

Racial Harmony and Interracial Marriage

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My aim today is to argue from Scripture and experience that interracial marriage is not only permitted by God but is a positive good in our day. That is, it is not just to be tolerated, but celebrated. This is extremely controversial since it is opposed by people from all sides.

Interracial marriage was against the law in 16 states in 1967 when the Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court Decision struck down those laws. That is very fresh historically. I was a senior in college. Laws reflect deep convictions, and convictions don't usually change when laws do.

Opposition to Interracial Marriage

The first website that came up on my Google search for Martin Luther King and interracial marriage was the website of the Ku Klux Klan which still has this anachronistic quote today: "Interracial marriage is a violation of God's Law and a communist ploy to weaken America."

Many African Americans believe interracial marriage erodes the solidarity of the African American community. Lawrence Otis Graham wrote that "interracial marriage undermines [African Americans'] ability to introduce our children to black role models who accept their racial identity with pride."

Some conservative whites oppose interracial marriage for a different reason. Syndicated columnist H. Millard wrote:

. . . we are seeing the death of the American and his replacement with a non-European type who now has enough mass in our society to pervert European-American ways. . . . White people . . . are going to have to struggle mightily to survive the Neo-Melting Pot and avoid being part of the one-size-fits-all human model. Call it what it is: Genocide and extinction of the white genotype.

One letter I received from a white Christian man went like this:

As individuals, they are precious souls for whom Christ died and whom we are to love and seek to win. As a race, however, they are unique and different and have their own culture. . . . I would never marry a black. Why? Because I believe God made the races, separated them and set the bounds of their habitation, Deuteronomy 32:8; Acts 17:26. He made them uniquely different and intended that these distinctions remain. God never intended the human race to become a mixed or mongrel race. So, while I am strongly opposed to segregation I favor separation that the uniqueness with which God made them is maintained.

These are just a few of the opposing views to interracial marriages that I have come across.

Personal Experience

To these opposing views I would add my own experience. I was a southern teenage racist (by almost any definition), and, since I am a sinner still, I do not doubt that elements of it remain in me, to my dismay. For these lingering attitudes and actions I repent. Racism is a very difficult reality to define. The Bethlehem staff have been working on it for months. We are presently most closely committed to the definition given last summer at the Presbyterian Church in America annual meeting: "Racism is an explicit or implicit belief or practice that qualitatively distinguishes or values one race over other races." That is what I mean when I say I was a racist growing up in Greenville, South Carolina. My attitudes and actions were demeaning and disrespectful toward non-whites. And right at the heart of those attitudes was opposition to interracial marriage.

My mother, who washed my mouth out with soap once for saying, "Shut up!" to my sister, would have washed my mouth out with gasoline if she knew how foul my mouth was racially. She was under God the seed of my salvation in more ways than one. When our church voted not to admit blacks in 1963, when I was 17, my mother ushered the black guests at my sister's wedding right into the main sanctuary herself because the ushers wouldn't do it. I was on my way to redemption.

In 1967 Noel and I attended the Urbana Missions Conference. I was a senior at Wheaton. There we heard Warren Webster, former missionary to Pakistan, answer a student's question: What if your daughter falls in love with a Pakistani while you're on the mission field and wants to marry him? With great forcefulness he said: "The Bible would say, Better a Christian Pakistani than a godless white American!" The impact on us was profound.

Four years later I wrote a paper for Lewis Smedes in an ethics class at seminary called "The Ethics of Interracial Marriage." For me that was a biblical settling of the matter, and I have not gone back from what I saw there. The Bible does not oppose or forbid interracial marriages. And there are circumstances which together with biblical principles make interracial marriage in many cases a positive good.

Now I am a pastor at Bethlehem. One quick walk through the pictorial directory that came out last year gives me a rough count of 203 non-Anglos pictured in the book. I am sure I missed some. And I am sure the definition of Anglo is so vague someone will be bothered that I even tried to count. But the point is this: Dozens and dozens of them are children and teenagers and single young men and women. This means very simply that we as a church need a clear place to stand on interracial marriage. Church is the most natural and proper place to find a spouse. And they will find each other across racial lines.

That is what I would like to give. First, we will make four textual observations and then some concluding implications for our experience.

1. All Races Have One Ancestor in the Image of God, and All Humans Are in God's Image

The Bible portrays the human race as coming from one pair of human ancestors who were created in God's image unlike all the animals and that this image of God is passed on to all humans. Genesis 1:27, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Again in Genesis 5:1-3, "When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and

named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image." In other words, the magnificent image of God goes on from generation to generation.

Then Paul makes the sweeping statement in Acts 17:26, "And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth." In other words, Adam, who was created in God's image, is the father of all human beings in all ethnic groups. Therefore all of them are dignified above the animals in this absolutely unique and glorious way: humans are created in the image of God. With all the beautiful, God-designed ethnic and cultural diversity in the world, that truth is paramount. That truth is decisive in setting priorities for how we respect and relate to each other.

2. The Bible Forbids Intermarriage Between Unbeliever and Believer, But Not Between Races

The Bible forbids intermarriage between believer and unbeliever but not between members of different ethnic groups. 1 Corinthians 7:39, "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." "Whom she wishes, only in the Lord." One biblical restriction on the man she marries: he must be in the Lord. He must be a believer in Jesus Christ.

This was the main point of the Old Testament warnings about marrying those among the pagan nations. The point was not to protect racial purity. The point was to protect religious purity. For example, Deuteronomy 7:3-4:

You shall not intermarry with [the nations]; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you.

The issue is not color mixing, or customs mixing, or clan identity. The issue is: will there be one common allegiance to the true God in this marriage or will there be divided affections? The prohibition in God's word is not against interracial marriage, but against marriage between the true Israel, the church (from every people, tribe, and nation) and those who are not part of the true Israel, the church. That is, the Bible prohibits marriage between those who believe in Christ (the Messiah) and those who don't (see 2 Corinthians 6:14).

This is exactly what we would expect if the great ground of our identity is not our ethnic differences but our common humanity in the image of God and especially our new humanity in Christ. That leads to the third biblical observation.

3. In Christ Our Oneness Is Profound and Transforms Racial and Social Differences from Barriers to Blessings

In Christ ethnic and social differences cease to be obstacles to deep, personal, intimate fellowship. Colossians 3:9-11, "You have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."

This does not mean that every minority culture gets swallowed up by the majority culture in the name of unity. God does not obliterate all ethnic and cultural differences in Christ. He redeems them and refines them and enriches them in the togetherness of his kingdom. The final image of

heaven is “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 7:9; 5:9). God values the differences that reflect more fully his glory in man.

The point of Colossians 3:11 is not that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences have no significance; they do. The point is that that they are no barrier to profound, personal, intimate fellowship. Singing alto is different from singing bass. It’s a significant difference. But that difference is no barrier to being in the choir. It’s an asset.

When Christ is all and in all, differences take an important but subordinate place to fellowship—and, I will argue, marriage.

4. Criticizing One Interracial Marriage Was Severely Disciplined by God

The fourth observation is that Moses, a Jew, apparently married a black African and was approved by God. Numbers 12:1, “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman.” Cushite means a woman from Cush, a region south of Ethiopia, and known for their black skin. We know this because of Jeremiah 13:23, “Can the Ethiopian [the very same Hebrew word translated “Cushite” in Numbers 12:1] change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.” So attention is drawn to the difference of the skin of the Cushite people.

J. Daniel Hays writes in his book, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), that Cush “is used regularly to refer to the area south of Egypt, and above the cataracts on the Nile, where a Black African civilization flourished for over two thousand years. Thus it is quite clear that Moses marries a Black African woman” (p. 71).

What is most significant about this context is that God does not get angry at Moses; he gets angry at Miriam for criticizing Moses. The criticism has to do with Moses’s marriage and Moses’s authority. The most explicit statement relates to the marriage: “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman.” Then consider this possibility. In God’s anger at Miriam, Moses’s sister, God says in effect, “You like being light-skinned Miriam? I’ll make you light-skinned.” Numbers 12:10: “When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow.”

God says not a critical word against Moses for marrying a black, Cushite woman. But when Miriam criticizes God’s chosen leader for this marriage God strikes her skin with white leprosy. If you ever thought black was a biblical symbol for uncleanness, be careful; a worse white uncleanness could come upon you.

Those are my four biblical observations. 1) All races have one ancestor in the image of God and all humans are in God’s image. 2) The Bible forbids intermarriage between unbeliever and believer, but not between races. 3) In Christ our oneness is profound and transforms racial and social differences from barriers to blessings. 4) Criticizing one interracial marriage was severely disciplined by God.

The Challenges and Blessings of Interracial Marriage

Now for some closing implications for our experience. Opposition to interracial marriage is one of the deepest roots of racial distance, disrespect, and hostility. Show me one place in the world where interracial or interethnic marriage is frowned upon and yet the two groups still have equal respect and honor and opportunity. I don't think it exists. It won't happen. Why? Because the supposed specter of interracial marriage demands that barrier after barrier must be put up to keep young people from knowing each other and falling in love. They can't fellowship in church youth groups. They can't go to the same schools. They can't belong to the same clubs. They can live in the same neighborhoods. Everybody knows deep down what is at stake here. Intermarriage is at stake.

And as long as we disapprove of it, we will be pushing our children, and therefore ourselves, away from each other. The effect of that is not harmony, not respect, and not equality of opportunity. Where racial intermarriage is disapproved, the culture with money and power will always dominate and always oppress. They will see to it that those who will not make desirable spouses stay in their place and do not have access to what they have access to. If your kids don't make desirable spouses, you don't make desirable neighbors.

And here is a great and sad irony. The very situation of separation and suspicion and distrust and dislike that is brought about (among other things) by the fear of intermarriage, is used to justify the opposition to intermarriage. "It will make life hard for the couple and hard for the kids (they'll be called half-breeds)." Catch 22. It's like the army being defeated because there aren't enough troops, and the troops won't sign up because the army's being defeated. Oppose interracial marriage, and you will help create a situation of racial disrespect. And then, since there is a situation of disrespect, it will be prudent to oppose interracial marriage.

Here is where Christ makes the difference. Christ does not call us to a prudent life, but to a God-centered, Christ-exalting, justice-advancing, counter-cultural, risk-taking life of love and courage. Will it be harder to be married to another race, and will it be harder for the kids? Maybe. Maybe not. But since when is that the way a Christian thinks? Life is hard. And the more you love the harder it gets.

It's hard to take a child to the mission field. The risks are huge. It's hard to take a child and move into a mixed neighborhood where he may be teased or ridiculed. It's hard to help a child be a Christian in a secular world where his beliefs are mocked. It's hard to bring children up with standards: "you will not dress like that, and you will not be out that late." It's hard to raise children when dad or mom dies or divorces. And that's a real risk in any marriage. Whoever said that marrying and having children was to be trouble free? It's one of the hardest things in the world. It just happens to be right and rewarding.

Christians are people who move toward need and truth and justice, not toward comfort and security. Life is hard. But God is good. And Christ is strong to help.

There is so much more to say about the challenges and blessings of interracial marriage. But we are out of time. I hope to write more. Suffice it say now by way of practical conclusion: at Bethlehem we will not underestimate the challenges of interracial marriage or transracial adoption (they go closely together). We will celebrate the beauty, and we will embrace the burden. Both will be good for us and good for the world and good for the glory of God.

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