

The Glory of God and Racial Unity

Three years ago far-right extremists gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of a Confederate statue from a local park. The removal was initiated by local government officials after Dylan Roof shot and killed nine black members of a Charleston, SC church. That gathering, which was called, “United the Right,” was a gathering of white supremacists that turned violent as protesters and counter-protesters clashed. And as you probably remember, one counter-protester, Heather Heyer, was killed when James Fields drove into a crowd.

A few days later, Alejandro Mandes, who is the executive director of the Evangelical Free Church’s All People Ministry, wrote an open letter to the EFCA family – to us. It was entitled: *An Open Letter to Those Who Are Struggling: Aiming for the Kingdom of God through Racial Strife*. He opened his letter this way:

This is an open letter to all who are struggling to figure out what comes next or how to apologize for what’s going on in America, in light of Charlottesville.

America seems to be in the midst of childbirth contractions. I believe that events taking place in Ferguson, New York City, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Dallas, Charlotte and Charlottesville are not disconnected occurrences but may actually be the new normal.

Recent events may well represent what the near future looks like—due both to our country’s demographic shifts and to the built-up frustrations of generations of African Americans who have received the brunt of racism, exploitation and marginalization.

For too long, the Church has been both complacent and even part of the problem. We have an amazing opportunity before us to be proactive—but will we?

That was a good question to ask then. It’s a good question to ask now. As we continue to see racial strife in our country, we have an amazing opportunity to be proactive, but will we? And some might even ask, should we? Is this really what the church ought to be doing? Isn’t this a distraction from the main thing that God has called us to, which is proclaiming gospel? What I want to say today is that pursuing racial unity is not a distraction from the main thing. It is in fact part of the gospel.

Today, we are continuing our series on the glory of God. We are considering various aspects of God’s glory with the hope that God’s glory might truly become the central passion in our lives. Today, we are going to look at how the church has an amazing opportunity to be proactive and pursue racial unity in a way that makes God’s glory known in our world.

We are going to look at Ephesians 2:11-22. But before we do, I want to summarize the first 10 verses of the chapter. Paul describes how God has restored our vertical relationship with him. We were dead in our trespasses and sin. We were lost. But God’s grace showed up and through

Jesus' death and resurrection, God made us alive together with Christ and our relationship with God was restored. **The gospel is about a restored relationship with God.** Too often we believe that this is the extent of the gospel. But Paul goes on and tells us that **the gospel is ALSO about restored relationships with one another.** This is what we are looking at this morning.

This is a long passage and time doesn't allow us to get into the fine details of everything that Paul says here. But I want to help us see the central issue that Paul describes. First, Paul says that **our relationships were broken.**

Paul is specifically talking about the division between Jews and Gentiles. Here are some of the descriptors that he uses. In verse 12, he says to those who were Gentiles that before they came to believe in Christ, they were *separate from Christ*. And so that's the vertical relationship. But he also says that they were *excluded from the commonwealth of Israel*. In verses 14 and 16 he uses the word, "enmity," twice to describe the nature of the Jew and Gentile relationship. And in verse 19, he says that the Gentiles were *strangers and aliens*. This is the horizontal relationship that was broken.

This was a division that was religious, social, and racial. And so, what Paul goes on to describe is how God intervened in this brokenness to restore it. He explains that **God brings into existence a new humanity through Christ.** Verse 13:

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Paul again mentions the vertical aspect of the Gospel, a restored relationship with God, but then he goes on to talk about horizontal restoration.

¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall,

Through Jesus' shed blood on the cross, he brings both Jews and Gentiles near to God and gives them peace with God, but also with each other. He says that Jesus *made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall.*

Time doesn't allow us to look at the various options of what the *dividing wall*. What I want us to see is that in breaking it down, Jesus restored the brokenness between Jew and Gentile. Verse 15:

¹⁵ by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.

Jesus, through his death, reconciles Jew and Gentile. He puts to death the enmity between the two and He brings into existence what Paul calls, *one new man*. The NIV says, “one new humanity out of the two.” Gentiles did not become Jews. Jews did not become Gentiles. God birthed something entirely new, *one body*, which is the church. This too is part of the gospel.

Where once there had been animosity and hostility, there is now peace. In verse 19, Paul uses the phrase, *members of the household of God*, to further describe this new thing. When he says this, Paul is saying that through Jesus Jew and Gentiles becomes a child of God, which means that they are now siblings. They are in the same family.

The gospel is about a restored relationship with God. But it is also about how God, through Christ, has reconciled enemies across racial lines and any other kind of division to bring one family of God into existence.

And so, if we go back to the question of should we as a church engage issues of racial unity, what do you think? What is the gospel? Reconciliation IS part of the gospel. This is not a distraction from the main thing; it part of the main thing!

I love how John Stott said it in his book, *The Message to the Ephesians*.

I wonder if anything is more urgent today, for the honour of Christ and for the spread of the gospel, than that the church should be, and should be seen to be, what by God's purpose and Christ's achievement it already is--a single new humanity, a model of human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their Father and love each other, the evident dwelling place of God by his Spirit. Only then will the world believe in Christ as peacemaker. Only then will God receive the glory due his name (p. 111-12).

He wrote that back in 1984. And it is just as true now as it was then.

This past week, Cindy and I were in Denver as Cindy had some doctor's appointments. While she was at her appointments, I was trying to find places to work on the sermon. On Wednesday I worked at New Life Church in Aurora, which is an EFCA church pastored by a high school friend, Jeff.

Jeff told me a little of New Life's story. When he showed up to the church in the early 90's Aurora was around 80% white, and 20% Hispanic, Asian and black. If I remember right the church was over 90% white. But over the years the community has become more and more diverse. Today, Aurora is 43% white, 18% Hispanic, 16% black, 6% Asian.

Jeff's conviction was that the church ought to reflect their local community and so they began to do the hard work of becoming an ethnically and racially diverse church. Now, 57% of New Life is non-white. The church is a beautiful mix of Hispanic, Filipino, Middle Eastern, Ethiopian, black, and white brothers and sisters that work and worship together.

I asked Jeff, “How is God being glorified through the diversity of your church?” Here are three things he shared. First, a few years ago when a new police chief was stepping into his role in Aurora a local government official told him that one of the best things he could do to get up to speed about the Aurora community would be to go talk to New Life Church. Because New Life is living out racial reconciliation, the community notices. Is God’s name not glorified when the local community sees racial unity working in a local church so much so that they would point to that as a place to go get understanding?

Secondly, he shared how each culture represented in their church has strengths and weaknesses. But as they come together, they learn from each other. And so, whereas one culture might be more oriented towards an approach to God that is more study and intellectual, another might have a more experiential, expressive approach. They learn from and sharpen each other in these differences. Jeff talked about how he has learned from some of his non-white brothers and sisters what it looks like to live with a moment-by-moment dependence on the Spirit of God. God’s glory is put on display as the best of each culture shapes and influences the others to a deeper knowledge and experience of God.

The last thing Jeff mentioned is that many Muslims and Buddhists are moving into their area. And because of the diversity of New Life, they have been able to build bridges to these people of other faiths that is allowing them to share the Good News of Christ. And they are seeing Muslims and Buddhists coming to faith in Christ.

All of these examples are aspects of how living out the fullness of the gospel by pursuing racial unity puts God’s glory on full display.

Now, what does the truth that Paul is teaching in this passage, a truth we see illustrated in a church like New Life, mean for us here in Manhattan? We are not in Aurora, CO. It would not even be possible to have the kind of diversity that New Life has because that isn’t Manhattan. Regardless of where we live, here’s the principle: We should **seek to become the kind of Christ-followers who embody the fullness of the gospel by working to live in racial unity.**

I want to share a little of what my journey the past couple of years has been in trying to become this kind of Christ-follower. And as I do this, you will see my approach to growth. I grew up in south-central Nebraska, which as you can guess is a far different place than Aurora, CO. For us diversity was reflected in whether you were Swedish or German. This just wasn’t something on my radar for much of my early life.

Probably the first time that I began to think about issues of race was in the early 90’s when our neighbors, Bernard and Elsie, became our friends and trusted us enough to share some of what it was like for them to live as black people in Manhattan. I remember Bernard, who was finishing up his PhD at K-State, sharing about being followed around in department stores just because he was black, or Elsie sharing about how grocery baggers would not offer to help her with her bags out to the car like they did for other customers even though she had two little kids with her. This was the first time I started thinking about the reality that people like Bernard and

Elsia, beautiful, wonderful, Christian people, had a very different experience with life in Manhattan than I did just because their skin was a different color.

About 3 years ago I stumbled upon a book entitled, *The Blood of Emmitt Till*. I'm ashamed to say that until I listened to that book, I didn't know who Emmitt Till was. He was a black, 14-year old from Chicago spending the summer of 1955 in Mississippi with cousins. He was accused of offending a white woman and because of that he was yanked out of his bed one night by the woman's husband and his half-brother. They beat him beyond recognition, shot him in the head, and dumped his body in a river. The men were acquitted. It is a horrifying story that caused me to weep. But it also lit a fire in me to do the work necessary to become the kind of Christ-follower who embodies the fullness of the gospel by working to live in racial unity.

To be this kind of Christ-follower means growth and change in my life and so that's what I've been pursuing. Here's how I'd summarize my approach to approach to growing in this areas. First, I made a decision to **lean in**. I can choose to ignore issues of racial injustice and I can keep living comfortably, because I'm white. But if I'm going to care about my brothers and sisters of color, this just isn't an option. Love requires me to keep leaning into this issue.

Secondly, I'm seeking to **learn**. I don't know what I don't know. When Steve preached on this topic a few weeks ago, one thing he encouraged was for us to have a posture of humility. That's what learning is about. It is acknowledging I might not know some of our troubling 400-year history with race as the evangelical church. And so I'm trying to learn through books and podcasts and documentaries and however I can.

Third, I try to **listen**. I'm trying to listen to our brothers and sister of color to understand their perspective, to understand their experience.

And finally, when I see the ugly stuff, I **lament**. When I see the ugly stuff in our history as a country, as the church, or in my own heart, I lament. Lament is a way to respond to sin and brokenness and all the complexities that we don't understand. Lament isn't about fixing the problems that we see; it is simply going to God with our expressions of anger, or grief or despair.

Now, is there more that God might call me to? Of course, but leaning in, learning, listening and lamenting is a great place to start for me or any believer, who is seeking to become the kind of Christ-follower who embodies the fullness of the gospel by seeking to live in racial unity. It is a great place to start if we want to become the kind of church that embodies all of the gospel – both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of restoration – that we might bring the most glory to God's name.