

Justice, Race and Scripture: A Theological Foundation

Redeemer Presbyterian Church West Side

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Theological Reflections on Race and Scripture

The past 18 months have seen a renewed awareness and interest in an issue that strikes at the heart of the gospel: racial justice. The church, a community of people whose primary identity is rooted in a shared adoption into the family of God through the reconciling work of Jesus, has both the resources and mandate to confront racism in our hearts, church family and broader human community. The purpose of this document is to provide a biblical framework to guide our work in the area of justice and race.

Foundation

Developing, teaching and embodying a biblical understanding of justice is core to the vocation of the church. The universal recognition and longing for justice¹ reflects the biblical teaching that the world was created by a God whose character reflects biblical justice (Psalm 89:14, Dt. 32:4) and who is a community existing in three equal, eternal and distinct persons. The God revealed in Scripture is “perfect unity in diversity and diversity in unity”² and therefore as redeemed image bearers the Christian community is to reflect this revealed image by being a “mutually loving, honoring and supporting diverse community. We glorify (God) in this.”³ The Book of Revelation reflects this created glory as it showcases a redeemed multicultural community “from every nation, tribe, people and language” worshipping at the throne of Jesus (Revelation 7:9-10).

The biblical narrative found between Genesis and Revelation reflects the human struggle to overcome the consequences of our rejection of God⁴ (Gen 3, Romans 1) and God’s gracious promise to one day restore the world. The reconciling work of Jesus fulfilled God’s promise to bring about a new creation (Isaiah 65:17-25, 2 Corinthians 5:17) releasing his followers into the world as ambassadors of reconciliation⁵, a communal mission characterized by Jesus as ‘salt and light’ (Matthew 5:13-16). Therefore to follow Jesus is to be animated by God’s vision of shalom (Luke 4:16-21) and to take seriously God’s command ‘to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with (our) God.’ (Micah 6:8)⁶

¹ “All people know that this strange thing we call justice, this longing for things to be put right, remains one of the greatest human goals and dreams. Christians believe that this is so because all humans have heard, deep within themselves, the echo of a voice which calls us to live like that. The voice goes on, calling us, beckoning us, luring us to think that there might be such a thing as justice...even though we find it so elusive. We're like moths trying to fly to the moon. We all know there's something called justice, but we can't quite get to it.” NT Wright See also Tim Keller’s *Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory* (<https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/a-biblical-critique-of-secular-justice-and-critical-theory>)

² Keller, *The Bible and Race*, pg 1

³ Irwyn Ince, *The Beautiful Community*, pg. 12

⁴ The spiritual death of Adam and Eve is shown by their alienation from one another, symbolized by sewing fig leaves together for barriers, and their separation from God, symbolized by hiding among the trees. Sin is transgression of divine boundaries, which results in alienation, deteriorating ecology, and physical death.” Waltke, *Genesis*, pg 103

⁵ 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20 We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. (2 Corinthians 5)

⁶ Other Scripture that reflect God’s heart for this call: Psalm 146:7-9; Deuteronomy 10:17-18

Defining Terms

Biblical Justice

The human struggle to overcome the destructive nature of sin must be understood in the context of biblical justice⁷. The Hebrew word for justice found in Micah 6:8, Psalm 146 and Deuteronomy 10 (*mishpat*) occurs more than 200 times in the Old Testament and its most basic meaning is to “treat people equitably.”⁸ For example Leviticus 24:22: “You are to have the same law (*mishpat*) for the foreigner and the stranger. I am the Lord your God.” Also, “Do not show partiality in judging...Do not be afraid of anyone, for judgment (*mishpat*) belongs to God. (Dt 1:17) The word *mishpat* also means to give people their rights. Two instances where *mishpat* is used as “give people their due” is Deut 18:3 (the due of the priests) and Deut 21:17 (the due of the firstborn). The standard biblical Hebrew dictionary (BDAG) says when *mishpat* is used this way, it means “right, privilege, due”. So to do justice in light of this word means *giving people their due - whether punishment, protection or care*⁹. This principle is to be universally applied in all of our relationships as part of God’s command to love our neighbors and in particular is commonly connected to four vulnerable classes: widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. (Zechariah 7:10-11). In other words those who have very little if any social power. So to ignore or neglect this group is not a lack of charity, but an act of injustice.

The other Hebrew word commonly associated with justice in the Old Testament (*tzadeqah*) refers to a life of right relationships. If *mishpat* is rectifying justice (punishing wrongdoers and caring for victims of injustice) then *tzadeqah* is primary justice reflecting God’s moral character expressed in his law¹⁰, which if prevalent would make rectifying justice unnecessary because humanity would be ‘right’ with God, one another and creation. This is the concept of shalom which Nicholas Wolterstorff describes as:

*the human being dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature... (a peace which) is not merely the absence of hostility, not merely being in right relationship (but) enjoyment in one’s relationship*¹¹

Therefore the world was created to reflect God’s vision of shalom, which was spoiled by humanity’s rebellion against God leaving all of creation groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time (Romans 8). This has left the world with all forms of pain and injustice, one form of which is racism.

⁷ Tim Keller lists four facets of biblical justice:

- a) Equal treatment
- b) Generosity
- c) Special advocacy for the poor
- d) Individual and corporate responsibility (see <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/justice-in-the-bible/>)

⁸ Keller, *Generous Justice*, pg 3

⁹ *Ibid*, pg 4

¹⁰ Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, pg. 415

¹¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*

Racism

Racism is the personal and corporate sin¹² of viewing and treating others as inferior based on ethnic and/or cultural characteristics (i.e. skin color) that undermine the gospel's message (Galatians 2:14) and violate the gospel's vision (Revelation 7:9-10). Racism falls short of God's will (Ephesians 2:14-15) and glory (Romans 3:23) and violates his law (Leviticus 19:9-18, Mark 12:31) and character (1 John 4:7-12).

A biblical treatment of the sin of racism requires an understanding of the difference between race and ethnicity which are distinct ways of grouping human beings¹³. Ethnicity is often based on shared characteristics like common ancestry, heritage, culture, language, cuisine, and region. The Bible itself distinguishes different groups of people by nation, tribe, and language (Rev 7:9). Race, on the other hand, is understood by many contemporary scholars as a modern concept that was created approximately 500 years ago as a way to justify race-based slavery and colonialism. The modern idea of race postulated that humanity could be divided into four or five races, based largely on skin color, that existed in a hierarchy of superior and inferior races. While both ethnicity and race can be tools of prejudice and "othering" and oppression, it is helpful to recognize the distinct dynamics of each.

Racism, as manifested in our society, is antithetical to the Kingdom of God. In particular we see the sin of racism in light of the following biblical truths:

1. God's Image

The Bible teaches that every human being has equal dignity and worth because they are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-28). One implication of this teaching is reflected in the reminder that God is no respecter of persons (Deuteronomy 10:17), the context of which is a "discussion of race and class prejudice."¹⁴ (God) shows no partiality... He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing" (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). Also we find that racism dishonors God's image by calling 'common' that which God has called 'clean' (Acts 10:15).

John Calvin, reflecting on this principle, wrote that "great parts of [the human race] are most unworthy if they are judged by their own merit. (But) Scripture helps in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider what men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love.....Therefore, whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him.... [W]e remember not to consider men's evil intention but to look upon the image of God in them, which cancels and effaces their transgressions, and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them."

2. God's Law

Jesus reflected Calvin's insight in his answer summarizing the law of God as the commandments to love God and love our neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40). Jesus elaborates on the definition of neighbor in the story of a man who "meets the physical and material needs of a man of a different race and religion from

¹² The Bible acknowledges that humans have both individual and corporate responsibility. Most secular theories of justice emphasize only one or the other and are therefore reductionistic, but the Bible recognizes both. Biblical justice is neither Marxist, which says all injustice is structural, nor Enlightenment libertarian, which says unequal outcomes are solely due to individual responsibility. Rather, the biblical view understands that life is complex and that unequal outcomes can be due to a range of factors that encompass the individual (Proverbs 6:6-7; 23:21) and corporate (Proverbs 13:23, 18:23; Exodus 22:21-27) and environmental. For more on this, see Tim Keller, *Justice in the Bible* (<https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/justice-in-the-bible/>) and *Racism and Corporate Evil* (<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/racism-and-corporate-evil>).

¹³ See also Tim Keller, *The Sin of Racism* (<https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/the-sin-of-racism/>)

¹⁴ Tim Keller, *The Sin of Racism*, pg 1

himself.¹⁵ (Luke 10:25-37) Jesus then commands his followers to go and do likewise, an echo of Micah 6:8. God's law is always an extension of his love for us, and our obedience to his law reflects love back to God and one another. We find this principle in our own tradition.

Our tradition (PCA) asserts that the WCF and its Larger and Shorter Catechisms reflect the system of doctrine taught in Scripture. In the section containing exposition of the 10 Commandments, Question 93 of the catechism answers the question "What is the moral law" this way: *The moral law is the declaration of the will of God to mankind....promising life upon the fulfilling, and threatening death upon the breach of it.* In other words, as we see in Jesus' story, the law is not just an outline on what is prohibited, but the promotion of what preserves and promotes life. For example John Calvin's reflection on the commandment "Do Not Murder" is instructive:

The purport of this commandment is that since the Lord has bound the whole human race by a kind of unity, the safety of all ought to be considered as entrusted to each. In general, therefore, all violence and injustice, and every kind of harm from which our neighbour's body suffers, is prohibited. Accordingly, we are required faithfully to do what in us lies to defend the life of our neighbour; to promote whatever tends to his tranquillity, to be vigilant in warding off harm, and, when danger comes, to assist in removing it.

So when Jesus exhorts his followers to fulfil God's law by loving their neighbors he is affirming this principle of promoting life through "treating people of other races, classes and groups with the same amount of care, respect and love we would give to ourselves or members of our communities."¹⁶ Therefore racism violates God's command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

3. God's Gift (Cross)

The good news of Jesus' death on the cross is that it has achieved peace with God and peace with one another (Romans 5:1-2). Followers of Jesus therefore have been adopted into God's family, clothed with Christ and are to boast only in God's saving grace, celebrating that

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3)

Galatians 2 is a case study of how it is much easier to affirm the promise than embody it. We are told that Peter has fallen back into a refusal to eat with Gentile believers. Paul does not appeal to him on the grounds of failure to love his neighbor or honor the image of God (though he could have). Instead he says that attitudes of racial and cultural superiority "are not in line with the gospel." They violate the good news that because of the atoning work of Jesus on the cross we are all sinners who have received God's grace. Paul's basic argument is that God's table fellowship with us has nothing to do with our race or culture (it is based on grace) and therefore for Peter to refuse table fellowship with others because of their race and culture is a violation of the gospel's message and power.

This appeal is at the heart of Redeemer's historic understanding of how the heart works, and therefore how it changes, which is active meditation on God's gift to us through Jesus' death on the cross. In this example Paul exposes the "spiritual roots of racism (which) is a rejection of the gospel of salvation and a return to justification by our moral efforts or pedigree"¹⁷. When the cross no longer is at the heart of our self-understanding our hearts will seek out other ways to justify ourselves, devising ways to feel superior,

¹⁵ Ibid, pg 1

¹⁶ Ibid, pg 1

¹⁷ The Bible and Race, Keller, pg 5

more acceptable, and better than others, including our racial, ethnic or cultural differences. Like all sin this requires repenting of the ways we have forgotten God's gracious acceptance of us through the costly sacrifice of Jesus.

It is worth noting that the cross is a revelation of God's justice as well as his love. God poured out his righteous anger on Jesus because of the way sin results in so much injustice. John Stott is worth quoting at length here:

[A]s we have repeatedly noted throughout this book, the cross is a revelation of God's justice as well as of his love. That is why the community of the cross should concern itself with social justice as well as with loving philanthropy. It is never enough to have pity on the victims of injustice, if we do nothing to change the unjust situation itself. Good Samaritans will always be needed to succour those who are assaulted and robbed; yet it would be even better to rid the Jerusalem-Jericho road of brigands. Just so Christian philanthropy in terms of relief and aid is necessary, but long-term development is better, and we cannot evade our political responsibility to share in changing the structures which inhibit development. Christians cannot regard with equanimity the injustices which spoil God's world and demean his creatures. Injustice must bring pain to the God whose justice flared brightly at the cross; it should bring pain to God's people too.

Contemporary injustices take many forms. They are international (the invasion and annexation of foreign territory), political (the subjugation of minorities), legal (the punishment of untried and unsentenced citizens), racial (the humiliating discrimination against people on the ground of race or colour), economic (the toleration of gross North-South inequality and of the traumas of poverty and unemployment), sexual (the oppression of women), educational (the denial of equal opportunity for all) or religious (the failure to take the gospel to the nations). Love and justice combine to oppose all these situations. If we love people, we shall be concerned to secure their basic rights as human beings, which is also the concern of justice. The community of the cross, which has truly absorbed the message of the cross, will always be motivated to action by the demands of justice and love.¹⁸

The cross therefore reminds us that we are fully and unconditionally loved, which when experienced and applied mitigates the need to find our sense of value in things like our ethnicity or race. The cross also humbles us, reminding us of the depth of our sin, mitigating the kind of self-righteous displayed by Peter in Galatians 2. Finally the cross reflects God's holy justice and love, motivating followers of Jesus to oppose all forms of injustice.

4. God's Power (Resurrection)

At the end of Galatians, Paul picks up the topic of circumcision and uncircumcision from Galatians 2 where they were used as metaphors for racial and ethnic differences as a way of qualifying us before God. But instead of appealing to the cross this time he alludes to the resurrection: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation" (Galatians 6:15). The implication is that racial and cultural distinctions count for nothing as a way of approving us before God, and that what ultimately matters is what was ushered in when Jesus rose from the dead. The new creation is a renewed material world, wiped clean of all death, suffering and tears, war and injustice, sin and shame. Herman Ridderbos puts it this way in his commentary on Galatians 6:15

New includes everything that has been given in and through Christ - the new reality of the kingdom of God. Through Christ this new thing is not merely future-eschatological (Rev 21:1-5, 3:12 and Mark

¹⁸ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, pg 285

*14:25) but is already present, is already in man. This new creation is first of all a gift, but it brings its task with it. This...then is the one thing that counts.*¹⁹

This task of modeling and working for Christ's new creation brings us full circle back to God's original vision for creation in Genesis 1 and 2, and echoed by Isaiah who describes that new creation (Isaiah 65:25), and speaks of the nations and kings of the earth uniting before God (Isaiah 60:1-7). As noted above John picks up on this image with his vision of God's future consisting of "every tongue, tribe, people and nation" (Revelation 7:9).

Conclusion

The current conversation around race confronts the church with two opposite temptations. One is to allow the polarized and political nature of the conversations and its highly charged lexicon to engulf and divide us. The other is to avoid the hard work of self-reflection in the area of racism because of, among other things, fear. But Scripture reminds us that the sin of racism is first and foremost a gospel issue, not a political or cultural one. And that the church through its union with Christ, empowerment of the Spirit and resource of God's word is the community where the moral courage and clarity are available to confront the principalities and powers of this world, including the evil of racism. And as such is to both enjoy and model God's vision for the world where we learn to love one another not despite our differences, but because of them.

In light of the above the Redeemer West Side Session affirms the following:

1. God, who is diversity in unity, created the world to reflect unity in diversity (Revelation 7:9-10).
2. Humanity rejected God (Gen 3, Rom 1) replacing unity in diversity with walls of hostility (Eph 2) leading to alienation from God, one another and nature.
3. Jesus' life, death and resurrection ushered in God's kingdom fulfilling God's promise to restore our relationship to God, one another and nature²⁰.
4. The church is the Spirit empowered community (Acts 2) that is to embody God's vision for the world and actively work to make disciples of all nations as ambassadors of reconciliation, bringing about God's Kingdom vision on earth as it is in heaven (Ephesians 4:1-16)²¹.
5. Part of this call is to pursue justice in all areas of life, both inside and outside the church, personal and corporate, including justice across racial differences, demonstrating to the world how in Christ unity in diversity is possible.
6. Given our belief that racism is a violation of God's law and character and therefore offensive to Him, RWS church leadership is committed to equipping and mobilizing our congregation in pursuit of racial justice as part of its stewardship of our vision to pursue shalom.

¹⁹ Ridderbos, Galatians, 226

²⁰ "In Jesus Christ, who is both the Son of God and the Image of God, we are restored to our humanity, as true images of our Creator, and more than images; we become God's sons in his Son, by the bond of a new covenant." (Henri Blocher, pg 94)

²¹ "Through Jesus Christ, who died for sinners and was raised from death, God is creating something entirely new, not just a new life for individuals for a new society. Paul sees an alienated humanity being reconciled, a fractured humanity being united, even a new humanity being created. It is a magnificent vision." John Stott, Ephesians, pg 146