

THE WISDOM OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Dealing with racism, *Ephesians 2:11-22*

Regardless of what one thinks about the phrase “black lives matter”, it represents a truth about our nation – we live in a society that politicizes race. And, despite claims that we have become a more ‘enlightened’ society, the strong reactions that phrase solicits from people reminds us that race really does matter in our country. Given the current turmoil surrounding race in our nation, we will consider the way the early church responded to the division it encountered between Jews and Gentiles and explore what guidance its response offers us.

“You are all one in Christ Jesus”¹

- God chose Israel out from among the other nations, selecting them to be His “treasured possession” (*Genesis 17:1-5; Exodus 19:5*).
- God’s selection of the nation focused on giving them a mission to represent Him in the world, a mission that involved both rejecting the thinking and behavior of the nations in Israel’s world and limiting their interactions with them (*Exodus 19:6; 34:11-16; Deuteronomy 4:1-14*).
- Israel, however, rejected its mission and embraced relationships with other nations, which eventually led the nation into captivity to Babylon (*cf. 2 Chronicles 36:15-21*).
- The Jews who came out of that captivity recognized their failures and desired to demonstrate their renewed devotion to God by committing to being a pure people (*Ezra 9:1-2; Nehemiah 13:1-3; cf. 1 Chronicles 1-9; Ezra 2; 8; 10; Nehemiah 7; 12*).
- Israel’s zeal to be a pure people, however, gave rise to an inappropriate emphasis upon racial purity (*cf. Ezra 9:1-2; Nehemiah 13:1-3*) that intensified in the face of the hostility they felt from the nations that took control of them following the end of their captivity to Babylon.
- Even though the Jewish people regularly interacted with Gentiles by the time of the New Testament, Jewish writings from that period reveal that many assumed all Gentiles were idolaters, immoral, and ritually impure (*cf. Acts 10:28*).
- Those prejudicial attitudes seeped into the early church, creating conflict that the book of Acts reveals required an ‘emergency’ meeting of the church’s leadership (*Acts 15*).
 - The ethnocentric attitudes of Judaism led a vocal group of Jewish Christians who believed that it was “necessary to circumcise [Gentiles] and to order them to keep the law of Moses” (*Acts 15:1-5*).
 - Paul, noticing how that attitude led to division within the church (*cf. Galatians 2:11-13*), stood up against those who tried “to force the Gentiles to live like Jews” (*Galatians 2:14*).

¹ Galatians 3:28. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

- The conflict between Jewish ethnocentric beliefs and Paul’s inclusive convictions represented more than a clash of values – Paul believed **prejudice endangers “the truth of the gospel”** (*Galatians 2:1-5*).
- A meeting of the church’s leadership therefore took place in Jerusalem where, guided by the Holy Spirit (*Acts 15:28*), they reminded the church that:
 - God, through the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius, clearly demonstrated His desire for the equal inclusion of Gentiles in the church (*Acts 15:7-11; 10:1-11:18*).
 - Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, was a Gentile (*Acts 15:14; 7:1-4*).
 - God’s planned for the Jewish people to be the means through which He would draw the Gentiles to Him (*Acts 15:15-17; cf. Genesis 12:1-3*).
- Paul, drawing on the outcome of the meeting in Jerusalem, wrote that:
 - God’s promise to Abraham focused on “all the nations” rather than merely the Jewish people (*Galatians 3:7-9*).
 - God fulfilled His promise through Jesus (*Galatians 3:16, 22, 24; Acts 13:38-39*), using him to create equality among those who follow Jesus by giving them new, Jesus-shaped identities (*Galatians 3:27-28*).
 - The new identities God gives Christians offers two blessings – God forms them into a new Israel and God adopts them as His children (*Galatians 3:25-4:5*).
 - Division among Christians, consequently, represents an affront to God’s will and receives His wrath (*Ephesians 3:1-11; 4:1-6; 1 Corinthians 1:10; 3:16-17; cf. John 17:20-21*).

Applications

- To begin thinking about the application of the early church’s struggle with Jewish ethnocentrism, we need to recognize that the experiences of racism in our society differs from the prejudices in the first century world; Jewish animosity toward Gentiles had nothing to do with skin color.
- Even though differences exist between the prejudices confronting the early church and those facing us today, the message remains the same – **“God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him”** (*Acts 10:34-35*).
- The Bible’s teachings about humanity reveal that “race” is a social construct we impose on the rich diversity of the people God made in His image that divides people in ways that God does not divide them. Therefore:
 - **All humans, regardless of race, gender, or nationality, deserve dignity and honor** as individuals made in God’s image and given the privilege of co-ruling with Him (*Genesis 1:26-28*). Extending dignity and honor would involve things like:
 - Not imposing our culture on others by, for example, expecting immigrants to adapt to us because they are in America (*cf. Galatians 2:11-14*).
 - Not dismissing the experiences of others in areas like systemic racism because their claims do not match our experiences (*cf. 1 Corinthians 8:1-13*).
 - Being willing to give up our freedoms or privileges for the benefit of others (*cf. Philippians 2:1-8*).

- **Character, not genetics, God defines God's people** (*Galatians 3:1-9; Romans 2:28-29; 9:6-8*).
- It is important that we recognize that Paul did not respond to the divisions in the early church by seeking to destroy the social structures of his world. Instead, he called for something more challenging – he called for people to live differently in those social structures (*1 Corinthians 7:17-24; cf. Philemon*).
- Allowing prejudices to exist, whatever the reasons, divides the church family God united through Jesus and must be withstood (*Galatians 2:1-5; 3:27-28; Ephesians 2:11-3:10*).

We live in a world marked by division. God, through Jesus, forms us into something unique in the world – He forms us into a family of people united despite our diversity. That unity, however, requires us to develop new ways of thinking about ourselves and about others. Are we, therefore, people whose united relationships evidence God's transformative work in our lives or do we harbor prejudices that disrupt His efforts in our lives?