redemption makes a new creation (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17). Scripture calls believers to be transformed by the renewal of their minds, to set their minds on the Spirit, and to regard no one according to the flesh (Rom. 12:2; 8:6; 2 Cor. 5:16). We are urged not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought (Rom. 12:3), and to avoid showing

¹ While some would try to argue that God intended a separation by race at Babel, we reject any notion that this scattering was done along racial lines or for purposes of racial "purity." We further reject as a misreading of Paul the idea that God has placed intentional boundaries between people based on racial or ethnic distinctions (See Paul's Areopagus sermon in Acts 17:26).

partiality in our churches (Jas. 2:1-4; Acts 10:34-35). Racism not only violates the image of God, it also denies the truth of the gospel that all believers are one in Spirit and have been baptized into one body (John 17:22-23; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Gal. 3:28).

Jesus plainly says that the work of the gospel in the lives of his disciples will inevitably bear much fruit (John 15:8). It is worth noting that Jesus explained and illustrated neighbor love with a parable featuring persons of different ethnicities (Luke 10:25-37). In his own earthly ministry he himself crossed barriers of gender, class and ethnicity in his encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-42). Furthermore, in the early church we see the Holy Spirit confronting cultural and ethnic divisions, bringing about gospel reconciliation (Acts 6:1-7; 10:1-22). Scripture clearly and repeatedly calls God's people to treat those of a different appearance, background, language group, ethnicity, or culture with respect, love, dignity and care—modeling true unity before the world (John 13:34-35; 17:21; Rom. 12:5; Phil. 2:2-3).

We reject as unbiblical any theory that would assign guilt or innocence, superiority or inferiority, on the basis of skin color alone. God has created us as a rational, moral people who are both capable of making choices and being held responsible for those choices. Scripture teaches that no sin is inevitable and only one sin is unpardonable—racism is neither. We call upon the Missionary Church to first and foremost think biblically about the sin of racism.

Like many North American denominations, we recognize that the Missionary Church has a somewhat complicated history on the subject of race. With historical beginnings in the late 19th century resulting in a 1969 merger, our roots reveal a mixed record. Early publications from our forbearers often reflected an indifference regarding racial issues. When addressed, our approach towards racial injustice was often patronizing and at times resorted to stereotyping.² We were both reserved and late to offer condemnation of Jim Crow laws or explicitly racist groups.³ One of our denominational schools even prohibited interracial dating and marriage.⁴ Stated plans to more intentionally and effectively embrace minority groups were not well received, much less carried out.⁵ In short, our history reveals that the

² See various articles in *The Gospel Banner*, years 1883-1969.

³ In a March 23, 1916 editorial in the *Gospel Banner*, J. A. Huffman (UMC) condemned segregation, one of the cornerstones of Jim Crow laws. In a September 4, 1924 *Gospel Banner* article, a contributing writer decried the impact of the Ku Klux Klan and called out ministers who were complicit with the KKK. These two instances are the closest the Missionary Church has come in its history to officially denounce Jim Crow laws and the Ku Klux Klan.

⁴ Fort Wayne Bible College prohibited interracial dating until 1972. See "Inter-racial Dating," *BC Book* (1959-60), 19; cf. "Inter-racial Dating" in *BC Book* (1969-70), 31.

⁵ See the "1965 Action of the MCA Study Committee for Reaching Minority Groups," (Fort Wayne, IN: March 15, 1967), housed in The Missionary Church Archives at Bethel University.

Missionary Church has tended to drift along with our culture on this issue.⁶ The numerical growth of Latino brothers and sisters within our denomination more recently has been a tremendous blessing. The Missionary Church must intentionally and consistently address any sense of disconnectedness and second-class status in our regional and national meetings. Our denomination has much to learn about developing ministries in urban, inner-city, and non-anglo communities across the nation. Our church planting strategies have historically reflected a tendency to start new works where there has been the greatest interest (and perceived potential to be successful)—not necessarily where there was the greatest need. We not only lament the legacy of every form of racism in our world, we acknowledge the presence of historical failures and ongoing shortcomings within our own denomination.

When it comes to a sin like racism, it is important to note that Scripture distinguishes between sin's guilt and its corruption. Culpability for sin is personal, but corruption can be corporate (Rom 3:10-12; 8:20-21). Some within the Missionary Church may be personally guilty of the sin of racism and have an obligation to seek repentance. Others may simply live in the midst of the corruption of this particular sin and be inheritors of a mixed record. We challenge everyone to examine their own hearts and ask the Lord to reveal any hidden faults (Ps. 19:12-14). We also understand that when damage done by previous generations remains unaddressed or unresolved, such damage needs to be repaired and such wrong needs to be righted. Scripture presents several biblical precedents for corporate repentance when not every individual involved was personally guilty (2 Chr. 6:24-39; Neh. 9:33; Matt. 23:31; Rev. 2:13-16). Even if one is not directly culpable for specific past sins, repenting of corporate or historical sins can be an expression of regret and a form of public disavowal (Dan. 9:3-15). As recipients of the Missionary Church's heritage, we acknowledge and lament these sins—and where appropriate, we confess such sins personally. Furthermore, we unequivocally renounce any statutes, systems, or structures in our world that would strip individuals of their image bearer status based on prejudice against skin color, ethnicity, language group, or cultural background.

We know that the church will one day worship as a great, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-cultural assembly (Isa. 2:1-4; Zech. 8:23; Heb. 12:22-23; Rev. 7:9-10). This picture of the heavenly state, where every tribe, tongue and nation gathers to worship God (Heb. 12:18-24), should be reflected in our earthly state (1 Pet. 2:9-10). We therefore express our desire to mature in our racial diversity and harmony as brothers and sisters in the Missionary Church. Toward that end we furthermore call upon local churches, regions, and our entire denomination to recognize that from the earliest days of the church God has gifted and called a diverse group of leaders in order that that they may raise up a similarly diverse and beautiful bride (Acts 13:1). We live and minister in the bright light of this first-century biblical

⁶ As recently as 2019, The Missionary Church's Constitution and position papers gave racism only a single brief mention. "WE STAND . . . FOR government based on the equal rights of all citizens regardless of race, gender, or faith— . . . AGAINST racism and anti-Semitism anywhere, anytime." See Position Paper XI: "Our Values," (adopted by the 1989 General Conference) in the Constitution of the Missionary Church.

example. We wholeheartedly affirm our partnership in the Gospel and our equal standing together before the Lord—all purchased with the precious blood of Christ. Our prayer is that the Missionary Church will grow as a unified and diverse community of equal image bearers who are being increasingly conformed to the image of God's Son (John 17:21; Rom. 8:29).