

## The Bible on Racism

By David de Bruyn

What is the Bible's attitude toward racism? This topic often has a lot more heat than light. Emotions are too often allowed to rule the roost whenever one speaks about race, instead of allowing the Bible to have the final say. Emotions are charged, with people either too eager to hear Bible teaching on it, or else sick and tired of hearing about racism. The fact of the matter is, it would be nice to hear the Bible's perspective to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Sadly, many have twisted the Bible over the years to teach weird and unbiblical things on race. Some taught that the fact that Israel practiced separation from the surrounding nations means that the races ought to be segregated. Some taught, and still teach, that a particular race is actually the lost tribes of Israel, and therefore ought to remain separate from all other races.

One cult teaches that all of us exist prior to coming to earth in a body, and if we are cowardly or bad – we end up in a black-skinned body, and if we are valiant and good, we end up in white skinned-bodies. Many have erroneously taught that the mark placed upon Canaan, and his curse, applies to black people. On the other hand, I once picked up a study Bible which taught that every major Bible character from Adam to Jesus was actually an African.

You also have portrayals of Jesus as a blue-eyed blonde European, instead of the dark-haired, dark-eyed, Semitic Jewish appearance he more than likely had. It is because of such teachings that many are negative toward Christianity today. They take the abuse of Scripture by some, and then throw the baby out with the bathwater. They condemn all of Christianity as being filled with prejudice because of the actions of a few.

Instead of twisting the Bible to make it exalt one race over another, and instead of pretending there is no such thing as different cultures and skin colours, let us go to the Bible and get God's perspective on the races and racism.

We might begin by asking, "Does the Bible classify people according to race?" The answer is both yes and no. The racial distinction made in Scripture is more of a national distinction. You see the distinction of Jew and Gentile, or Jew and Greek. The Bible knows nothing of black man, white man, red man, brown man. In fact, when God describes the diversity of people, He almost always describes them according to the language they spoke, and the nations or families they came from.

**Revelation 5:9** says: *"And they sung a new song, saying, 'Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.'"* Every tribe and language and people and nation. This is not a physical skin colour distinction, but a genealogical and linguistic distinction.

You might be interested to learn that the modern notion of races has been very much influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution. Not many people know that the full title of Darwin's

famed work is in fact *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*.

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century enthusiasm for Darwinism led to fuel for racial theories. It led to the slaughter of Aborigines in Australia so that their skulls could be exhibited as supposed evidence of the missing link. It led to the shameful exhibition of people from Africa like zoo exhibits as supposed examples of lesser-evolved humans.

Indeed, Adolph Hitler loved Darwin's theory, and classified the various peoples of the world according to how much ape he felt they still had in them. His anti-Semitism was driven by a belief in superior and inferior races. The bottom line is – Darwin's theory gave fuel to the idea that the races were actually humans in different stages of development. And such harm has been done as one race thought of itself as better than another.

White supremacists and black supremacists keep these beliefs going. They teach that their race is more developed, more intelligent, stronger, fitter. They propagate the notion that the races are almost different species of human. And when they supposedly have the agreement of science as proposing that man is in varying stages of development, they can infer that some men are superior to each other.

Of course, this thinking is very tempting for our proud hearts. Seeing your race as superior to another is probably the broadest, most general form of pride. See, I might regard my white race as superior to all others. But then within the white race, I can regard English-speaking whites as better than Russian-speaking whites. And then, within that group, I can decide that South African English-speaking whites are better than American English-speaking whites.

Then within that group, I can regard Johannesburgers as better than Capetonians. And from that group, I can narrow it down to the suburb I live in. And even there – the street I live in. And there – I am better than my neighbours. Till I am inside my own house – and I still regard myself as better than the others living in my house. That's the sinful, deceitful human heart which loves itself more than anything else.

Racism is just that desire to regard myself as better than others, expressed. Racism gives fuel to my never-quenched desire to be better than my neighbour. Racism feeds my sinful desire to feel superior to everyone else.

But this kind of approach to race is not the way the Bible sees it. The Bible does not portray races as superior or inferior to each other. The Bible does make distinctions. There is nothing sinful in recognising differences. How could we enjoy diversity, except if we admit it exists? One of the thrilling things about flying into South Africa after being abroad where the population is all very similar, is to just see the incredible diversity of people.

Diversity can be a good thing – and it is foolish to pretend we are all the same, when common sense shows we are different. But the key is to understand what that difference is. The Bible does not discriminate based on skin colour. But it does see differences between families of the

earth. The real question is: what does it do with those differences? And how does God instruct us to treat those differences?

Firstly, the Bible expects us to embrace its teaching regarding race. When Paul was preaching to a pagan Greek audience in Athens, he said the following:

*God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that He is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed any thing, seeing He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; and hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us.*

**Act 17:24-27**

Paul is trying to teach the Greeks that the notion of each nation having its own God, or each culture worshipping in its own way, is foolish, since men are in fact all created by the same God, from the same original man. He says God has made of one blood all nations of men. He then determined when and where these different nations would dwell.

Don't miss that phrase – “one blood.” Mankind is one blood. People would have us believe man sprouted up all over the world like different plants – and so we are all completely different from each other. We are like apples and oranges. But the Bible instead says we are all one blood. We were created from one man. We need to see the distinctions and differences between us in light of the overall truth – we are one blood.

Consider, for example, how this plays itself out in a family. One brother might look completely different from another. They may have totally different personalities. They may end up going in completely different directions. But their ongoing, innate sense that ‘we are one blood’ still binds them together. They do not pretend that they have no differences. They do not make-believe that they are exactly the same. They may at times, even emphasise the differences.

But what the Bible calls natural affection causes the brothers to love each other, in spite of the differences. When troubles come, your brother still turns out to be your friend, no matter how many arguments you have. It's that sense of one blood. Now does that mean that simply by agreeing that we are all one blood will help solve racial problems? No. Cain and Abel were one blood, and we know how that ended!

Humans understanding that we are one blood is not the final solution. However, it does help cut down much of the pride that comes from believing we are separate species of human, some of whom are better than others. In fact, it may help us to look at the Bible's clues about the origins of the various skin colours.

The Bible does not explicitly record where the different skin colours came from, because the Bible does not care, and neither should we. But it does take some time to explain how the various families and descendants of Noah spread over the earth. Again, the Bible's focus is on

the geographical dispersion of people. It is concerned with the various families of man, not with skin colour, hair type, or the shape of his eyes.

In fact, it's likely that many of the nations were made up of different skin colours. It's possible that outward differences simply started to occur as the various families of man moved to different climates on Earth. It's also possible that at the Tower of Babel, when God divided man by language, He may have changed the races as well. In the confusion of all those languages, it might have been easier to identify someone who looked similar to you than to identify a voice among all the cacophony of thousands of frantic, confused humans.

So God may have changed the physical appearance of people at Babel, or He may have allowed those changes to occur as man went to different climates. Either way, we come back to the same thought: all people are related to each other. We do come from one blood. All the families of the world can be traced back to Noah and his three sons.

And if the simple one-blood attitude of two brothers allows them to co-exist and help each other in spite of many differences, it is right that man ought to have the same one-blood attitude toward other men. So the Bible's first remedy for racism is to understand and believe what the Word of God says at face value – we are all from the same blood.

Secondly, the Bible expects us to treat the differences with realism. The Bible is alive. As such, it deals with real life. It gets into the nitty-gritties of it. The Bible does not sit on a sanitised pulpit with no knowledge of the grim realities of life. One of these realities is that culture makes one racial group very different from another, in many ways.

Sometimes these things are merely cosmetic – foods, customs of marriage and family, table manners, hospitality, when to stand or sit, who goes first, who goes last. But sometimes these differences are very deep indeed. They have to do with the very way we view life, our priorities, our focus. They have to do with our history and our identity.

The Bible does not expect us to merely sweep these things under the carpet. It is a kind of dishonesty, that is perhaps well-meaning, that wants us all to act like we have no differences at all. But there are differences. However, these differences need not be points of contention, they can be points of rejoicing.

But there will be times when the differences cause problems. Cultures clash. Ideals and philosophies are at odds. During these times, we need not childishly block our ears and cover our eyes to our disagreements and differences. Instead, we can, as Christians, approach the whole issue with the Spirit of God.

Some Christians seem to want us to have a collective group hug every time we differ, hoping that superficially agreeing that we are one will solve the issue. It will not always do that. In the early church, there was a real issue. The Greek-speaking members of the early church felt their widows were being neglected in favour of the Aramaic-speaking widows. Their complaint was one of clear discrimination.

The solution here was not to pretend that there was no difference, or to hide from the reality of having diversity within the church. Instead, with integrity, openness and fairness, they appointed godly men to take care of the problem in practical ways. That brings us to our third and main point: the Bible expects believers to overcome racism between each other.

I say believers, because there really is no final solution for racism in the world apart from Christ. All the world can do is try and arrange a truce between selfish people. Whether it be nations, races or even marriages – the world's wisdom is: 'You must both give a little, so you can both win a little.' There are boundaries and limitations, which both sides must respect and honour – sometimes at the risk of punishment, if people disobey those limitations.

This is how the world does things, and sadly, this thinking comes into the church as well. People say, 'We need to try and get equal rights and representation for the different groups in the church. Then each can have a voice to educate the others about their unique strong points so as to develop more understanding of each other.' The church ought to know better.

This is not peace. It is merely meeting the selfish desires of two groups enough to avoid a total blow-up. But future conflict is guaranteed, so long as we have not dealt with the heart of the matter – and that is the proud, selfish hearts of humans. Both groups still want their own way. They still want to be exalted. They are still sinning against each other in pride, even if it has been restrained for a time. And only the Gospel deals with this.

This is why we say that the Bible expects believers to overcome racism in their relationships with each other. Ephesians 2 deals with this issue. Now Ephesians 2 is not speaking about some sort of artificial reconciliation meeting. It is not a phony 'kiss and make-up session' or a 'hug, and let bygones be bygones' attitude. It deals with the reality of the racial divide that the early church had, and applies the Biblical solution.

The racial divide between Jew and Gentile was deep indeed. Jews regarded Gentiles as unclean scavenging dogs. Gentiles regarded Jews as religious hypocrites. Jewish ritual law made social fellowship with Gentiles just about impossible. The Jewish commercial instincts which had been refined in Babylon had made them into the money-lenders of the world. Gentiles were often obligated to borrow Jewish money – which made them despise them all the more.

The Jews prided themselves on being the chosen people of God, while the Greeks prided themselves on their culture, wisdom and learning. Once again – you see the root issue of racism is pride. From these two warring groups, though, God would make one group that would love each other to His glory.

How would God do it? Well, what God did and instructed the Gentiles at Ephesus is the same formula He expects of us today which will tear down the walls of partition between believers of different races. Paul begins by reminding us of the past:

*Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; that at*

*that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.*

**Ephesians 2:11-12**

Here, Paul is drilling down to cut the heart out of our pride. He says, don't forget the past. You, as Gentiles, were without a Messiah – who was promised to the Jews. You were aliens – outside the community of Israel. You were strangers to the covenants of promise, that is, there was no special blessing promised to Gentiles. Having no hope, you were essentially doomed to hell, and to top it off, *“without God in the world.”*

Now, how often do we non-Jews forget that at the time of Abraham, all of our ancestors, white, black, red and brown, were pagans worshipping the sun, moon, stars, and other idols. It gives us a good dose of humility when we remember that as Gentiles, we were not the focus of God. And yet, by His grace, we now find ourselves experiencing the grace of the Messiah through the Jewish people.

God is calling all of us Gentiles to repent of our pride – of our false belief that we are superior and worthy of God's blessings. God did the same thing with the other group – the Jews. The Jews boasted in their laws, rituals and commandments. But in Christ, all those rituals and ceremonies found their fulfilment. The shadows were no longer necessary once the truth in flesh had come – and again, God was stripping people of pride.

The Jews could no longer boast in their ceremonies because they too were now coming to God through one Mediator – Christ Jesus. The result was that neither side could boast; both ought to be humbled before God:

*For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in His flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in Himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.*

**Ephesians 2:14-16**

So God's plan is very wise. He first removes any room for boasting in both Jews and Gentiles. He then calls on all of us to repent of our pride and humble ourselves before Him and others. But there is another thing He calls on us to do. He calls on us to embrace a new identity – that of the church.

See, God did not say, “Ok, you Gentiles are now going to be part of my Jewish church. Nor did He tell Jews to become part of the Gentile club. He doesn't call them to be separate, but equal – tolerant of each other, but sitting on different sides of the church. No – this would not bring any glory to God. God does not work in such superficial, cosmetic ways. He calls on true, born-again believers to give up their old identity and embrace a new one.

That does not mean that Jews were to pretend they were not Jews, or Gentiles abandon their ways. They were to subordinate those identities to the greater identity – the Church. God

removes both divisions by removing their ground for boasting, and sets both on equal footing. There is no room to exalt yourself over another at the foot of the cross.

In effect, God produces a new race. He does not merely persuade different groups to no longer fight. He makes us truly one – part of one blood – no longer merely the one blood of Adam, but the precious blood of Christ. *“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light,”* (1 Peter 2:9).

And in this absolutely new relationship, there are rules for how to treat one another. Listen to Paul's instructions in Ephesians 4:

*I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*

**Ephesians 4:1-6**

The key here is the humility to forbear with each other in love. Paul says we need to maintain the unity that exists in Christ, not try to artificially create it. The unity is far deeper than the weak human will that tries to be friendly. This is a profound, spiritual bond, deeper than we can imagine. We do not have to create the unity. We have to acknowledge it is there in Christ, and then act like it.

To be proud, to be disrespectful, is fracturing God-given unity. To show partiality is to behave unlike the oneness that God has provided. **James 2** speaks very harshly about the deadness of a faith that singles people out for special treatment or is indifferent to others because of their social standing or other criteria.

Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan drives this home. To love your neighbour is to do for them as you would want done for you, in spite of racial or cultural differences. The Samaritan man was a racial enemy of the Jewish man he ministered to, but Jesus declared that he was the only one who was a neighbour to the man, even though two other Jewish men passed him.

So, the solution is fairly basic, though not always easy. The hard part is repenting of pride. It is hard to leave the boasting that you have perhaps been taught is merely a good form of pride in your culture. While that can exist, it very quickly turns ugly – and becomes a boasting, self-exalting kind of pride. But we need to see not our position in relation to other races – but our position before God.

When we see how destitute of hope we were, and how He has grafted us into His plan – the only correct reaction is humility. Seeing other forgiven Gentiles ought to fill us with a happy humility with each other, deeply grateful that we can all find mercy at the cross.

From that kind of humility we must treat each other in keeping with what we are – equal members of one body. There should be no one-upmanship between illuminated, Spirit-filled believers. They see that they are merely forgiven sinners.

So, we need to remind ourselves that we are one blood with all mankind. But that is not enough. Unbelievers will not solve all their racial problems merely by acknowledging that mankind is one family. True peace with man is only found when we are at peace with God.

When we have entered His family through personal faith in Jesus Christ, we are joined into one family, with a unity that transcends the closest possible human, physical ties. Acknowledging this fact causes us to subordinate our differences and embrace our commonality. And this will cause us to treat one another with the kind of love that characterises Christlikeness – Spirit-filled self-denial, that sacrificially loves others.