

On Racism and Genealogies

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There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. Galatians 3:28-29

Racism. It's an ugly word. Prejudice, mistreatment and hatred, based on race. Sadly, history is replete with examples of race-based oppression and atrocity committed even on the largest and systematic scale. It is an evil completely incompatible with the gospel, but here to stay in this present age.

My country's practice of slavery is a long and shameful episode in American history. Preachers in pulpits across the south likely took their congregants to Ephesians 6 or Colossians 3 and 4, encouraging slaves to obey their masters with sincerity of heart, and masters to treat their slaves with dignity and respect. This is no endorsement of slavery, but instruction to Christians on how to conduct themselves in structures of authority and power that they may be powerless to change. Therefore, such instruction is equally applicable to the present-day workplace. However, slavery as it was practiced in America was nothing less than systematic kidnapping, abuse and exploitation of human beings for profit. Families were torn apart and destroyed. It was human trafficking on an enormous scale. I know there were always dissenting voices condemning the evil practice, but those voices were too few and lacked the strength to avert civil war.

My own Japanese American heritage has not been unscathed by the ugliness of racism. During the second World War, American citizens of Japanese descent were forcibly dispossessed of property and rights as citizens, and moved to internment camps across the country. Thousands of Japanese American men, determined to prove their loyalty, chose to fight for the American cause in Europe. Their service was segregated, exceptional and eventually highly decorated, but so many never returned to their families, whose sufferings were just beginning. Sacrifices should be remembered and honored, but war never romanticized or glorified. It is a power of last resort.

The problem of racism notwithstanding, the world's population is comprised of a great diversity of peoples, cultures and languages. People take pride and interest in their genealogy or ancestry. They want to know who they are and where they come from. They want to know what makes them distinct as a people. This interest ranges from natural curiosity to preoccupation. For most, it is enough to hear stories from living relatives and fill in some blanks on the family tree. Others search through historical documentation to go further back. Still others use genetic testing to verify ancestral relationship to certain people groups, their location and movements in history, or to estimate the ethnic mixture of an individual. While self-discovery of this kind is fascinating and satisfying to many, the Bible points us to a spiritual lineage of faith, which is of far greater importance.

Redemption history is world history, and it can be understood as God's gracious action to call out of all the peoples of the world a people for himself, as a treasured possession, that they might be his people, and he might be their God. When God began in earnest, he started with a man, Abraham, who became a nation, Israel, through which came one particular offspring or descendant, the Savior of all peoples, who is Christ Jesus the Lord. God's call on Abraham's life took the form of promises so grand in

scope, it is difficult to imagine Abraham grasping their full import. Nevertheless, we read of Abraham that he “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” (Romans 4:3, from Genesis 15:6) Thus Paul writes, “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.” (Galatians 3:7) He is spiritual forefather to all who walk in the same footsteps or pattern of faith. And we can understand what the apostle means when he writes, “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring ...” (Romans 9:6-7) It is a spiritual lineage of faith that counts. “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Galatians 3:29) This has always been God’s plan, that he would justify or make his people to be in a righteous standing before him through faith. God is distinguishing between people. He is culling out his own, not on the basis of race, gender, socio-economic status, or good works, but on the basis of faith. And that divine activity continues today in all parts of the world.

And what exactly did God promise to Abraham? God promised to bless Abraham saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” (Genesis 12:3) According to Paul, this was Scripture pre-announcing the gospel of Christ to Abraham. (see Galatians 3:8) God promised Abraham land in which his descendants would dwell. (see Genesis 12:7, 13:14-15, 17:8) God promised Abraham descendants that number like the stars of the sky and the sand of the seashore. (see Genesis 13:16, 15:5, 22:17, Hebrews 11:12) God promised that he would make Abraham not just into a great nation, (see Genesis 12:2) but a multitude of nations, and changed his name from Abram to Abraham to reflect the scale of the promise. (see Genesis 17:15) It soon becomes obvious that these promises could never find their ultimate fulfillment in ethnic Israel, but point us to a great multitude of spiritual descendants from all the nations, who will inherit not just the land between the great rivers, but the entire earth! Finally, God promised Abraham

that the fulfillment of the promises would come to and through one particular offspring or descendant, Jesus Christ, fellow heir of the promises with the saints, and the Savior of the world. (see Galatians 3:16, Romans 8:17)

We can wonder just how clearly Abraham saw the Christ. Probably not any more clearly than he saw the fulfillment of all the other related promises. Instead, Abraham simply trusted that God was able to deliver on all that he had promised, whatever that might look like. (see Romans 4:21) The man of faith trusted that his God would provide. But for those of us who live in history on this side of the Cross, who have the complete testimony concerning the Christ, how without excuse is this generation not to believe! I suppose Abraham did see the very beginning of what was promised in the birth of his son, Isaac, but Scripture states plainly that Abraham died in faith not having received the things promised. He lived as a foreigner and stranger in the very land of his inheritance, dwelling as a temporary resident in tents, but looking forward to a heavenly country, and a permanent residence, a city with foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (see Hebrews 11:13-16) And we are no less than Abraham in this regard, although I fear we have become far too familiar and at home in the world, too permanent in our thinking. We know that glory awaits, and this is precisely what should allow us to give our lives away for the cause of Christ, but we don't want to miss out on everything this life has to offer. So, we withhold. We hedge and protect. We spend our time, energies and resources on our pleasures, and we avoid suffering at all costs. And not just suffering. We can't stand to even be uncomfortable or inconvenienced. But how can this not limit what God wants to accomplish in and through us? I include myself in the indictment.

I have heard unbelievers take such bitter exception to the perceived exclusivity and narrowness of Christianity: "How can faith in Jesus be the only way to God? Why

must Christians be right, and everyone else wrong?" But the better question is this: "Why, of all the things God could look for in order to distinguish his people, did God choose faith?" And the answer is that God has established the narrowness of faith in Christ so that all the promises made to Abraham and others long ago, of which we are heirs, might rest on his grace, to the praise and glory of God! (see Romans 4:16) All religious efforts to win God's favor and acceptance are insulting, because they attempt to rob him of his glory and diminish the perfect sufficiency of his provision in Christ. The truth is that all of us bear our likeness to Adam. We carry his broken spiritual genetic code. We are all sinners and in need of Christ alone. This is what makes us the same before God, regardless of the color of our skin. And Christ, our good shepherd, is bringing in his own by faith from among the nations. There is no racism in God's eternal kingdom come, but there is a beautiful diversity of people united by their faith in Christ and their love for one another. You can travel the globe, and wherever you find faith in Jesus, there you will find the same Spirit at work in his people. Jesus says, "So there shall be one flock, one shepherd." (John 10:16) God has clearly chosen some from every tribe, nation and tongue, and this is hardly narrow or exclusive. It is the picture we are given of heaven.

And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." Revelation 5:9-10