

RACISM

“Of one blood all nations”

Key question

How should Christians respond to racism in our culture?

Key text

Acts 17:26

“God hath made of one blood all nations.”

Key Definition

Racism

Racism is a preference defined by an irrational fear that is mixed with social and cultural power and is focused on a person’s race.

Introduction

1. American society today, more than any other culture in history, is painfully aware of and shamed by individual and systemic episodes of racism. Why is this so?
2. This sensitivity is rooted in ideals which ultimately reflect a Biblical view of humanity that sees no class distinction between races. If this is true, why does the Bible not condemn slavery?

A. Racism must be fought on two fronts.

1. **Personal** Racism is the preferential treatment of one race or ethnic group over another.
2. **Systemic** Racism is the combination of ethnic prejudice with political economic power.
3. Key term
 - a. We all need to have **discernment** in our relationships with people. Discernment enables us to make wise choices in our associations.
 - b. We all have amoral **preferences** in relationships.
 - c. When our preferences in relationships are accompanied by irrational fears we have **prejudices**.
 - d. When our prejudices are mixed with social and cultural power we have unjust **discrimination**.

- e. When that discrimination becomes focused on a race it is **racism**, - when focused on a sex it is sexism, etc.

Personal Preferences	Irrational Prejudice	Unjust Discrimination
tastes, styles, etc.	Preferences + a judgmental attitude	Prejudice + power to shape social systems
<i>This is to be welcomed.</i>	<i>This is to be tolerated.</i>	<i>This is to be eliminated.</i>

1. **Personal preferences** are neither good nor evil as long as they are “personal”. When my “personal preferences” are exported as God’s preferences they become abusive and evil to those who have different “personal” preferences.
2. **Irrational prejudice** is evil not because it is prejudiced but because it is an irrational fear. There is a rational prejudice that is a part of discernment and should be encouraged as a virtue of mature wisdom. We must tolerate but not encourage irrational prejudices.
3. **Unjust discrimination** is the coupling of irrational prejudice with political power and applied to the social culture. Discernment of good and evil will involve discrimination. It is the “unjust” discrimination that is the problem. Public policy and law can address unjust discrimination.

4. Racism can be divided into three categories.

- a. Overt political discrimination.
 1. Genocide
 2. Slavery
 3. Racially tainted laws
- b. Covert public discrimination.
 1. Economic ostracization
 2. Media stereotyping
 3. Educational and political districting
- c. Personal discrimination.
 1. Conscience
 - a. Supremacy
 - b. Separation
 2. Subconscious

B. The discussion of race problems in America must be sensitive to the following points.

1. The real race problem is with the human race.

- a. Every nation and culture in history has experienced ethnic, racial, and gender discrimination.
- b. Human nature seems to be plagued by an impulse to social injustice through racial and ethnic discrimination.
- c. This suggests that any proposed solution to racial injustice must not neglect the problems inherent in human nature.

- d. Proposed solutions that seek to simply change the systems of society (Media, Government, Education, etc.) without addressing personal attitudes is bound to be frustrated.

2. **American culture is unique.**

- a. It has welcomed people from differing races and cultures and promised to grant them equal rights. Few nations have welcomed ethnic diversity as has America.
- b. It strives to be a society free of unjust discrimination based on race.
- c. It is shamed by its inability to be free from unjust discrimination based on race. Most multi-ethnic cultures do not share the degree of shame over racism that exists in America.

3. **In any society the majority subculture and / or the historically formative subculture will tend to set the parameters of success and failure in its socio-economic systems.**

- a. It is the challenge of minority groups to:
 - 1. find some way to conform to the broader culture
 - 2. adapt to the broader culture and its socio-economic patterns
 - 3. refine the broader culture through its presence
 - 4. recognize and avoid the inherent tendency to acquire a victim status
- b. It is the responsibility of the majority culture in the American model to:
 - 1. respect the rights of minority subcultures
 - 2. seek to understand and appreciate the value of the contributions of minority subcultures to the broader American experience.
 - 3. make it possible for minorities to participate successfully in the broader culture as much as it is reasonably possible.
 - 4. recognize and avoid the inherent tendency to abuse the privileges that come with power.

4. **Any minority subculture should avoid the following temptations.**

- a. **Adopting a victim mentality.**
 - 1. People who see themselves as victims seldom get better.
 - 2. People who see themselves as “victims” tend to be bitter and find their identity in being victims.
- b. **Accepting special economic or social privileges while neglecting personal responsibility.**
 - 1. This encourages inferiority feelings among those who receive such privileges.
 - 2. This encourages a sense of injustice and resentment on the part of those who feel forced to grant such privileges.
 - 3. This discourages responsible self-improvement and encourages victim status.
- c. **Reducing every disappointment and painful experience to racism or abuse by the majority culture.**
 - 1. While racism is a cause in much of the inequality in society it is not always the cause and often is not the only or primary cause of inequality.
 - 2. Differences in ethnic, cultural styles and strengths suggest that minorities will often be at a disadvantage when being forced to play the home field of a majority culture.

C. Issues that promote racism must be addressed if we are to solve the problem.

1. **Secularism** with its ethical vacuum encourages the powerful majority to exploit minorities. Racism is attacked when we become more ethically responsible.
2. Ethnic purity and **multiculturalism** encourage segregation on the part of minorities. Ethnic pride, withdrawal, and tribalism tend to work against the healing of racist wounds.
3. **Preferential social programs** that involve racial quotas should be avoided if at all possible because:
 - a. The sense of reverse discrimination through quotas fosters a perception of injustice and resentment on the part of the majority subculture.
 - b. Racial quotas covertly discourage self respect, self confidence, and self initiative on the part of minorities.
 - c. Racial quotas suggest that indeed one race is incapable of competing head to head with another and is therefore in some way inferior.
 - d. Note: The special advantages that certain subcultures have over others in “the race” are best mediated by finding ways to make all groups equally competitive without assuring any particular outcome of “the race.”
4. **Political correctness** while intending to express compassion and sensitivity can have the effect of limiting honest dialogue and freedom of speech.
5. **Fear** of those who are “different” is solved by positive exposure.
6. **Ignorance** of those who are different than ourselves often fosters unwarranted assumptions and fears. Education of different cultures is an important part of healing.

D. **Biblical principles that instruct us in addressing problems of racial inequality.**

1. **Lk.17:1-3** suggests that those who are with power in a situation bear some responsibility for not abusing those who are vulnerable. The term “little ones” in this text refers to children and in principle to all who are vulnerable before those who are in power.
2. **Acts 6:1-7** suggests that the best way to solve complaints of social injustice is to empower representatives from subcultures that feel unjustly treated. In this text the Hebrew leaders appointed Greek overseers to administer goods and services to Greeks who were feeling neglected by the Jewish majority.
3. **Gal.3:28** “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
4. **Acts 15:22-29** indicates that the Gentiles in the early church were expected to conform to some Jewish cultural patterns but that the Jews were to exercise forbearance and grant respect to those who’s lives were limited in terms of their Jewish sentiments.

SLAVERY

A. **The Biblical record openly condemns racism but not slavery as an institution.**

1. This is not to suggest that Christians can use the Bible to justify slavery.
2. This does suggest that Christian ethics can operate in a wide spectrum of social systems, including societies that practice slavery.

B. **The discussion of race relations in American culture must be initiated by both minorities and the majority in our culture.**

1. The church should be willing to take the lead in these discussions.
2. The fact that churches tend to be segregated is a function of a number of factors.
 - a. Racial prejudice and discrimination on the part of whites and blacks.
 - b. The desire of the black community to maintain a sense of ethnic identity within the broader culture.
 - c. The radical differences in cultural tastes and styles of worship and teaching between ethnic groups.

C. The following arguments were used by some Christians during the civil war to justify slavery.

1. **Slavery seems to be divinely sanctioned among the patriarchs.**
 - a. Gen.9:24-27 Noah's curse upon Canaan was slavery.
 - b. Gen.24:35 The Scripture says that the Lord blessed Abraham by multiplying his slaves.
 - c. Abraham received, possessed, and willed slaves to his children as property. Gen.12:5,16;14:14; 16:1-9; 20:14; 24:35-36; 26:13-14
 - d. Gen.47:15-25 Joseph was commanded by God to buy his own people as slaves for Pharaoh.
2. **Slavery seems to be incorporated into Israel's national constitution.**
 - a. Lev.25:44-46 Israelites were allowed to take foreign slaves.
 - b. Ex.12:44-45 Israel held both bond (slaves) and free servants.
 - c. Ex.21; Lev.25 Israelites could sell themselves and their families for limited periods of time.
 - d. Ex.21:20-21,26-27 Slaves were treated as the master's money.
 - e. Ex.21:2-4 Slaves who were sold could not take their mates with them if the mate belonged to the master's family.
 - f. Lev.25:44-46 God clearly directed Israel to buy servants from foreign nations and to hold them as property in perpetuity.
3. **Slavery seems to be recognized and tolerated by Jesus Christ and the apostles.**
 - a. It is estimated that one third of the Roman empire consisted of slaves, many of whom were poorly treated, yet Jesus says nothing against the institution.
 - b. The apostles approved of slavery but disapproved of its abuses - Eph.6:5-9; Col.3:22-25; I Tim.6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10; I Pet.2:18-19. To admonish those who abuse the institution of slavery is not to abolish that institution. To exhort people to submit to Nero is not to endorse his policies.
 - c. The apostles teach that the church has no authority to interfere with slavery as a political or economic system.
 - d. The distinctions made between master and slave are not an impediment to faith and spiritual freedom and are thus insignificant - Gal.3:28; I Cor.12:13; Col.3:11.
 - e. Slaveholders were accepted and affirmed not only as church members, but also as church leaders.
 - f. The apostles gave no exhortation that Christian masters should free their slaves, but said rather that slaves should remain in their existing state - I Cor.7:20-24.

- g. In I Tim.6:1-6 Paul declares that the doctrine of slavery is based on “the words of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- h. Paul’s own example with the sending back of Onesimus (Philemon’s slave) to his master even after he had run away. Philemon.

4. **Slavery seems to be in some cases, a merciful institution.**

- a. In many cultures the alternative would be the extermination of a people taken in war.
- b. Slavery has brought many people into contact with the gospel.

D. The so-called slavery of the patriarchies in no way justifies the system of slavery in early American history.

1. Slavery was not initiated by European white males but it was their materialistic greed, sense of cultural superiority, and manipulation of Scripture that encouraged the horror of the middle passage from Africa to America and the enslavement of Africans in America.
 - a. Slavery was widely practiced in Africa between tribes long before Europeans exploited this phenomena of African culture for their own prophet.
 - b. Many Africans were eager participants in the slave trade, motivated by greed and disrespect for their enemies from other tribes.
 - c. In many ways African culture seemed and was primitive to “Christian” Europeans. This tended to encourage feelings of superiority on the part of many Europeans.
2. The Biblical curse on Canaan (Gen.9:25) can not be applied to African American slaves.
 - a. Noah (not God) predicts slavery but does not prescribe it.
 - b. National subjection, not individual bondage is prophesied.
 - c. Africans are no more Canaanites than are Grecians, Romans, Persians or Assyrians.
 - d. Canaan's posterity was to become subject to those of Shem (the Jews) not Americans.
 - e. This prophecy was fulfilled in Canaan’s subjection to Israel (Deut.20:10-18).
3. Servitude under Abraham was not slavish but a position of privilege.
 - a. It included circumcision and the benefits of the community.
 - b. In Gen.13 wives and children were also listed as property along with servants, suggesting that something less than abuse was assumed.
 - c. The Hebrew words used for “slave”, “buy”, and “sell” can be understood in the sense of “servant” more than “slave.”
3. Abraham’s morality cannot simply be copied by us today otherwise we should practice polygamy and concubinage.

E. God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt shows that God hates and condemns slavery.

1. Deut.26:6-8 God heard the cry of the oppressed and delivered them from their slavery.
2. Egyptian bondage and American Slavery had common characteristics.
 - a. One nation enslaves another race.
 - b. Slavery originated in kidnapping and was involuntary.
 - c. Slave labor is unrequited.
 - d. Harsh and oppressive rules and punishments are employed.

- e. Efforts are put forth to retard the growth of the slaves population, lest they become too powerful.
- f. The number of slaves was about three million.

F. Hebrew servitude in the time of Moses was voluntary, merciful, and of benefit to the servant; it was not slavery as we know it from American history.

1. Hebrew people offered themselves to become servants as a security against poverty - Ex.21:2-6; Lev.25:39-43; Deut.15:12.
2. Hebrew servitude was a benevolent institution, a kindness to the poor or oppressed - Ex.21:20-21,26-27; 22:21; 23:9; Lev.19:18,34; 25:42-43; Deut.27:19.
3. A servant could be redeemed at any time by a next of kin who put up money for him - Lev.25:47-52.
4. In the seventh year, the sabbatical, and in the jubilee year all servants were automatically freed - Ex.21:2-6; Lev.25:10.
5. Servants took full part in religious ceremonies and vacation days - Ex.20:10; 23:12; 12:44; Lev.25:4-6; Deut.12:11-12.
6. Servants were instructed in morality and religion with full membership in the covenant - Gen.17:12; Deut.16:9-14; 31:10-13.
7. Servants were entitled to the same civil and religious rights as masters and had equal legal protection - Lev.24:22; Num.15:15-16,29; 9:14; Deut.1:16-17; Lev.19:15; 24:22.
8. Strangers who came into Israel in the role of servants were to be circumcised, become members of the covenant, and thus be eligible for all the above humanitarian benefits - Gen.17:9-14,23,27; Deut.29:10-13.
9. The law required that runaway servants not be returned to their masters; they were thus legally protected from oppressive masters - Deut.23:15-16.

G. Israel's history and the prophetic oracles confirm that oppressive slavery did not exist in Israel; God would have condemned it, had it existed.

1. There is no evidence that Israel was ever involved in holding foreigners as slaves.
2. Jeremiah links Israel's exile to her failure to give the sabbatical liberty to her servants - Jer.34:8-20.
3. The ethical teaching given to Israel with respect to the general treatment of all peoples would work against abusive servitude.

H. Neither Jesus nor the apostles approved of nor condoned slavery.

1. Servitude no longer existed in the Hebrew community by the time of Jesus therefore He had no direct contact with it.
2. The radical equality of all mankind and the universal call upon Christians to selflessly serve one another and love even the enemy make slavery as we have known it in America impossible.
3. Acts 17:26 "God hath made of one blood all nations." I Cor.12:13 "For by one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jew or Gentiles, whether we be slave or free."
4. The Apostle's teaching was characterized by:

- a. Looking at slavery as a social institution that did not need to be removed in order for Kingdom principles to be lived out. But it would require that slavery would lose its distinctive class prejudice. Masters would serve slaves as well as slaves serve masters (Eph.6:5-9; Col.3:22-4:1; I Tim.6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10; Philemon; I Pet.2:18-25). The distinctive nature of the Apostle's teaching where spiritual community is emphasized over social-political structures is significant. When genuine spiritual community is nurtured it will be reflected in the social structures in society.
- b. Encouraging slaves to gain their freedom when offered opportunity to do so (I Cor.7:21).

Summary

1. Christians who argued for the existence of slavery would advocate a strong ethic of selfless love and spiritual fellowship between master and slave or servant.
2. Our contemporary culture tends to define freedom in social, political and economic terms while the spiritual freedom advanced by the Kingdom is not so defined.
3. It is significant that in I Tim.6:2 when both slave and master became Christians, Paul did not prescribe termination the slave / master relationship. The importance of spiritual community seems to take precedent over economic and social status. Christian community can thrive in any culture or economic system if those involved submit to each other.
4. It is understandable that when the Spirit of Christ and the values of the Kingdom are brought to bear on the lives of masters, there will be a strong impulse to abolish the institution of slavery in that some of its primary purposes (personal ease and material gain) are devalued.
5. The parallel between Israel's enslavement in Egypt and the plight of American slaves is significant.
6. For a good explanation and critique of Black liberation theology see <http://home.earthlink.net/~ronrhodes/BlackTheology.html>

Questions that you should be able to answer.

1. **Specific facts you should know.**
 - a. How would you define racism?
 - b. Where does the New Testament speak about slavery?
2. **Issues that you should be able to discuss.**
 - a. Why does the New Testament seem to permit slavery?
 - b. How was slavery in the ancient nearest different from slavery in early America?
3. **Questions you should wrestle with.**
 - a. What are appropriate reparations to African Americans in our system?
 - b. What popular postures and arguments against racism actually hurt rather than help the cause of victims of racism?