

What Does the Bible Say about Race and Racism?

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There is one human race. Each person is made in God's image. Sometimes people make unfair, cruel, or dehumanizing judgments of people from other ethnic backgrounds. The world calls this sin "racism." The Bible calls it "partiality," which in the original Greek more literally means "superficiality." As the Creator of all people, God loves all people equally, and He calls us to do the same.

One Common Image

Humans (but no other creatures) were created in God's image. "God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." (Genesis 1:27) The image of God is what makes murdering any person a grave evil. (Genesis 9:6) To hurt or harm a fellow human being is to attack God's own work of creation.

One Common Ancestry

The Bible teaches that Adam and Eve were created by God as the first parents—the ancestors of all people since then. (Genesis 2:18–24, 3:20) After the flood, only Noah, his three sons, and their wives (eight people in all) survived to repopulate the earth. (Genesis 9:1; 2 Peter 2:5) From Noah's sons and their wives came all the nations of the earth (Genesis 9:32). Seventy distinct tribes spread out from Babel, eventually forming the various nationalities of the world. (Genesis 10) As St. Paul explained, "[God] has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings." (Acts 17:26)

One Common Problem

The Bible teaches that all people, regardless of ethnicity, share one common problem: sin. "Original sin" refers to all people's common inheritance of the sin of Adam. (Genesis 3; Romans 5) "Actual sin" refers to the ways that each individual rebels against God in thought, word, or deed. All people bear the guilt of both original and actual sin.

The Bible specifically states that ethnicity does not excuse one group of people, nor does ethnicity condemn another group of people. "There is no distinction," wrote St. Paul. (Romans 10:12) "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. ... For the

wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 3:23, 6:23)

The typical pattern of sin sometimes varies by ethnicity or culture, but sin is sin either way. The Bible emphasizes that Gentiles violated God's moral law, even though they should have known better because God had written His law in the hearts of all people. (Romans 2:15) The Bible emphasizes that Jews, who already had God's Word, tended to fall into a different sin: rejecting God's Messiah who was born from their own people, and instead trusting in their own abilities to be moral, often by keeping commandments of their own invention. (Matthew 15:3–9, 23:1–29) Even when the pattern of typical sins varies by ethnicity or culture, the common fact remains: all people have sinned and need a savior.

One Common Solution

No matter anyone's ancestry, one and the same savior, Jesus Christ, came to earth to live in each person's place, to die for each person's sins, and to rise back to life to bring each person eternal life. "I am the way, the truth, and the life," said Jesus, "No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14:6) "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) In a sense, salvation came "for the Jew first" and then "also for the Greek." (Romans 1:16) But this historical unfolding of God's plan always had all people, Jews and Gentiles, in mind. (Genesis 12:3; 2 Samuel 22:50; Psalm 117:1; Isaiah 11:10, 42:1,6; Malachi 1:11)

Although an individual congregation might consist of people with a common ancestry—simply because they tend to live together in a particular nation—the church at large has never been confined by culture. At Pentecost, three thousand people from Africa, Europe, and the Near East heard Peter's sermon and were baptized into Christ. (Acts 2:5–12,41) In the centuries that followed, bishops from the North African cities of Alexandria and Carthage as well as the the European city of Rome, plus other cities to the east, all shared in the leadership of the church. European Christians have African bishops—such as the dark-skinned Athanasius and the Roman-Berber mixed ancestry Augustine—to thank for the preservation of the one true faith. Meanwhile,

African Christians have Europeans like Martin Luther to thank for proclaiming the Gospel with clarity. Orthodoxy has no correlation to “race.”

St. John’s vision of heaven repeatedly emphasizes that people from “all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues” will be gathered together in heaven. (Revelation 7:9; cf. 5:9, 14:6)

What about God’s Apparent Favoritism?

In the Old Testament, any apparent “favoring” of the Jews had to do with their faith in God—faith which Gentiles could and at times did share. God did not favor one group over the other in terms of biology or “race.” The very moment that God began to identify Abraham’s descendants (the Jews) as a special kind of people, He also declared His intention to bring all people under a common blessing: “in you [Abraham] all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:3)

“Jewishness” did not map to “race” as people might expect today. Many Jews probably had medium complexion, but Moses himself married a black African (Numbers 12:1). Even the highest festival of Judaism—the Passover—was available to people of other ancestries. Moses led a “mixed” population out of Egypt (Exodus 12:38) and provided instructions for how to include non-Jews in the Passover celebration. (Numbers 9:14) The Old Testament repeatedly emphasized God’s love for Jews and non-Jews alike. (Joshua 6:17, cf. Matthew 1:5; 2 Kings 5:1–19; Isaiah 42:6; Ezekiel 39:23; Amos 9:11–12)

In the New Testament, we find once again that God had selected the Jews for a special purpose and that God also intended to bless all people through the Jews. Jesus, the Savior of the world, was born a Jew, but Jesus Himself ministered to Samaritans (John 4), to a Syro-Phoenecian woman (Mark 7:24–30), and to a Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5–13)—to list but three examples.

The Pan-Ethnic Great Commission

At the conclusion of His earthly ministry, Jesus specifically instructed His disciples to share the good news of salvation by baptizing and teaching “all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Baptism, indeed, unites all people—whether “Jew or Greek”—into one faith in one Savior. (Galatians 3:26–28; Ephesians 4:5)

In both message and personnel, Christian evangelism was pan-ethnic from the start. The Galilean and Judean apostles taught a multi-ethnic crowd on Pentecost. (Acts 2) An Ethiopian man was one of the earliest converts to Christianity. (Acts 8:26–40) Jesus commissioned Paul to be a missionary to the Gentiles. (Acts 9:15) Peter shared the Gospel with a Roman centurion’s household. (Acts 10) Luke frequently referred to “Jews and Greeks” as being among the people who heard the Word of God and believed. (Acts 14:1, 18:4, 19:10)

Apollos—an African-born Bible teacher—partnered with Paul and Aquila (both born in what is today Turkey) to share the Gospel in Greece. (Acts 18:24–24) Christianity was *never* limited to one culture.

Christian worship is not defined by picking one culture over another, but by selecting hymns and liturgies that best teach the biblical doctrines of Law and Gospel to all of God’s people. Around the world, Christians of various ethnicities are united to each another by their shared heritage of God’s Word in the church’s use of Hebrew (*Hosanna, Hallelujah, Amen*), Greek (*Agape, Alleluia, Kyrie Eleison*), and Latin (*Te Deum, Gloria in Excelsis, Nunc Dimittis*).

No Partiality, No Racism, with God

The Bible acknowledges that ethnic differences exist, but the Bible constantly affirms that sin is the common problem of all people and that Jesus is the one and only Savior for all people.

The Bible does not use the term “racism,” which is a modern term, but the Bible does condemn the sin of “partiality,” which is a form of injustice arising from discrimination. Loving God and loving our neighbor means avoiding partiality, avoiding racism. “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” (James 2:8–9)

The old myth that Noah’s son Ham was cursed with black skin is a total fabrication. The curse applied specifically to Canaan, Ham’s son who begat the Canaanites. (Genesis 9:22–25) No curse applied to Ham’s other sons—Mizraim, Cush, and Put—who settled Africa. (Genesis 10:6) Nothing about skin color is mentioned in the curse. American slaveholders who twisted these passages to support racial oppression were guilty of dishonestly handling God’s Word and dishonorably treating their neighbors.

Far from demonizing black-skinned persons, the Old Testament identifies the Ethiopian Ebed-Melech as a hero of faith who rescued the prophet Jeremiah. (Jeremiah 38:7–13, 39:15–18) God, who faults every hint of injustice, surely condemns racism. “There is no partiality with God.” (Romans 2:11)

More positively stated, God proclaims His love for all people through Jesus Christ. By reconciling us to the Father, Christ also restores our relationships to one another—as brothers and sisters gathered from every nation, tribe, people, and language.

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