

Speaking About...

Racism

OUR GOD: Reconsidering Division

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"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"— Revelation 7:9–10

God's Word On Tribe and Tongues

The picture John paints in this passage reveals a moment, yet to come, when people from every corner of the globe, people from different cultures and ethnicities, people with different skin colors and tongues, come together to praise our God for the salvation that belongs to him and to the Lamb—our Lord Jesus Christ. Our. Not yours. Not mine. Our. This simple fact pervades every aspect of our shared human existence: there is only one God for all of us. It does not mean, of course, that everyone trusts in our God or understands all that Jesus Christ did and does for us. It does mean that no other God exists and that the entire world has always had only one true God—our God, the one to whom salvation belongs. Our God, and no other, took on human flesh and in doing so, affirmed humanity as a whole.

The picture in Revelation 7 is about a time to come, but it is not the only place in the scriptures where we hear about different cultures, different ethnicities, and different tongues acknowledging, shouting out to our shared God. Consider Philippians 2:10–11, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." For everything else that text does, it also reminds us that one day, every single person, every single tongue, will confess the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord, regardless of whether or not they believe it. The question is not whether the whole of humanity will bow before our God, it is a question of when. And although we long for the return of our Lord and sinless perfection, we need to remember that our life now is meant to be a reflection of what is to come. We are called to live in light of the Last Day, not in spite of it.

Sadly, though, the picture of what is to come is often not what shapes our life now. We all let fear, mistrust, suspicion, and division govern our existence. Racism, sectarianism, nationalism, and a whole host of other 'isms' and ideologies, speak loudly in our moment and, by all appearances, the

church is not immune to the allure of those voices. This is not to suggest that all division is inherently problematic; St. Paul himself notes that sometimes division is present to show who is being faithful. However, the division that shows faithfulness cannot be a division based upon something like skin color, ethnicity, or language. When those things become the basis for division, either individually or collectively, the church is called to speak louder than any 'ism' or ideology, because those kinds of divisions suggest that some skin colors, ethnicities, and languages are not as beloved by God.

Theologians have long looked to the tower of Babel as an explanation for the existence of the myriad of cultures, languages, and ethnicities in the world. The historical account of Babel does provide more than an explanation. It demonstrates unequivocally that God is the author of those divisions. Genesis 1 and 2 speak clearly that the whole of creation, including all humanity, has God as its Creator. Then Genesis 11 explains that the languages we hear and the people groups we see are a result of the work of God. It is necessary to point out that the existence of these languages and ethnicities began at Babel as a punishment of sorts. In order to prevent humanity from honoring itself, God confused the language of the people and scattered them. The question that presents itself is, why would John's picture affirm that those languages and ethnicities will still exist on the Last Day? If they were only a punishment, would not the restoration of the world on the last day undo that diversity?

The Witness of the Scriptures

The Old and New Testament Scriptures suggest an emphatic answer to that question: distinctive languages and ethnicities do matter to God. Consider the picture in Isaiah 25:6–8:

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away
from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.*

Those attending this heavenly feast, where death is swallowed up, are from all nations and peoples. In fact, more than once the prophets foretell how all nations, not just His chosen Israel, will stream to God's holy mountain. These instances of all nations and all peoples are not claims of universal salvation, but rather are claims that people from all sorts of

cultural and ethnic backgrounds are people who will experience the salvation that belongs to our God. Secondly, the picture in Acts of Pentecost, the day when God pours out his Spirit on all kinds of people, is a picture that affirms the languages of those who are hearing Peter preach in their native tongues. Notice the words Luke uses in Acts 2:5-11: Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."

Men from all these nations heard about the salvation that belongs to our God in their own language. Some have said that Babel is inverted at Pentecost, and to a certain extent that is true, but not in the way many think. The miracle at Pentecost is not that everyone now understands the same language (thus undoing the curse at Babel). Rather, Pentecost affirms that each language can bear the Gospel. The men from every nation do not hear a united language, but they do each hear the Gospel in their own language. In the miracle at Pentecost, the confusion of Babel/the variety of languages is not something that inhibits the work of God. Rather, as KJV translator Lancelot Andrewes point out, there were not yet tongues enough to praise God.

When taken together, the pictures painted throughout the scriptures regarding the Last Day and Pentecost suggest not only that God is a God who retains diversity in the age to come, but He is one who values all people of every nation. Pentecost, for everything else it does, affirms every language and all humanity. Thus, to live in such a way that rejects some people or nationalities, that intentionally divides on the basis of ethnicity or language, goes against the work of our God.

The Problem

Division that hurts people is problematic. That kind of division exists, and it can be disastrously divisive when one person hurts another or when a society structuralizes the hurt in terms of policy, law, or mores. While it would be easy to explore how acts of racism or sectarianism—person to person or community to community—violate the whole of the tenor of the second table of the Ten Commandments,

it should never be forgotten that they always violate the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." Suggesting that some people are not as worthy as others because of skin color or language, to receive salvation or just plain respect, goes against our God. Our one True God so loved the world that he gave it His only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

What Can I Do?

If the above is correct, the question becomes, what do we do about it? How can we recognize and combat division, especially racism? The answer to that question has both a personal and corporate dimension. On a personal level, we have to be willing to admit that all of us, rightly or wrongly, function with biases that need to be admitted, and if necessary, challenged and changed. Racism is sometimes evidenced through the actions of one person toward another, like the utterance of a slur or the clutching of a purse. Certainly, those are not the only ways racism is evidenced. Racism is not just individualized actions. Racism is not just about the actions I commit or fail to stop. Think about it. If sinners created the structures in society, those structures are not without sin. Then we also need to be committed to working to reshape society to better reflect the truth about the image of the one God we all bear. Thus, there is also a corporate dimension to racism and division with regards to the passage of laws or advocacy of policies that aim to redress wrongs and support the common good.

When there is need, we often care for people individually. But we can also work together supporting the passage of laws that benefit all people groups. We often work better together, being more productive than we ever could be as individuals. The same is true for combating racism. While the world will never be free of it, let's take the time to work on ourselves; and with others, let's work together to ensure that no one is told, implicitly or explicitly, that they are of lesser worth because of the color of their skin, the language they speak, or where they live.



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