

Meanings of “Racism,” and Some Evaluations

In contemporary secular discussions of ethics, one type of moral issue overshadows all others: the issue of inter-group relationships. The groups in view are denominated by race, gender, nationality, creed, sexual preference, age, “ability” (what we used to call “handicap”), etc., and they are classified, in quasi-Marxist terms, as oppressor groups and victim groups. The oppressor group is usually identified as white, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual males. The issue is the unfair or unequal treatment of the victim group by the oppressor group.

Most all other ethical questions eventually get reduced to this one. Even the abortion issue, at first glance rather far removed from these inter-group issues, gets defined in terms of “choice.” And “choice”, in turn, is defended on the basis of gender autonomy: restricting abortion is sexist, oppression of women by men.

The attitude of the oppressor group toward the victim group is variously described as racist, sexist, age-ist, weight-ist, homophobic, and so on. These attitudes are seen to be at the root of all social and ethical problems.

Issues of such great concern to people should be discussed, not only with sensitivity, but also with care and precision. Unfortunately, most treatments of them are burdened by ambiguity, confusion of distinct issues, and the substitution of rhetoric for argument. There are many things that can be meant by racism, sexism, etc., and many practices are condemned as racist or sexist without much careful thought. In this paper, I hope to contribute something to the cause of clarification.

I will be writing primarily about racism, though what I say will often apply to other “isms,” *mutatis mutandis*. The issue of sexual preference is rather distinct from the others, however. On a scriptural view, homosexuality is a sin, while it is not a sin to belong to a particular race, gender, etc. The rest of this paper, therefore, will not apply, in most cases, to questions of “homophobia.”¹

What does “racism” mean, and what are its manifestations? Let us consider some possibilities, taken from current discussions.

¹ In general, my view is that Christians should relate to homosexuals as people like themselves, in the image of God and therefore precious, but also fallen and therefore under God’s judgment apart from the grace of Christ. We should lovingly present Christ in such a way that brings repentance from sexual and other sins and that brings change to a godly lifestyle. In the meantime, we should not support special rights for homosexuals. We should have the right to keep our children from homosexual influences in schools and in the general culture.

1. Racism is often equated with *hatred*, so it may be defined as “hating people because of their race or color.” Hatred, of course, is something inward.² We should be quick to recognize it in ourselves, slow to accuse others of it. Unfortunately, in the current discussion, the reverse is often true. People quickly accuse others of racial hatred, but they almost never admit such hatred in themselves. That is one thing that goes wrong in current discussions of race.

Certainly it is sinful, and irrational, to hate someone merely because of ancestry or skin color. A person cannot help who his ancestors were, and ancestry alone never makes a person worthy of hatred.

I do not doubt that such irrational racial hatred exists, but I suspect it is more rare than many ethical writers and news commentators suppose. Most of the time, what we call “racial hatred” is really something more subtle, and with a greater claim, at least, to rationality. I explore those possibilities below.

2. One distinct form of “racial hatred” is hating members of a particular race *because of perceived wrongs done by that racial group*. This is not racial hatred pure and simple. Here the hatred is not directed toward people merely because of their ancestry, but because of unreconciled grievances. African Americans often continue to resent whites because of the history of slavery and segregation. Whites often resent blacks because of the high incidence of crime, illegitimacy, and drug use in their communities, and because of the rhetoric of some black leaders who blame these problems on white society. The problem in either case is not ancestry or skin color as such; the problem is behavior.

With simple racial hatred (#1, above), the solution is simply biblical repentance. In this case, finding solutions is more difficult. Of course, we must certainly, as in the previous case, set aside our hatred. For one thing, it is not fair to blame an entire race for the activities of some of its members, especially when those activities were done in the past, by members of earlier generations.

Some have said that although it is illegitimate for an oppressor-group to hate or resent an oppressed group, the reverse is legitimate. But we should reject that argument. If there is anything wrong with racism, sexism, and the like, it is that people are hated or discriminated against or judged, not for what they have done, but solely on the basis of their membership in a group. If that moral principle is correct, it must be applied universally. It is wrong for any racial group to hate any other racial group as a group, regardless of past grievances.

² I am taking “hatred” here to refer to emotional revulsion. I realize that Scripture typically uses the term differently, to indicate practical opposition to the goals of another person. On that definition, (a) hatred is not entirely “inward,” (b) it is not always wrong, and (c) it is not incompatible with love. But in this paper, I am trying to use the term as it is used in the contemporary discussion.

But, in addition to putting aside our hatreds, we need also to work toward reconciliation of the grievances. In relations between American blacks and whites, that is not easy. When slavery ended, slave owners should have been required to make double restitution to those who were kidnapped and/or held against their will, and actual kidnappers should have paid the appropriate legal penalties. But today, the slave traders and slave owners are long gone. Failure to deal adequately with their sin has created difficult situations and personal resentments that are still with us today. But how can we now deal with them?

Some today have, perhaps, indirectly benefited from slavery and segregation, making them in some special sense liable for the current racial disparities. But it would be extremely difficult to identify those people and prove their liability with legal force. Some economists believe that both slavery and segregation resulted in net economic losses for whites, in which case nobody really benefited from slavery and segregation.

Some might suggest a national racial summit, with representatives of both whites and blacks negotiating a settlement. But this suggestion faces formidable difficulties. Who would represent each group, and how would such an agreement be enforced? And would it lead to reconciliation, or would the inevitable inequities produce all the more resentment?

Others would suggest programs of affirmative action to counter the lingering effects of past injustice. Certainly it is a good thing when corporations voluntarily make special efforts to hire people from minority communities, or when schools and colleges seek applicants among minority groups. But racial quotas, and, even worse, race-norming (lowering standards for particular racial groups) lead to resentments, unfair treatment of those in non-victim groups, deterioration of quality in education and industry, and stigmatization of those benefiting from such programs.

The lingering hatreds and resentments are not likely to be overcome by any social or political policy. Consideration of such intractable problems should lead us to turn all the more to God's grace in Christ, which alone can produce forgiving hearts. In the final analysis, only the forgiveness of Christ can heal these wounds.

3. But "racism" does not always refer to hatred. Sometimes the term is applied to certain *beliefs*, such as the belief that one race is inferior to another, either generally, or in some particular way.

The belief that one race is *generally* inferior to another is plainly irrational. Considering all the different abilities and disabilities, all the different virtues and vices, existing in the human race, it is not even clear what would be meant by saying that one human being is "generally superior" to another, let alone saying that one *race* is generally superior or inferior. And even if we could agree on what

a superior race would look like, how could that superiority ever be measured or verified?

Sometimes these discussions focus on whether members of one race are, on the average, more “intelligent” than another. But intelligence is an extremely complicated matter. There are many different kinds. Anyone who is skilled at anything can be called “intelligent.” That includes quarterbacks, boxers, and musicians, as well as rocket scientists. IQ and other “intelligence” tests do not measure intelligence as such, but only certain kinds of intelligence relevant to academic success.

Sometimes “superiority” in such discussions refers to *moral* superiority. But Scripture consigns all mankind to the status of sinners before God. The argument of Rom. 1-3 is that all races, Jews and Gentiles, are equally guilty before God, hopeless apart from divine grace. Paul rebukes those Jews who believed that they had a higher standing with God because of their ancestry.

And the biblical teaching about the differences of supernatural gifts in the body of Christ (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12) suggests a similar way of looking at the natural gifts in the human race in general. No individual, no race, has all possible human abilities. And the “lesser” abilities are just as necessary to the whole society as are the “greater.” Indeed, those that are most widely acclaimed may be less valuable in the sight of God.

4. However, it is not wrong, in my view, to believe that some races generally excel others *in some particular respects*. One coach at a midwestern college was fired because he asserted that black athletes are, on the average, better sprinters and jumpers than whites. His superiors claimed that his remarks were racist. In my view that was an injustice. The coach’s views, in this case, were very probably true, and he should have had freedom to express them.

Earlier I said that it is very unlikely that one race is “generally” superior to another in any meaningful sense. But it is just as unlikely that all races are equal in every particular ability. The diversity of gifts I mentioned above would suggest that neither individuals nor races or nations are equal in every human ability or skill.

But in contemporary secular discussions it is considered heresy to assert that people of one race or nationality are superior to others, even in some specific respect. Even scientists who conduct studies of genetic influences upon, e.g., IQ, are often dismissed as racist. That is, in my view, a wrong use of “racist.” However it may benefit the self-esteem of particular groups, the assumption that everyone is equal in every way is false and certainly detrimental to the progress of science. Clearly there are genetic factors influencing human abilities and disabilities, and scientists should be free to study these.

We should remember, however, that these kinds of racial superiorities and inferiorities should not be held against individuals. I have no doubt that proportionately there are more blacks than whites with the ability to play basketball in the NBA. But the case of Larry Bird is sufficient to refute the notion that *only* blacks should be allowed to compete. Perhaps there are even some whites who can compete with the best blacks in sprinting and jumping. Competition should be open to all, within reason³, and we should be willing to be surprised at finding exceptions to our generalities.

Similarly I have no doubt that, on the whole, men make better lumberjacks than women. But it is quite possible that some women may be better than some men at this kind of work. So even if there are group-based superiorities or inferiorities, we should not use them to justify prejudice against individuals.

5. Another kind of belief sometimes called racist is the belief that *disproportionate numbers of people in a particular racial group are now guilty of some kind of wrongdoing*. Earlier we discussed belief in the “moral superiority” of one group over another. Here I am interested in something somewhat different. The present question is an empirical one. It is not a question of overall moral superiority, but of specific practices. Nor am I here concerned, as I was earlier, to speak of *historical* grievances. Rather, I here speak of *present* grievances.

For example, it is quite evident that among people living in the US illegally, a disproportionate number are Latino. Americans prominent in the Mafia are mainly of Sicilian ancestry. The defendants at the Nuremberg trials were predominantly German. The proportion of illegitimate births is disproportionately high in the black community. And clearly the slave owners were predominantly white, as are most white-collar criminals in our time.

Scripture does not dispute the fact that certain kinds of sins abound in certain national groups and result in the judgment of those nations. The Canaanites worshiped idols, and their culture degenerated into the worst forms of wickedness. Israel was not *better* than the Canaanites; but at one point of history, the iniquity of the Canaanites was judged to be full.

People are often judged as racist for holding such empirical beliefs. Yet ironically, pleas for more border security are often attacked as “anti-Hispanic,” and cries for stiffer penalties against violent crime are often stigmatized as “anti-black.” Some attack the very phrase “law and order” as a “code-word for racism.” Thus the victim-groups themselves recognize their own disproportionate involvement in some of the problems of society.

It is time for greater honesty about these matters, even when that honesty requires us to reflect critically upon ourselves and our own people. African-American spokesman Jesse Jackson, in a moment of candor, some years ago

³ It is OK to exclude overweight, 58-year-old seminary professors.

recounted an incident during a walk along city streets: he heard someone approaching from behind, and he actually felt relieved to discover that the people approaching were white.

It is not wrong to recognize these realities for what they are. We must not use them as excuses for racial prejudices. It should not be assumed that all Mexican-Americans are here illegally, any more than that all Italian-Americans are connected with the Mafia. But we should in humility, recognize the sins characteristic of our own groups and exhort one another to repent of them. It is, of course, easier and more credible for us to deal with the sins of our own races and nationalities rather than with the sins of other races and nationalities.

6. Other beliefs sometimes called racist include *beliefs about what should be done in response to racial problems*. Some examples:

(a) *Belief that racial intermarriage is wrong*. The Old Testament, of course, forbade Israelites to marry people of other nations. But this was a religious, not an ethnic requirement. Israel itself was a “mixed multitude,” including not only the physical sons of Jacob, but also many Egyptians, Midianites, even Canaanites such as Rahab. Anyone who confessed the God of Israel (and who, if male, underwent circumcision) was an acceptable candidate for marriage.

I know of no biblical principle which discourages interracial marriage as such. Surely, people entering such unions should be prepared to accept the social consequences of their decision without illusion, though I believe that prejudice against such unions has rather drastically declined in recent years.

(b) *Belief that races should be separate*. Certainly Scripture does not require the physical separation of races, or the kind of *apartheid* once enforced in the Union of South Africa. If no biblical principle excludes racial intermarriage, then certainly Scripture does not require separation of races.

There are, to be sure, places in the world where antagonism is so intense that separation of ethnic groups may be the only workable solution for the present. As of this writing, I know of no other solution for the situation in Bosnia, in Central Africa, in Palestine, or in the areas of Armenia and Azerbaijan. To advocate racial separation in these areas should not be condemned as racist. But we should never regard such separation as an end in itself, or a final solution.

Does Scripture place before us the goal of an “integrated society?” Yes, certainly, in the sense of a society in which love and respect exist between races. Yes, in the sense of the dream of Martin Luther King, in which people are judged by their character rather than by the color of their skin. But I do not believe there will ever be, or should be, in this world, a society in which racial differences are

abolished, or in which people do not prefer to associate with people like themselves. That is the subject of section (7).

(c) *Politically incorrect views*, such as opposition to bilingualism, restrictions on welfare and immigration, etc. These are complicated political and social questions. It should not be assumed that holding such views amounts to hatred of minorities or even opposition to their best interests.

7. The term *racism*, as we've seen, can be used to designate certain kinds of hatreds and beliefs, emotions and thoughts. But it also refers to actions, choices. Emotions, thoughts, actions: existential, normative, situational.

One action frequently called racist is *associating with people of one's own race or nationality, rather than others*. Later we will address more formal kinds of "discrimination." Here, we will consider our natural tendency to want to be with people like ourselves. I have called this tendency natural, because I believe that most all of us have it to some degree. We find it easier to talk to people who share our culture, who best understand us, who are least likely to become hostile, who are more likely to become good friends. Those people are more often found among those of similar ethnic and cultural background.

Is this tendency sinful? Not generally so, in my opinion. It was God who placed human beings in families, so that our most intimate associations are generally those with which we are closest genetically. Usually we turn to our own cultural group to find spouses and close friends. There *is* a level of mutual understanding and appreciation within ethnic and culture groups than among them. With your own people, it is usually easier to let your hair down, to joke, to cry, even to worship. With people very different from yourself, you often feel that you are "walking on eggs." You are never quite sure when something you say or do will be found offensive, so you tend not to intrude too far into the emotional space of the other group. It is no accident that blacks refer to one another as "soul brothers." It is not that people outside one's ethnic group have no souls, but it sometimes seems like that. The outsiders seem stiff and formal, or their language of friendship seems incomprehensible. You do what you need to do, and then you run home to your home base.

It is important to understand that it is this natural human phenomenon, rather than "racism" in the objectionable senses discussed earlier, which results in much of the informal racial and cultural segregation in our society. Why is it, for example, that blacks and whites worship in separate churches? For the most part, I think it is not because white Christians hate black Christians, or vice versa. Nor is it because they bear continued grudges or believe in the superiority of their own group, though some of these motives may at times be present. Churches tend to belong predominantly to one race or another, because worship is one of those times in which it is important to understand one another on an intimate level. The church is like a family; indeed it is the family of God. Much of its

ministry involves communication; and communication is almost always better within ethnic limits. Blacks and whites tend to speak different languages in worship, a difference evident in their choice of music and of preaching style.

Much has been said about how Sunday at 11:00 A. M. is the “most segregated hour of the week.” But can it be doubted that *both* blacks and whites prefer to worship with people of their own race? Would black Christians willingly give up their black churches to become, say, 20% minorities within white churches? Such “integrated” churches might try hard to include gospel music and black-style preaching occasionally; but it would never be quite the same.

The phenomenon is not limited to differences between whites and blacks. In the US, there are churches of people that are predominantly of Dutch ancestry, as well as German, Scandinavian, Korean, Chinese, Mexican, etc. Each of these ethnic churches are somewhat distinct in style and emphasis. In the general culture, as immigrants’ families have learned English, these ethnic differences have become less important. But in the churches they persist, and they persist because many people want to keep them.

But doesn’t the gospel break down racial barriers, bringing people of every kindred, tongue, tribe, and nation into one great new family? Certainly it broke through the barriers between Jew and Gentile, so that the uncircumcised could have full fellowship with God in Christ. And surely the various ethnic groups within the church are to love one another and to accept one another as joint heirs of God’s grace.

On the other hand, there is no suggestion in the New Testament that every house church must have representation of both Jews and Gentiles. In many localities, such equality would have been unlikely. And as the church moves throughout the world, congregations are segregated by language differences. Nothing in Scripture suggests that this is wrong.

I therefore defend “freedom of association” within some limits. I don’t believe that we are obligated to seek friends of all ethnic groups on an egalitarian basis. Nor do I believe that it is wrong for a church to be 90% Dutch, or 80% African American, or 95% Anglo. However, I wish to make a couple qualifications:

(a) *Evangelism*: Church growth literature often advocates the “homogeneous unit principle,” which is that churches should reach out primarily to people in society who are like themselves, ethnically, culturally, and economically. This literature points out, as I have pointed out above, that it is much easier to communicate the gospel within cultural groups than across them. The conclusion, then, is that cross-cultural evangelism is largely a waste of time, and that the church’s efforts should be more sharply focused on those with whom they can more effectively communicate.

There is much truth in this principle. Certainly speakers of German can be more effective evangelists among Germans than non-speakers of the language. If I am incapable of learning German, it would probably not be wise for me to dedicate my life to the evangelization of the German people. Other cultural trappings: music, dress, foods, etc., can be seen as extensions of language, used more effectively by cultural natives.

But we cannot forget that conversion is God's work, a supernatural event, in which God's grace can overcome the inadequacies of our presentation. And Scripture teaches that in our own proclamation the gospel is to be offered freely, to all. This does not mean that we should be careless about the quality of our communication. But we need to display God's love for people of *all* backgrounds, lest our churches be confused with ethnic clubs.

For example: an Anglo church may have many Spanish speaking neighbors, but may have few members able to communicate well with them. I don't believe that they should barge into the Hispanic neighborhoods and bombard them with English gibberish. But they ought to find some way to demonstrate their love and concern for their salvation. Perhaps they should seek partnership with a Spanish speaking congregation, providing resources, teaching, and encouragement where needed.

After all has been said in favor of freedom of association, we must recognize that unless some Christians are willing to press the cultural envelope, to get beyond the comforts of our own community, to take risks to bring the gospel to other cultures, races, and nations, we will never fulfill Jesus' Great Commission. I don't believe that every Christian is called to cross-cultural witness; but all of us are called to support the overall ministry of the church. And make no mistake: that ministry is cross-cultural and cross-racial.

(b) *Welcome*: Churches do not have to seek a certain quota of every ethnic or national group in their vicinity. But they must welcome everyone.

Some years ago, *Christianity Today*, whose readership is predominantly white, asked a number of African American Christians what they most wanted to say to their white brothers and sisters in Christ.

The article intrigued me, because I was not at all sure what they would say. Would they demand greater proportionate membership and leadership in white churches? Religious "affirmative action?" Would they demand that white churches endorse Jesse Jackson's political agenda?

Not at all. What the black Christians seemed most concerned about was lack of welcome from white churches. One told of how his family moved into a new neighborhood and visited a predominantly white church. The pastor visited

later that week, and made the suggestion that the family “might feel more comfortable” at a predominantly black church, some distance away. The black Christian took some offense that the pastor had not welcomed them to the white church and sought their involvement there.

I suspect that the white pastor had the best of intentions. Knowing that, as I have said, people tend to prefer worship with others like themselves, the pastor probably thought that the black family would prefer to worship in a black church, and he sought to serve them by giving them information about a black church in the area.

Nevertheless, his attempt to help was taken as a slight. One may criticize the black Christian for imputing evil motives to the pastor without justification. On the other hand, history imposes on white Christians the obligation to be extra-sensitive with blacks on matters of race.

The point here is not to assess blame with any precision, but to underscore to white readers the importance of welcoming *everyone* to our churches. Our primary response to anyone coming to our church should be strongly positive. Yes, it may be that in time black visitors will seek out black churches and Hispanics will seek out Hispanic churches. We cannot condemn this. But in the meantime they should know that they have a home with us, a Christian family that really loves them. And if the black family decides to join our white church, we should be delighted. While Scripture does not require multiculturalism or multi-ethnicity in every congregation, we should be joyful when it happens. Because when the church becomes multi-ethnic (i) it becomes an emblem of God’s worldwide kingdom; (ii) it gives the church new gifts, the better to reach out to a broader diversity of people.

And if we can encourage such multi-cultural growth by varying somewhat our language of worship and style of ministry, we should certainly do so.

8. The next type of action we shall consider is *discrimination*, that is excluding people from jobs, housing, or public accommodations because of race. In the discussion earlier, I pointed out that whatever intellectual or moral disparities there may be among the races should not be held against individuals. Both Scripture and American legal tradition call us to consider people innocent until proved guilty. There are also economic considerations, though these are, of course, less weighty: when businesses exclude people from employment, or even as customers, because of race, they cut themselves off from important markets, usually to the detriment of their profit.

Non-discrimination, therefore, should be the general rule. But again some qualifications ought to be made:

(a) Is it wrong to have a family business? To have a business in which all the employees are members of one household and therefore, most likely, of one ethnic background? What about a business run by a group of friends, who are all of the same ethnic ancestry? Or are we obligated to conduct a search to fill each job in which members of all ethnic groups have equal opportunity to be hired? I do not believe that Scripture requires that level of equality. Nor, certainly, do I believe that government should force all businesses to be equal opportunity employers in that sense. (And if people want to start a Christian business, they should not be forced to hire Muslims.)

As I argued above, there is a natural human tendency to associate with people like oneself, and Scripture never rebukes that tendency in itself. Of course, limiting employees to one's own family and friends may be economically disadvantageous: such a policy may prevent you from getting the best employees. But in some cases that disadvantage may be overcome by other factors, such as a better sense of unity, a better *esprit de corps*. To do this is not necessarily to hate those outside one's group, or to believe they are inferior. It is simply to prefer association with those most like oneself.

By extension: it is often valuable for people to be educated in schools of one race or one gender. There has never been any proof that racial or gender diversity is a major positive factor in education. Such schools are not right for everybody, but it is not apparent to me that it is morally wrong to establish them.

(b) What of a cab driver who is asked to take a passenger into a dangerous part of a city, in which there has been a rash of cab robberies involving murders of drivers? Let us say that the driver is white and the dangerous part of town is predominantly black. If he refuses to go there, is he guilty of racism? Or is he merely making a rational judgment, protecting his own safety?

We can see how the presence of sin in our world complicates moral decisions. In this case, the driver is not discriminating against blacks as such. He is discriminating against some people, who may, to be sure, be innocent, because of the additional factor of likely violence. Jesse Jackson's comments cited earlier are to the same effect: in some situations our normal human fear of violence may have a racial context.

There are reasons why we should sometimes take the risk of entering a dangerous situation, as in carrying out the Great Commission; but I don't believe that we are always obligated to do so. Certainly the goal of providing equal cab service to all parts of the city is desirable; but drivers should not be expected to risk their lives in order to bring that about. If the lack of service inconveniences people of certain neighborhoods, that should motivate them to seek better law enforcement and to cooperate more fully with police and civic leaders.

Fear is not always a bad thing. But we need frequently to take stock of our fears to assess their rationality. It would be wrong to use the above kind of example to justify a general policy of racial discrimination, even though much such discrimination may be motivated by an analogous kind of fear. We should support law enforcement to eliminate the justifications of such fears. Where doubt remains, we should stretch ourselves as much as possible, by God's grace, to give others the benefit of that doubt.

Some Concluding Thoughts

We have seen that the term *racism* is something of a wax nose. It means a great many different things to different people. In fact, it tends to be used most often as an undefined form of abuse, to attack people who disagree with the speaker in a vaguely conservative direction. I propose a moratorium on the use of the term. When you get into a discussion of these matters, insist on distinguishing these issues clearly from one another.

Race is certainly a compelling issue to many people today, and the similar issues of sexism, etc. also command a lot of attention. Therefore terms like *racism* tend to be used as a overarching terms for everything one considers bad in society.

In discussions of race, it never seems to occur to people that we should identify ourselves as anything other than white, black, Hispanic, Asiatic, or whatever. But that seems to me to be a crucial issue. I'm not only a white man, but also a father, a brother, a husband, a pianist, a theologian, and, most importantly, a Christian. When I vote, I never once think what government policies are in the best interests of white people. Rather, I ask first, what policies are best for Christians? what policies are most biblical?

Of course, if I were black, my history would force me to reflect on my race much more often. If I were a woman, I would reflect more often on my gender. But it is important for all Christians to remember that for us *race and gender are secondary issues*. The families of this earth are one day to be overshadowed by the kingdom of God, in which there will be no more marrying or giving in marriage. Our intimacy will be with Jesus and with all his people.

I have tried to reflect seriously on matters of race, as every Christian teacher should. But one of the greatest mistakes we make is to make racism, sexism, etc. the most important issues of human life.