

A Theology of Ethnicity, Race & Justice

A Theological Paper for the People of
West Shore Evangelical Free Church

Introduction

A theological paper is an effort to bring clarity and guidance to a complex issue. Its main work is to inform us and shape the way we think. We must also remember that every form of theological exercise, including a paper like this, aims to do more than inform. Theology done well shapes our hearts and lives and produces fuller worship of God.

We, the elders of West Shore Evangelical Free Church, believe a theological paper on ethnicity, race and justice is necessary for two reasons. First, because there is much confusion and division among Christians around the subjects of ethnicity, race and justice, we want to help God's people think biblically about these topics. Second, because there is work to be done in our hearts, we need a biblical framework so God can change our feelings and actions as He desires. We trust and hope that this work will help shape our lives so that God is increasingly glorified among us.

The content of this paper covers foundational theologies of ethnicity, race and justice. We begin with these to give a picture of how the Bible speaks about and develops these subjects from beginning to end. After offering these theologies, we offer examples of how to apply these concepts to some of the more relevant terms and philosophies in the current conversation about them. The list of terms is incomplete, but we trust they give an example of how to apply biblical thinking and that provides a road map of how to do so with other terms and ideas.

We recognize our assessment of philosophies and terms often found in the secular conversation around race and justice is more critical than affirming. This is the case because we do not find that these secular ideas help establish the justice and righteousness God desires. We recognize that the limited scope of our assessment could leave the impression that we are more interested in criticizing attempts to pursue justice than pursuing it ourselves or that we believe ethnic injustice is a minor issue. This would be extremely harmful, especially given the disproportionate and egregious impact of racism on our non-white brothers, sisters and neighbors. We believe there are few categories that represent a greater opportunity for gospel extension than Christians pursuing reconciliation and justice along racial lines. We believe these things are close to the heart of God and commit ourselves to grow in them. We invite you to join us in doing the same and hope this paper serves you and our whole church family to that end.

Guiding Convictions

In addition to our desire to bring clarity to these issues for believers, we, the elders of West Shore Evangelical Free Church, are guided by the following convictions in producing this paper:

- **To act rightly, we must think rightly.**
God is always at work to bring justice and righteousness into His world. (Isaiah 16:5, Jeremiah 9:24). Our job is to join Him in this work. (Proverbs 21:3, Psalm 106:3) Therefore, we present this paper not as an end unto itself, but so that we might think rightly about these issues and seek justice and do righteousness together as a church. (James 1:22-25)



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- **The Scriptures are a sufficient source for truth and a guide in all matters of faith and practice.**

The Bible provides all we need to be saved by God and to trust and obey Him. (2 Timothy 3:15-17, Proverbs 30:5-6) Therefore, all that we need to know the heart of God on matters of ethnicity, race and justice is provided in God's word. This does not preclude learning from extra-biblical sources, but it reminds us to measure all things by God's word and gives us confidence that we can know and obey God's will if we have no resource other than the Scriptures.

- **In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, charity. In all things, Christ.¹**

In conversations about ethnicity, race and justice, there are biblical truths upon which all believers must agree. There are also practices and ideas about which believers may disagree and over which they should not break fellowship. Discerning the difference can be challenging, and we hope this paper helps toward that end. This challenge also reminds us that we are always to assume the best of one another and relate to each other with the grace, humility, love and gentleness that glorifies God.

A Biblical Theology of Ethnicity & Race

1. All people are made by God and for God, in His image. As a result, all people are equal in nature, have the opportunity for redemption before God, have inestimable value and should be treated with dignity and honor. (Genesis 1:27)
2. All human beings descend from Adam and Eve, created by God in the beginning. Therefore, all people are of the same race, which we call humankind. Race, defined by shared skin color, is not a biblical category but a social construct often used to perpetuate sinful attempts to categorize people as inferior or superior. (Genesis 2:4-25)
3. Ethnicity, defined by shared culture, language, experience and skin color, is a biblical category. God displays His own nature's diversity within unity by creating different ethnic groups. He will redeem people from every ethnicity for His glory. Therefore, God delights in ethnic diversity in His creation and in His Church. All that honors God in each ethnicity should be celebrated, and all that does not should be condemned and corrected. (Genesis 11:7-9, Genesis 12:3, Matthew 28:19-20, Revelation 5:9, Revelation 7:9)
4. The primary identity of every person is defined by their relationship to God. While ethnicity is a part of our identity, it is not what defines us first or most. As those reconciled to God through Christ, Christians should recognize this fact and always see their primary identity as children of God, not as members of a certain ethnic group. (Galatians 3:27-28, Ephesians 2:11-22)
5. Racism is sin and is caused by sin. It is not rooted first in sociological realities but spiritual ones. We may define racism as believing a person possesses more or less value and dignity or treating them with partiality or prejudice based upon their ethnicity. This sin can manifest itself in individual relationships or systems and structures in society and result from omission or commission. The sin of racism may take particularly egregious forms when committed by people with power, but any person can be guilty of this sin. Because racism is first a spiritual issue, it ultimately requires a spiritual solution. Also, because racism is caused by sin and

¹ Evangelical Free Church of America, *EFCA Distinctives* [website], <https://go.efca.org/resources/document/efca-distinctives>, (accessed 6 January 2022).



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reinforced by our ethnic cultures, Christians understand racism is good at hiding itself from us and is difficult to root out. (Genesis 11:1-9, Ephesians 2:11-14, James 2:1-4, Galatians 2:11-14, 2 Corinthians 4:4, Galatians 3:1-6, Romans 7:15-20)

6. The gospel is the only solution for all sin, including racism. God has reconciled people to Himself and one another through the gospel. Therefore, it is good, right and necessary for Christians to pursue this reconciliation to one another as a demonstration of God's love and the power of the gospel. The Church is meant to be the living embodiment of this reconciling work. Any failure of Christians to love people of other ethnicities is a violation of the gospel of salvation by grace through faith. (Ephesians 2:1-10, Ephesians 2:11-22, Galatians 2:11-14, Galatians 6:10)
7. Our reconciliation to one another across ethnic lines will be finally and perfectly complete when Christ returns to establish God's kingdom in full on the earth. (Revelation 5:9-10, Revelation 7:9-12, Revelation 21:1-7)

A Biblical Theology of Justice

1. The foundation of justice is God's nature. He is the final arbiter of what is just and what is unjust, and justice cannot be determined by human reason alone. As a result, justice must be based on moral absolutes revealed by God and cannot be culturally constructed. True principles of justice apply to all people across time and location. (Jeremiah 9:23-24, Psalm 9:7-8, Isaiah 61:8, Exodus 20:1-17, Matthew 22:34-40)
2. Justice includes both the correction and punishment of wrong and the restoration of those to whom wrong is done. We call these the retributive and restorative aspects of justice. (Exodus 23:6-7, Deuteronomy 10:18-19, Proverbs 21:15)
3. Justice requires radical generosity. Because everything we have is from God, we see that it must be used for His glory and the good of others, not just ourselves. (Deuteronomy 24:17-22, Deuteronomy 15:7-8, 2 Corinthians 8)
4. Justice requires a special concern for the poor and oppressed in generosity and assuring equal treatment under the law. (Deuteronomy 10:18, Deuteronomy 27:19, Psalm 82:3, Psalm 41:1, Psalm 103:6, Zechariah 7:9-10)
5. Justice requires personal impartiality and equal treatment under the law for all people. Individually, we must treat all people with dignity, befitting their nature as God's image-bearers. Corporately, justice requires all people to receive equal treatment under the law. (Leviticus 24:22, Deuteronomy 24:14-15, Proverbs 2:7-9, Isaiah 11:4)
6. Justice requires equal treatment of all people under the law but does not require equal outcomes in opportunity and prosperity for all people. Disparities of outcome may result from present or historical injustice but may also be the result of other factors. (Psalm 37:28, Galatians 6:7-8)
7. Justice requires an understanding of both individual and corporate responsibility. All people are judged individually by God for eternal life and reward. No person is guilty of sin simply because they belong to, or are classified as part of, a particular group. (An exception to this would be when a person chooses to belong to a group whose purpose and values are in direct opposition to God's word.) Therefore, we should be judged here on earth for our own sins, not



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the sins of others. However, we may bear responsibility before the Lord for the sin of a group we belong to when we actively participate in that sin, help cultivate an environment that fosters that sin or fail to prevent that sin when it was in our power to do so.

Because the Bible affirms aspects of corporate responsibility for sin, it also invites us to consider aspects of corporate repentance for them. The way we bear responsibility for the sins of a group can vary, therefore different expressions of sorrow and culpability are called for. We find the following categories to be helpful:

- Recognition: I acknowledge what happened, and I see the negative effects of those sins of omission or commission.
- Remorse: I feel terrible for what has happened.
- Renunciation: I reject what has taken place in the past and repudiate those beliefs, words, thoughts or actions.
- Repentance: I have sinned against God and will turn away from this evil and strive after greater obedience to God's law in my life.²

(2 Corinthians 5:10, Daniel 9, Numbers 16, 1 Corinthians 5:1-6)

Related Terms & Philosophies

The theologies of ethnicity, race and justice outlined above represent a broad statement of the teaching of Scripture on these issues. These theologies represent a grid to be applied to different ideas, movements and philosophies related to ethnicity, race and justice. Because we know it can be challenging to apply broad statements of truth to specific situations, we offer the following commentary on a few common ideas and terms in the current conversation about ethnicity, race and justice.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a philosophy born in the legal field but is now applied in various disciplines across our society. CRT has been at the center of much discussion regarding ethnicity, race and justice. While CRT borrows several biblical ideas, its underlying framework is unbiblical. We encourage believers to reject it as a tool to be used in God's work of reconciliation and establishing justice.

- When secular philosophies assume biblical ideas, we must be careful not to reject biblical truths because we reject the broader philosophy putting them to use (and typically manipulating biblical truths to an end aligned with their worldview). CRT affirms the pervasiveness of sin when relating to racial injustice, that race is a social construct (not a biological one), that humans are prone to misuse power and that there is value in learning from someone who has a lived experience in a particular area. The Scriptures teach and affirm each of these ideas, and we encourage believers to make sure they seek ways to live out these biblical tenets. Equally important, we encourage believers to remember that seeking to do justice and doing the work of reconciliation across ethnic lines is gospel work. We should seek to join God in this work as God leads and calls. Rejecting CRT as a framework for this work

² Kevin DeYoung, "Toward a Theology of Apology", *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), 7 June, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/toward-theology-apology/>.



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does not mean the work itself is not good and necessary for us; it rather affirms the shortcomings of this specific philosophy to solve what is a spiritual issue.

- Here are the reasons we believe CRT is an unbiblical framework:
 - CRT does not have a category for sin. Therefore, it views injustice as a sociological rather than a theological issue. As such, it offers superficial solutions to a problem much deeper than it is willing to recognize. (The problem is our rebellion against God and subsequent separation from Him and one another.)
 - CRT views most injustice through the lens of power and oppression. While these are categories the Bible recognizes, this approach raises them to a primary marker of identity that a Christian worldview reserves for our relational standing with God. In addition, CRT fails to acknowledge that power can be used correctly, and that people are not power-abusers or oppressed solely because they belong to a certain ethnic group.
 - CRT denies the Christian doctrines of revelation and scriptural sufficiency by arguing that truth cannot be known on certain subjects by those who do not possess specific racial identities. CRT suggests that truth can be contingent on the experience and view of people, rather than an objective reality we must seek to know and adhere to.
 - CRT denies that people from oppressed groups can be guilty of racism. This is because it views racism as predominately, if not strictly, a structural issue and, therefore, not something someone from a group lacking power can commit. This view fails to treat racism seriously enough as a sin issue, but rather merely a sociological one. It also fails to see that all humans share this sinfulness and thereby can be guilty of the same sins in their inner person whether they possess or lack power. This approach also emphasizes our corporate identity and culpability over our individual identity and culpability in a way that seems out of step with an understanding of the distinction between our position under the Old and New Covenants in Scripture.
 - CRT prioritizes a lens of power and oppression. It often seeks to dismantle systems without offering a better solution. A biblical worldview is motivated by and seeks change according to a vision of God's kingdom and its ethics. This invites us to dismantle some systems, reform others and work within still others to bring about justice and righteousness. We do this while recognizing that all justice and righteousness will be approximate until Christ returns and establishes His kingdom in full.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality was originally a theory in law proposing that every person inhabits more than one category of identity (Example: ethnicity and gender). As a result, different forms of discrimination may be experienced by a person based upon the overlap between these categories of identity. This basic premise is neither objectionable nor unbiblical.

Think about Old Testament laws that serve to protect the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner in Deuteronomy 24:19-22. God seeks to protect these people because of their vulnerability. We can imagine that someone who is both an orphan and a sojourner in the cultural context of the Old



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Testament may have been even more vulnerable to harm than someone who was only one or the other.

Despite this original understanding, in everyday use, intersectionality has become a way to determine how valid someone's opinion is on certain subjects, based upon the number of marginalized categories of identity they possess. That understanding runs counter to a biblical worldview. Considering this, we encourage believers in the following ways:

- See the value of listening to and learning from people who are not like you. God has given us different genders, ethnicities, gifts and experiences. Particularly within the body of Christ, we should value learning from people who bring a different viewpoint to a situation because of these God-given parts of their identity. We should recognize that these other perspectives will be highly valuable when discovering and submitting to the truth of God's word.
- Remember that truth is objective. It is not determined by a person's experience or any category of their identity.
- Remember that truth is knowable. As Christians, we believe God's word reveals all we need to discern and apply truth in any situation. Your ability to do that is not determined by your possession or lack of possession of any category of identity.
- Remember that the primary marker of identity for any Christian is that we are children of God. This defines us above any other part of our identity, such as ethnicity and gender.

White Fragility

White fragility is a term introduced by Robin DiAngelo and explained in her book by the same name. She sums up white fragility as the defensive reaction many white people have when their racial worldviews, positions or advantages are challenged. She suggests that this defensiveness protects white peoples' comfort and positions of power in a racially inequitable society. Beyond this definition, DiAngelo also argues that racism is unavoidable for white people and that white people place an undue burden on people of color when they ask them to help them think through issues of race. Also, when white people ask genuine questions and even share expressions of remorse, those actions are still viewed as intentional or unintentional efforts to maintain power. Finally, a white person can't use objective standards to assess situations without having their conclusions dictated by their inherent racism. This is only a summary of the ideas connected with white fragility, and we would always encourage believers to engage directly with the source material, putting it up against the inerrant word of God.

Considering the above summary regarding white fragility, we would encourage believers in the following ways:

- It is helpful to remember that we may hold views that are less than just and righteous related to ethnicity. When our views are challenged, our first reaction should not be defensiveness but to return to God's word to assess if our views honor God or are unjust and prejudiced.
- No person is guilty of racism, or any sin, by belonging to a group (barring the exception noted in the section titled: A Biblical Theology of Justice, point number 7).
- Our sinful attitudes and thoughts will seek to hide from us, but God is good. He reveals them as we yield ourselves to Him and His work in us so that we might repent and walk in increasing righteousness.



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- God reveals what is true. Therefore, truth is objective, absolute and knowable. We can assess all situations through God's truth and need never feel that our preexisting biases or sin struggles make it impossible for us to apply that truth to a situation. At the same time, our awareness that we are prone to do so imperfectly should make us quick to listen, slow to speak and humble in applying our perspective.
- Sin not only fractured humanity's relationship with God but with each other. Through Christ we are restored to a loving relationship with the Father and one another. This is most true for Christians in relationship with one another, but it also applies to a Christian's ability to love our neighbors who do not share our faith. White Christians and Christians of color must ask questions of each other, listen to and honor one another as we do the work of seeking the justice and righteousness of Christ's kingdom in issues related to ethnicity.
- If white fragility simply challenged people's defensive posture in conversations around ethnicity, it could be useful as an invitation to those who are white to take a necessary look in the mirror. However, by its author's own description, white fragility seems loaded with unbiblical freight, a false assessment of the human condition and an uncharitable spirit that prevents necessary dialogue from progressing. For those reasons, we would encourage believers not to use it.

Concluding Remarks

As we stated in the introduction, this paper is not meant to be exhaustive. We hope that by offering a summary of the Scripture's teaching on ethnicity, race and justice and examples of how to apply that teaching to selected terms, believers can apply these principles to other terms and ideas they encounter. Further, while we want this work to be a grid to aid discernment, we also hope it challenges and calls Christians to join God in His work in the areas of ethnicity, race and justice and to love one another. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Seeking the Good for the Glory of Christ,
The Elders of West Shore Evangelical Free Church

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