

THE GOSPEL AND OUR PREJUDICE

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The Bible shows us how to humbly critique our own cultural biases while becoming a people of God united across a diversity of races, cultures and classes.

Matthew Henry would have never produced his famous Bible commentary if his parents had lived by their society's rules. His mother was from a well-to-do family, and his father began courting her although he came from a lower rung on the social ladder. Her parents, unhappy with the humble social origins of her suitor, complained, "This Phillip Henry—we really don't know where he comes from." But their daughter, who was a strong Christian like her suitor, said, "It doesn't matter where he is from—all that matters is where he is going."

Essentially she was expressing a principle we find throughout the New Testament. Social status, economic position, and other such identities ultimately should not matter in the church. In the world some classes, races, vocations, and cultures have more power than others. But the Bible calls us to refuse to let those distinctions in the world control us within the church. We are to deliberately practice the building of relationships with other believers across traditional cultural barriers as a sign of the coming kingdom. When we begin to follow Christ and come into the church, we inevitably bump up against Christians who belong to classes, groups, or vocations we had always disdained in our life outside the church. Working-class Christians may have a dislike for Christians from wealthier or more socially refined backgrounds and vice versa. Christians from one political persuasion may be upset by the presence of those from the other end of the political spectrum. Socially polished Christians may feel uncomfortable around believers who are socially awkward or marginal (and again vice versa). If we have fairly strong ties to an ethnic group (e.g., WASP, Hispanic, Chinese, African-American), we may feel uncomfortable around people whose cultural emphases are different.

We may be tempted to respond to these differences as Peter did in Galatians 2. We may decide to sit by "those people" in church, and we may not be overtly harsh or cold to them, but we will not "eat with them." In other words, we won't embrace them as friends. We won't socialize with them, sharing our lives and homes and possessions with them. How do we overcome the natural gravity of our hearts to stick with people culturally similar to us? How do we refrain from feeling superior to those culturally unlike us?

CASE STUDY: THE EARLY CHURCH

When we go to the Bible, we find many exhortations to affirm the equal importance of all those who belong to Christ. For example, Romans 15:7 commands, "Accept one another as Christ accepted you." 1 Corinthians 12:25 instructs us to "have equal concern [regardless of ability or status] for one another." To understand the full impact of these instructions requires us to understand the setting and situation into which Paul spoke them.

The context of both situations, in Rome and in Corinth, was a controversy between parties Paul calls "the strong" and "the weak." In each church, however, the dispute was somewhat different. In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul addressed a dispute over meat offered to idols. Some Christians had decided they could

never eat food that had been offered to a pagan god or idol. (Much food sold in the market and offered in public meetings had been dedicated to some pagan god.) Other Christians did not think there was anything wrong with eating such food.

In Romans 14–15 there was a different issue. Some believed that all believers should continue to adhere to the Old Testament dietary laws. Therefore, one party insisted that everyone shun the foods forbidden by Jewish custom, while other Christians did not think there was anything wrong with eating the full range of foods.

Paul saw both churches as divided between the Weak and the Strong, with the Weak being the narrow-minded whose consciences were not oriented to God’s grace and love and who therefore readily felt condemned and defiled (1 Cor. 8:7). The Weak in both cases were the Christians who were forbidding and abstaining from various sorts of food. They were weak because they tolerated no gray areas and wanted to know whether each and every food or practice was right or wrong. They wanted a lot of rules and boundaries in order to bolster their weak consciences; they tended to be very narrow-minded and judgmental of those who didn’t obey all these rules.

The Strong, on the other hand, were the broad-minded who had a better grasp on the gospel. In Corinth they understood that in the gospel there is freedom in matters not prescribed by the Scripture. In Rome they understood that Christ had made obsolete the older ceremonial laws. Paul himself identified with the Strong, saying that “we who are strong” know that idols are nothing (1 Cor. 8:4), and therefore there was nothing wrong with eating the meat. The Strong were neither superstitious like the narrow-minded in Corinth nor legalistic like the narrow-minded in Rome.

RACE (n.): a family, tribe, people, or nation belonging to the same stock

religious, linguistic, or cultural origin or background

ETHNICITY (n): quality or affiliation of large groups of people classed according to common racial, national, tribal,

CULTURE (n): the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group

The racial-cultural issue. Most commentators note that beneath the theological issues (the nature of idols and the status of the Old Testament dietary laws) was a racial-cultural issue. In Corinth the Weak would almost certainly have been Gentile believers—former pagans with sensitive consciences about idols—while the Strong would have been the Jewish Christians who thought of the Greek gods as nonentities. (Notice that Paul, a Jew and former Pharisee, speaks of the Strong as “we” who are sure there are no gods behind the idols.) On the other hand, in Rome the Weak would almost certainly have been Jewish Christians and the Strong would have been Gentile believers, who knew that in Christ they were no longer bound to the old ceremonial cleanliness laws and regulations.

The important point to note is that in one situation, cultural sensibilities made one group *blinder* to aspects of the gospel, while in another situation those same cultural sensibilities made that same group *wiser* about the implications of the gospel. These were not simply theological disputes or simply cultural divisions, but extremely complex combinations of both.

Paul’s counsel. What was Paul’s counsel in these racially charged situations? First, to our surprise, Paul sharply criticized the Strong in both situations. He refused to look at either dispute as simply a theological issue. Even though Paul acknowledged that the Strong were theologically right (by calling them the “Strong”), he criticized them because they disdained the Weak (Rom. 15:7). So though one

side was right and the other wrong in theological terms, the subtle racism of *both* groups was exerting itself in different ways.

The Weak were letting their cultural biases distort their understanding of the gospel; the Strong were letting *their* cultural biases strangle the application of the gospel in their lives. How could this be? The Strong were refusing to alter their behavior, even though it was harming people. That is, the Jewish Christians refused to spend time gently helping the superstitious Gentile members get more educated about the gospel. Instead, according to 1 Corinthians 8:9–11, they went ahead and ate the meat; their attitude was “I can’t help it if this offends those superstitious Gentiles.” The Strong, who congratulated themselves on understanding the gospel, were acting just as self-righteous and narrow-minded as the Weak, though in a different way.

In short, while one group was theologically strong it wasn’t relationally, culturally, and spiritually strong. It understood the gospel of grace intellectually enough to come to the right position in the theological dispute, but it did not understand the gospel of grace practically enough to treat the other racial-cultural group with humility and love.

Paul called both the Strong and the Weak to “accept one another just as Christ accepted you” (Rom. 15:7). This is not the modern notion of tolerance. The secular tolerant person refuses to make any evaluations of others’ behaviors or beliefs. If you say someone is “sinning” or “wrong,” you are considered intolerant. But on the other hand, the secular tolerant person refuses to let anyone else affect or hinder the way they want to live. The attitude is “I don’t condemn anyone. But if what I am doing upsets or offends them, that’s not my problem—that’s their problem! I have the right to live my life as I want to live it.” Paul is calling Christians to almost the exact opposite of this idea of “tolerance”—he is calling them to gospel-powered humility, service, and love.

The verb translated “accept” in Romans 15:7 is also used in Romans 14:1 when Paul tells the Strong to “*receive* the one who is weak with respect to faith.” Paul recognizes that the latter person is “weak”—spiritually and theologically, for he or she does not understand God’s grace. So Paul gives a negative evaluation of the person’s character and beliefs. Yet he calls us to accept and receive—to welcome into deeply engaged relationship—those whom we evaluate as mistaken or weak.

In Romans 15:1 Paul calls the Strong to “bear the weaknesses of the weak and not please ourselves.” This cannot mean we are to adopt the errors of the weak. One commentator writes, “They are to sympathetically ‘enter into’ their attitudes, refrain from criticizing and judging them, and do what love would require toward them. Love demands that the ‘strong’ go beyond the distance implied in mere toleration.”¹ So we see that humble love is almost the opposite of modern tolerance. Tolerance refuses to do any evaluation but also refuses to let others impinge on one’s individual freedom. It says, “I accept all people, but I’m not going to let anyone affect the way I want to live.” But Paul says that we *should* evaluate the beliefs and practices of others and should also lovingly engage them by changing our behavior in order to make room for them in our lives.

THE GOSPEL ON RACE AND CULTURE

One of the most crucial ways that the Christian church embodies the gospel is in the unity of Christians who are different from one another economically, culturally, and racially. In fact, the job of the church is to show the world that people who cannot live in love and unity outside of Christ can do so in Christ. Galatians 2 provides the classic example of how the gospel changes our attitude toward our own racial pride and cultural heritage. In Acts 10–11 God showed Peter that because salvation is by grace alone,

1. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 866.

anyone—regardless of race and culture—is equally lost in sin and equally loved in Christ. Peter said, “God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. . . . I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:28, 34). Yet sometime later Paul saw Peter refusing to eat with Gentile Christians. When confronting him about his racism, he did not say, “You are breaking the rule against racism.” Rather, he said that Peter was “not acting in line with the gospel” (Gal. 2:14). To “act in line with the gospel” is to draw out the implications of the gospel—that we are sinners saved by grace—and live in conformity and consistency with that truth.

Racial prejudice is wrong because it is a denial of the very principle of grace. It is a form of self-righteousness, a way to feel acceptable and worthwhile on our own merits. One of the most common self-justifying systems is to convince ourselves of the superiority of our own race or ethnicity. This happens when we attach moral significance to things that are only matters of cultural preference, such as the differences of a time-centric (Anglo-European) versus an event-centric (South American) culture. The gospel radically undermines all this.

Thus men who are not secure in Christ cast about for spiritual life preservers with which to support their confidence, and in their frantic search they not only cling to the shreds of ability and righteousness they find in themselves, but they fix upon their race, their membership in a party, their familiar social and ecclesiastical patterns, and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as though it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straitjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ. . . . Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons . . . Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce defensive assertion of their own righteousness and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger.²

Gradually the gospel transforms our identity. Identity is a complex set of layers, for we are many things: our occupation, our ethnic heritage, our cultural values, our level of education are all part of “who we are.” The problem begins when we assign different values to the components of our identity, and thus Christian maturing is a process in which the most fundamental layer of our identity becomes our self-understanding as a new creature in Christ. As our understanding of the gospel moves deeper into the foundation of our identity, we find ourselves less shaken by professional, social, or relational changes, less driven by professional success, more open-minded about political differences, and more easily able to overcome racial prejudices. “Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free . . . to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes to do so, as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, and he is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures.”⁴

At Pentecost, the outpouring of the Spirit upon the church, and the preaching of the gospel in all the various human languages at once, was a dramatic reversal of the “curse of Babel” (Genesis 11). In the confusion of Babel, God declared that if people would not acknowledge him their human community would split and fragment. At Pentecost God shows that in the Spirit people can have a unity that transcends their national, linguistic, and cultural groups and overcomes all human barriers. Jesus insists that the unity of Christians will be a major way we witness to the world that God sent his Son (John 17:21, 23.) So one of the most crucial ways that the Christian church embodies the gospel is in the unity of Christians who are different from one another—economically, culturally, racially. In general, the job of

2. Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 198, 211–212.

3. Ibid., 199.

the church is to show the world that people who cannot live in love and unity outside of Christ *can* do so in Christ.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Repeatedly the Bible calls the Christian church a new nation. We are “fellow citizens with God’s people” (Eph. 2:19); we are a “holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9), which literally means we are a new *ethnicity*. Our relationship to each other in Christ is to be stronger than our relationship to other members of our racial and national groups. When you become a Christian, you are not primarily from Ohio or Germany or Asia; you are not primarily Anglo, African-American, Asian, or Hispanic; you are not primarily white collar or blue collar. You are a citizen of God’s nation.

The Bible says some remarkable things about race when it states that the only true division in the human race is one of faith. There are only two “nations” or “peoples” on earth: those who belong to God and those who do not (1 Peter 2:9–10). God forbids marriage between these two groups of people, unbelievers and believers (2 Cor. 6:14–16), since this is the only way, in God’s view, to marry outside of one’s people. Numbers 12:1–16 presents a striking example of God’s view of interracial marriage: Moses’ wife was a Cushite, an African with dark skin—and a believer in the Lord. Miriam, Moses’ sister, opposed the interracial marriage, and God punished her by turning her leprous, “white as snow” (v.10). God punished her prejudice by making her more white! Thus Christians have a special test for racism. If racial differences are more important to you than differences in belief, you are acting as a racist.

Despite the clear teaching that all Christians are equal in Christ regardless of race, class, or culture, it is clear that we are not all *equivalent* or interchangeable. The Bible indicates that racial-cultural distinctives are not superficial or unimportant. For example, we are told that the eternal city of God in its final state will be enriched because “the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it” and “the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it” (Rev. 21:24, 26). In other words, each culture and race brings particular gifts to the glory of God.

When Jesus was raised from the dead and received his resurrection body, he maintained all his human particularities. That is, he was still male (not female). He was still Jewish (not a Gentile). This seems to indicate that our different cultures and races have different abilities, glories, and splendors, analogous to the differing gifts of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12). These differences won’t simply melt away when God returns to make the world new.

It is a mistake, then, to think that racial-cultural differences are superficial and to insist that in the church we need to drop our cultural distinctives and “just be Christians together.” There is no such thing as an expression of Christianity that is not embedded in a particular human culture. There is no neutral, culture-free, pure expression of Christian faith. Jesus didn’t come to earth as a generalized being; in becoming human he had to become a *particular* human, a socially and culturally situated person. He was male, Jewish, working-class. In the same way, actual Christian practice must have both a biblical form and a cultural form. For example, the Bible clearly directs us to use music to praise God, but as soon as we choose a particular song or musical genre, we enter a cultural form. As soon as we choose a language, a particular level of emotional expressiveness, or even a sermon illustration, we are moving toward the social context of some people and away from the social context of others. At Pentecost, everyone heard the sermon in his or her own language and dialect. But since Pentecost, we can never be all things to all people at the very same time, and thus adaptation to culture is inevitable.

PREJUDICE AND PERPECTIVE

As we have seen, our self-justifying hearts use racial and cultural gifts in sinful ways. Yet we have also seen that racial and cultural distinctions are created by God to enrich the human race, as differing gifts

enrich the body of Christ. This means that we all have cultural prejudices, which we should lose as we grow in the gospel; but we also have cultural perspectives that we cannot and should not lose because they enhance our gospel communities. The great issue, then, is in understanding the difference between prejudices and perspectives.

For example, African Christianity is filled with emphases on spirits, the supernatural, and exorcism. Most American Christianity is not. African Christians can easily say, “Your European Enlightenment culture has blinded you to what is obvious in the Bible—the reality of the spirit world. Your cultural prejudice has distorted your Christianity.” But European and North American Christians can just as easily insist that the Africans’ pre-Christian culture was superstitious and now their Christianity has been distorted by their culture. Who is right? The reality is that both forms of Christianity are distorted by cultural prejudice, and yet both forms embody a legitimately different cultural perspective. Every form of Christianity is to some extent adapted to a human culture. Every church has, to some degree, brought cultural elements into its form of Christianity. Individualistic cultures miss out on the communal aspects of Christianity. Authoritarian cultures miss out on the freedom of conscience and grace aspects of Christianity. None of us gets it right!

As a result, Miroslav Volf says, we are all to be like Abraham, who was called to depart from his family and people but to remain a pilgrim.⁴ Volf concludes that every Christian must get distance from his or her home culture yet stay connected to it as well. A Chinese Christian must not think that to gain acceptance in a new culture means denouncing his Chinese heritage. Yet he must seek critical distance from his culture of origin and must be willing to critique the Chinese culture by identifying its idols. One of the main ways we do this is through exercising accountability and love with other Christians across racial and cultural lines to the fullest degree possible. Other brothers and sisters can help us see our own culture’s idols.

Another helpful writer here is Lamin Sanneh, who points out that Christianity does not *replace* our culture with some other culture but rather *converts* it.⁵ Sanneh demonstrates how African Christianity began to grow exponentially when it became clear that Africans didn’t have to become Europeans to become Christians; rather, they had to embrace their Africanness and refocus some elements of their culture in light of the truth of the gospel. Much in their culture had to change. Christ gave them distance from their African culture, in order for them to critique it. But they didn’t ultimately have to become European or Asian to become Christians. Pentecost demonstrates that there is no one human language or culture that is more Christian than another.

Galatians 3:28 is often used to imply that cultural differences are erased inside the church—“there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.” But notice this from 1 Corinthians 1: “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.” Here we see Paul distinguishing between Jewish culture, which is more concerned with practical action, and Greek culture, which is more concerned with abstract reasoning. The gospel confronts both cultures in different ways (i.e., the cross is too weak for the Jews and too foolish for the Greeks). Gospel-believing Jews and Greeks now have a different cultural perspective. For the Jewish Christian, the cross becomes true power. For the Greek Christian, the cross becomes true strength. The gospel re-creates Christianity in the soil of each culture.

4. See his chapter “Distance and Belonging” in *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

5. Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003).

In conclusion, the gospel is neither absolute in its approach (claiming that there is an absolutely pure Christian culture) nor relativistic in its approach (claiming that all cultural forms are neutral and equally valid). Into each culture Christianity brings a core of transcultural, transformative absolute values that both judges and completes the culture's values and mores.

THE GOSPEL AND CLASS

When it comes to addressing class divisions, the book of James has the strongest things to say. James 1:9–10 tells us that the poor Christian “ought to take pride in his high position” but the rich Christian “ought to take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.” What a paradoxically wonderful statement. Every Christian is at the same time a sinner who deserves death *and* an adopted child of God, fully accepted and loved. This is true of Christians regardless of social status. James proposes that the poor person who becomes a believer will benefit by thinking about his new glorified, spiritual status, since the world demeans his lowly social standing. And on the other hand, James proposes, the rich person who becomes a believer will benefit by dwelling on his newfound realization of sinfulness before God, since the world provides only acclaim of his high social standing.

Again in James 2:1–4, James warns Christians not to show preference or favoritism for the rich within the church. “If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man . . . ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves?” The poor person, whose rough speech, manner, and clothing are disdained in the world, must not be treated disrespectfully in the community of Jesus. Nor should the wealthy be treated with inordinate respect. While the world makes one’s social status and bank account balance into one’s bottom-line identity, the gospel demotes such things to the periphery. Thus, James concludes, “if you show favoritism, you sin” (2:9), and “faith without deeds is dead” (2:26). If our faith is void of respect for those of different classes and without practical concern for the poor, it is dead; it is not gospel faith.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The goal, then, is to become one of the “Strong,” gospel-believing and gospel-living Christians who accept others as Christ accepted us, who are willing to stretch themselves culturally in order to make others feel more at home, and who choose to make room in their lives for the Weak. The deeper the gospel enters our thinking and becomes foundational to our identity, the less culturally rigid we will be. Following are a few suggestions for becoming spiritually strong when it comes to overcoming prejudice.

- + Do not be too quick to deny the presence of racism. Although we may be free of conscious forms of prejudice, we should be alert for subtle forms of it in our thinking. Self-examination is important, and I would go so far as to say that if you don’t see any sense of racial or cultural superiority in yourself, then you aren’t looking deep enough. This is true even if you are a member of a historically victimized group, since minority or persecuted groups can easily feel morally superior to the dominant groups.
- + Recognize and resist the tendency to stick only with those who are racially and culturally similar to you.
- + Understand that different cultures have somewhat different definitions of basic Christian virtues. For example, those immersed in Western individualism may view the traditionalism of Asian cultures as oppressive, while those raised in the collectivism of traditional Asian culture may view Western culture as deeply self-absorbed. Are not both partially correct? We must recognize the legitimacy of both cultural perspectives, as well as being mindful of the potential for cultural prejudices. Since none of us are looking at anyone else from a culture-neutral position, we must be slow to condemn and remain patient with others.

- + Try to see things from the other person's perspective as sympathetically as possible, with the expectation of gaining new insights you didn't have before.
- + Congregations that want to embody the gospel to the world should have a bias toward being multiethnic. The church should seek to reflect its actual geographic community and should be as representatively multiethnic as its community. This is done by seeking the practices of the Strong (as mentioned above) and by opening leadership positions to members of all representative cultural groups.
- + We must remember there are limits to the cultural range of any particular church. As stated earlier, there is no culture-neutral way to do things. Language, decision making, communication, attitudes toward authority, worship music—everything in the church will have to be decided one way or the other, and these decisions will invariably favor one cultural approach over another. A church needs to open itself up to a variety of people and cultural groups but cannot be infinitely flexible. In the end, churches should recognize the inevitability of having a “leading cultural sensibility” but seek to hold it humbly and self-critically.

CONCLUSION

Racism, classism, and cultural imperialism must be rooted out of our hearts with the help of the gospel. To the greatest degree possible, every congregation should model the coming unity of all races and cultures in Christ. And across an entire city, the body of Christ should reach out to and include every people group and find ways to celebrate our diversity. This will occur only when individual Christians become “Strong,” accepting one another as Christ accepted us (Rom. 15:7).

If the Church is to be effective in advocating and achieving a new social order . . . it must itself be a new social order. The deepest root of the contemporary malaise of Western culture is an individualism which denies . . . that we grow into true humanity only in relationships of faithfulness and responsibility toward one another. The local congregation . . . stands in the wider community of the neighborhood and the nation not primarily as the promoter of programs for social change (although it will be that) but primarily as itself the foretaste of a different social order. Its members will be advocates for human liberation by being themselves liberated. Its actions for justice and peace will be, and will be seen to be, the overflow of a life in Christ, where God's justice and God's peace are already an experienced treasure.⁶

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6. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 231.