

The Biblical Offense of Racism

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The Word of God not only specifies our obligation to be color-blind, but it prescribes how this obligation applies to society.

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MOOKIE: Dago, wop, garlic-breath, guinea, pizza-slinging, spaghetti-bending, Vic Damone, Perry Como, Luciano Pavarotti, non-singing

PINO: You gold-teeth, gold-chain-wearing, fried-chicken-and-biscuit-eating, monkey, ape, baboon, big-thigh, fast-running, three-hundred-sixty-degree basketball dunking spade...

STEVIE: You slant-eyed, me-no-speak-American, own every fruit and vegetable stand in New York, Rev. Moon, Summer Olympics '88, Korean kick-boxing...

OFFICER LONG: Goya bean-eating, fifteen in a car, thirty in an apartment, pointed shoe, red wearing, Menudo, meda-meda, Puerto Rican...

KOREAN CLERK: It's cheap, I got a good price for you, Mayor Koch, "How I'm doin", chocolate-egg-cream-drinking, bagel and lox, ...[\[1\]](#)

These sentiments are some of the niceties of contemporary racial warfare. The destructive notions expressed by these terms often remain unstated in "proper" social circles. Nevertheless, such attitudes tacitly guide many people's thought about the status, abilities, and dignity of racial groups. The underlying attitudes often find outlets in numerous subtle forms of behavior. And of course one of the ugliest features of the late 1980's is the overt and fatal expression of these attitudes in terms of actual racial violence, a la Howard Beach, and the resurgence of the Satanic ideologies of numerous neo-Nazi covens.

The particular quotes appear in a series of characterized outbursts in Spike Lee's raw and painful movie, *Do the Right Thing*. Lee places this racial slander in a morbidly humorous context in order to demonstrate (once again) the quagmire of modern race relations. Lee openly acknowledges that his film paints a very despairing view of the relationship between the races, and yet, he claims, "I think there's some hope at the end, a shaky truce. But on the other hand, I think it'd be very dishonest to have a kind of Steven Spielberg ending where we all hold hands and sing We are the World."[\[2\]](#)

Spike Lee only claims to point to the problems at issue; he doesn't attempt to offer any solutions. That, he asserts, is not his job as a film-maker. In response to a typical journalist's question, "What's the right thing?", Lee retorts, "I don't know. I know what the wrong thing is: racism."[\[3\]](#) This clear and confident

moral condemnation of the view that one race is inferior to another is most often taken as a self-evident truth.

Self-evident truth or not, our question should be: What does Scripture say about racial relations.

Put simply, Scripture very clearly condemns racist attitudes and actions.

A Biblical Case Against Racism

Christ is the King of kings and the Lamb of God, whose shed blood has purchased His people "*from every tribe, tongue, and people, and nation*" (Rev. 5:9). Christ's gospel will lead "all the nations...and many peoples" to stream to His kingdom (Is. 2:3), and "all the families of the nations will worship before" Christ "for the kingdom is the Lord's, and He rules over the nations" (Ps. 22:27,28). The gospel makes race insignificant. There is no religiously important category for race in the Biblical scheme. The only two groups who figure into the history of redemption are covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers, believers and unbelievers. Since Christ, as Lord of His church, has given us such great promises as those above, we should expect that the ethical imperatives of scripture would prohibit racist practices and attitudes. A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.[\[20\]](#)

A. The Norm: The Sixth Commandment

The first Biblical argument against racism is found in the decalogue. The sixth commandment forbids us to take the life of another. Christ argues that the implications of this commandment are far deeper than simple murder. The Lord teaches us that the commandment also condemns vile mockery and unexpressed hateful heart attitudes (Matt. 5: 21, 22). He rescues this law from those who had clouded it with their human traditions.

The Westminster Larger Catechism expounds the sixth commandment as forbidding, among other things, "sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge...provoking words, oppression...striking, wounding, and whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any" (Q. 136). If we are forbidden to have or act on hateful attitudes toward anyone, then we are forbidden from doing such things to an individual of another race.

Moreover, the Larger Catechism explains that the sixth commandment obligates us to preserve the life of others "by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild and courteous speeches and behavior; forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; comforting and succouring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent" (Q. 135). Racist attitudes stand in stark contrast to these prescriptions. The law of God goes to the heart of the issue. To be a racist is to be a killer.

B. The Situation: All Nations of One Blood in the Image of God

A second Biblical argument against racism is found in a Biblical understanding of our situation. We see this highlighted in Paul's testimony to the Athenian humanists. As noted above, evolutionary theory has been used to motivate racial hatred, but Paul rules out any such option when he declares that God "made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26). Though we are not all of the same family of faith, we are all part of the same ultimate genetic family. If all humans descend from the same parents, then no one segment can be inherently inferior to others.

Moreover, since all of mankind has descended from the original parents, and the parents were made in the image of God (Gen. 1: 26), all of their descendants reflect the image of God as well. This point brings out the particular heinousness of racist attitudes. To treat a member of another ethnic group as inferior is to despise the face of God. And to despise the face of God is to invite His wrath.

C. The Person: Considering Others More Important Than Ourselves

Racism is not only prohibited by the norm of God's word and the Biblical situation in which we live, but Scripture also instructs us concerning our motives. We fail to heed God's norm for the situation, if we act out of wicked motives.

Paul's instructions at Phil. 2:3 are readily applicable to the issue of racism: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind *let each of you regard one another as more important than himself.*"

This passage informs us that we are to seek to honor other persons in every situation. One way to picture this is that we are to treat others as if they were royalty. We treat royalty with respect, decency, and graciousness. This implies that our heart attitude must not be arrogant, paternalistic, or denigrating to others. This understanding clearly precludes racist attitudes. Calvin comments on this verse that:

If anything in our whole life is difficult, this above everything else is so. Hence it is not to be wondered if humility is so rare a virtue. For as one says, Every one has in himself the mind of a king, by claiming everything for himself." See! Here is pride. Afterwards from a foolish admiration of ourselves arises contempt of the brethren. And so far are we from what Paul here enjoins, that one can hardly endure that others should be on a level with him, for there is no one that is not eager to have superiority.[\[21\]](#)

Calvin notes the difficulty of obeying such an imperative since sinful human nature demands the rights of royalty for itself. Nevertheless, we are obliged to treat others as royalty. If individuals of another race were treated in this manner, then racist attitudes could not gain a hold in a person's thought or practice.

Application to Social Spheres

1. *The State*: The Biblical norm, situation, and personal motive distinctively apply to the institution of the state. If race has no Biblical significance, then the state has no right to legislate in a way which makes race significant.

The Sixth commandment, in particular, applies to the state as well as to the individual. Hence, the state may not legislate in a way which deems one racial group inferior to another. Such legislation is contrary to the image of God in man. Therefore, the state is to be a *color blind* institution, not giving preference to one race over another. In this sense, justice is blind in regard to the race and status of individuals.

We can see this standard of color blindness implied in the case law of Scripture:

I charged your judges at that time, saying, Hear the cases between your fellow countrymen, and judge righteously between a man and his fellowcountryman, or *the alien who is with him. You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike.* You shall not fear man, for the judgment is God's (Deut. 1:16,17).

There shall be one standard for you; it shall be for the stranger as well as the native, for I am the Lord your God (Lev. 24:22)

Though there are many verses which require the civil authority to be impartial (cf. Prov. 24:23-26), the above passages demonstrate that the law was to be equally administered to those outside of Israel, who might be of any race. The civil authority is to protect life, due process, and property without regard to the race of those in question. This one requirement has great implications for past and present civil governments.

This standard of color-blindness applies directly to American Jim Crow laws. This form of legislation, which arose after the War Between the States, was a form of coercive segregation. This legislation was designed primarily to keep blacks segregated from whites in public places, such as hotels and restaurants. Jim Crow laws were notoriously backed by lynchings. Such laws clearly violate God's law, regardless of the historical rationale.

Similarly, past and present laws in many nations, such as Uganda, the Philippines, Thailand, and South Africa, which coercively segregate racial groups immediately fail to meet the Biblical standard. Many Southeast Asian governments have for decades legislated against Chinese entrepreneurs.[\[22\]](#)

South African apartheid practices violate God's word by requiring the civil authority to breach its obligation to be impartial. We need not side with anti-biblical insurrectionists to see this basic point. In short, the State usurps its biblical jurisdiction in each of these cases, much to the harm of individual rights.

This sword cuts two ways. The civil authority may not coercively segregate, but neither may it coercively integrate. The color-blind state may not legislate with regard to race in either case. Hence, politically volatile Affirmative Action programs and forced busing are clearly racially informed legislation which violate the color-blind imperative for the civil authority. Moreover, such white paternalism is a denigrating offense against those individuals in the affected groups.

The failure of modern civil authorities to heed the biblical standard of color-blindness in their dealings and will compound the tragedies among their citizens. Segregationist and integrationist legislation not only stir racial antagonism, but both trample individual rights for the benefit of the collective. The rejection of Biblical faith invites such dire consequences.

2. *The Church*: The church is an agency of mercy and education; it may never use the coercion circumscribed to the civil authority. However, segments of the church are notorious for violating Biblical standards against racism.

There are simple applications: the church may not prohibit a man from ordained office due to his race; it may not refuse or even desire to refuse to preach the gospel to peoples of all races; it may not discipline someone due to his or her race. These are hopefully obvious and accepted applications.

Some segments of the church have a particularly abusive history in regard to barring certain ethnic groups from the Lord's Supper. This is a particularly abusive sin. The grounds on which a church may bar an individual from the Lord's Table are: (a) if the individual is not part of the covenant community, since the meal is for that body alone (Matt. 26:26,27); (b) if the individual cannot "partake worthily" in the meal due to unrepented sin, whether personally or formally recognized (I Cor. 11:27; II Thess. 2:3); (c) if the individual lacks the ability to examine him or herself (I Cor. 11:28, 29; Exod. 12:26, 27).

None of these conditions involves race, and, therefore, to bar someone on account of race is to adopt legalism (i.e. adding to the word of God). Hence, racist attitudes are Biblically precluded from the sphere of the church. As an agency of mercy, the church has an obligation to speak peace to the racial conflict which has arisen in a pagan culture.

3. *The Family*: As the primary institution in biblical sociology, the family must also heed the general biblical requirements of race relations. Individual family members must obey the Biblical requirements outlined previously, but one question which arises in the family context concerns inter-racial marriages.

Do parents have a Biblical basis to prohibit such marriages due to race? Parents too must heed the sixth commandment, image of God in man, and consider others better than themselves. For parents to forbid such a marriage solely on the basis of race is sinful. The church would be in its proper jurisdiction if it counseled and ultimately disciplined the parents for their sinful attitudes.

A very foreboding lesson is found in an Old Testament inter-racial marriage. Moses' second marriage was to a Black woman, an Ethiopian. We are told that Miriam and Aaron "spoke against Moses *because of the Cushite woman* whom he had married" (Num. 12:1; Jer. 13:23). We know that the woman has been made part of the covenant due to the Lord's declaration in the same context that Moses "is faithful in all My household" (v.7). Miriam and Aaron are bitter and rebellious because the woman is a foreigner -- she is of another race. The consequence of this bitterness and rebellion is that "the anger of the Lord burned against them" (v. 9). Moreover, in what is perhaps an ironic judgment, the Lord punishes Miriam with leprosy which made her "as *white* as snow" (v.10).

The only grounds Scripture gives us for prohibiting a marriage is religious in nature. Believers are not permitted to marry unbelievers (Deut. 7:2, 3; II Cor. 6:14; this would also include unrepentant sinners, criminals, etc.). This prohibition is repeated throughout Scripture, since it deals with the antithesis between covenant-keeping and covenant-breaking. And once again we see that race is insignificant in the Biblical scheme.

4. *Private Associations*: A final social sphere, private associations, is made up of businesses, recreational clubs, some schools, and sundry voluntary associations. The sphere of private associations is organized by means of voluntary contracts. In businesses, these contracts order the use and exchange of private property. Such private property is esteemed and protected by the Word of God (Ex. 20:15; Deut. 19:14; Matt. 20:1-16; Acts 5:4).

Private associations have given rise to several questions about race relations. One prominent question concerns the right of a private association to be racist. May a restaurant refuse service to hispanics? May a bus company prohibit blacks from sitting in the front seats? Can the pernicious KKK operate a grocery stand and refuse to sell to all other ethnic groups? The answer to these questions is yes and no.

Scripture distinguishes between sins and crimes. Crimes are a subset of sins. The civil authority is not permitted to punish sins which are not crimes. For example, the state may not punish an individual for sexually desiring someone who is not his or her spouse; this is sinful behavior, but it is not criminal. Similarly, it is sinful to hate someone, but it is not criminal to do so. The state cannot arrest and punish a person for either lusting or hating. These sins and many others are not within the State's Biblically defined jurisdiction.

The family and church have a definite jurisdiction over such sins. For example, the family may punish sibling hatred, and the church may ultimately excommunicate someone who, given objective evidence, hates or lusts after another person. Similarly, a firm may punish unsociable attitudes by firing a boorish employee. But the State may not punish you for hating your enemy.

Racism is in this category of sins; it is punishable by all spheres except the state. Racism is a heinous sin, but it is not a criminal offense. Given these distinctions, a restaurant owner may refuse to serve a particular ethnic group for sinful racist reasons, but that owner ought not to be criminally liable for doing so. Contrary to contemporary statutes, the State violates its jurisdiction by attempting to punish this sin.

This application does not mean that the owner may sin with impunity. Though the State is forbidden to require the owner to sell to all racial groups (Matt. 20:15), he or she would still face other sanctions. If the

owner is a believer, then someone may bring charges against him in the church (Matt. 18:15-20). And again the church may ultimately excommunicate him for such wicked behavior.

The sphere of private associations also has its own form of punishment. The free market can punish such sinful attitudes by driving such a person out of business. The costs of racism in a free market are high. For example, a racist florist may refuse to hire some minority individual. The minority individual job-seeker may increase the cost of this racism by underbidding the wage received by white workers. If the owner desires to stay in business, then he cannot ultimately afford to accept the higher cost of a white worker.

Obviously, minimum wage and occupational licensing requirements reduce such anti-racist market incentives. Similarly, government bureaucratic monopolies have no incentive to overcome racist practices. We must remember that the "back of the bus" regulations enlisted against blacks in the South were the practice of busing systems which were subsidized and monopolized by the government, and therefore they had no incentive to fend off potential competition by serving all their customers.[\[23\]](#)

The market fights against racism in other ways as well. Mark Hughes argues:

When a member of a minority group opens a new grocery store in an unfriendly neighborhood, say a Korean in a black area of Washington, D.C., he is likely to be discriminated against. Instead of demanding that the government force shoppers to buy from his store, he chooses the peaceful method: he reduces prices. This increases the cost to consumers of discriminating against him, because they are now paying a premium to shop somewhere else. As a result, they begin to patronize his store. Racists may still be racists, but they no longer discriminate unethically.[\[24\]](#)

Market and ecclesiastical sanctions against racism in private associations are potentially powerful forms of restraint. Nevertheless, we must never lose sight of the fact that a racist, in whatever sphere, if unrepentant, will face the wrath of God on the last day. All other punishments pale in regard to the final judgment.

Conclusion

The Biblical worldview can justifiably condemn racist attitudes and actions because such are contrary to the Word of God. Many non-Christians claim to oppose racism, but they cannot justify their condemnation. Their worldview precludes placing any significance or value on human life.

Pretoria, Howard Beach, neo-Nazism, and Spike Lee's pessimism are the logical products of a dominating humanism. These tragedies are all aspects of a judgment due to a culture that refuses to "kiss the Son" (Ps. 2:12) and bow before the Lord of "every tribe, tongue, people, and nation" (Rev. 5:9).

Notes

- [1] Lee, Spike and Jones, Lisa, *Do the Right Thing*, (New York; Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 186,187.
- [2] Handelman, David, "Insight to Riot," *Rolling Stone*, Issue 556/557, July 13-27, 1989, p. 107.
- [3] *ibid.* p.174.
- [4]

- This is the argument assumed in Thalberg, Irving, "Visceral Racism," *The Monist*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 1972, pp. 43-63, and discussed in Singer, Peter, "Is Racial Discrimination Arbitrary?," *Moral Issues*, ed. Jan Narveson, New York; Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 309-324.
- [5] Narveson, p. 309.
- [6] *ibid.* p. 311.
- [7] Though this conclusion most obviously applies to modern forms of naturalistic humanism, it also applies to non-Christian religions as well, but this concern is beyond my immediate focus.
- [8] *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Supplement to Vol. 61, #1, September 1987. pp. 27-42.
- [9] *ibid.* p. 34.
- [10] *ibid.* pp. 34, 35.
- [11] *ibid.* p. 35.
- [12] Narveson, p. 317.
- [13] *ibid.* p.318.
- [14] *ibid.* p. 321.
- [15] *ibid.* p. 319.
- [16] McDowell, Jeanne, "He's Got to Have It His Way," *Time*, July 17, 1989: p. 92.
- [17] Thalberg, p. 44.
- [18] Some may respond that many Christians or pseudo-Christian groups (e.g. Latter Day Saints) have used Biblical teachings to support racial prejudice. The truth is that one must distort and eisegete the objective Biblical record to reach such conclusions, whereas though one may in fact have to distort the "evolutionary record" to reach the false views mentioned above, the theory in principle permits divergent branches of human evolution.
- [19] Johnson, Paul, *Modern Times*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) p. 117.
- [20] I am indebted to Greg Bahnsen for much of the following discussion.
- [21] Calvin, John, *Calvin's Commentaries*, (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, 1984) Vol. 21, p. 52, 53.
- [22] Sowell, Thomas, *The Economics and Politics of Race: An International Perspective*, (New York: William & Morrow & Co.,1983) p. 21ff.
- [23] Block, W., "Racism: Public and Private," *The Freeman*, Vol. 39, No. 1, January 1989, p. 28.
- [24] "Racial Discrimination and the Free Market," in *The Free Market Reader* (Ludwig von Mises Press: Burlingame, 1988), pp. 40-44.