

# 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 confusion and division among Christians around the subjects of ethnicity, race and justice. For some, that confusion results in a failure to recognize and counter racism, while for others, it looks like attempting to do so with tools that run counter to a biblical framework. We want to help God's people think biblically so we can be united in working for God's kingdom and against racism. 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 Genesis to Revelation. After offering these theologies, we have included an addendum that offers examples of how to apply these theologies in practice and to some of the more relevant terms and philosophies in the current conversation about them (as of the origination of this document.)

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 growing in them. We invite you to join us in doing the same and hope this paper serves you and our 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)
- **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



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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.<sup>1</sup>**

In conversations about ethnicity, race and justice, there are biblical truths upon which all believers must agree. We believe the “Biblical Theology” sections of this paper represent a sample of these truths. There are also practices and ideas about which believers may disagree. That will undoubtedly be the case in the addendum of this paper. As you consider the guidance we offer, know that you may come to different conclusions and still be a joyfully welcomed member of this church family. Discerning the difference between issues which require agreement and those that do not 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. We recognize that some minorities utilize the concept of race as we do ethnicity (defined in point 3). This may be done to take a term historically used to demean and degrade and capture it for good purposes. Where this is the case, we do not suggest the use of the term race is inappropriate or wrong. (Genesis 2:4-25)
3. Ethnicity, defined as a sense of group affiliation created by shared culture, language, experience and sometimes 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 an important part of our identity, it is not what defines us first or most. As those reconciled to God through Christ should recognize this fact and always see their primary identity as children of God, not as members of a certain ethnic, national or political group. (Galatians 3:27-28, Ephesians 2:11-22)
5. Racism is sin and is caused by sin. While it has large sociological effects, it is not rooted first in sociological realities but in 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

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



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upon their ethnicity. This sin can manifest itself in individual relationships, systems and structures in society and result from omission or commission. The sin of racism often does 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 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 the sin of 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 (see “Practices that Help us Apply Our Biblical Theology” in the addendum) 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. To God’s glory and our joy, our reconciliation to one another across ethnic lines will be finally and perfectly complete when Christ returns to establish His 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. While Christians are to have a special concern for the poor and oppressed, we also recognize that God does not give equal gifts and outcomes to all people. Therefore, justice requires equal treatment of all people under the law but does not require equal outcomes in



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opportunity and prosperity for all people. Where disparities of outcome result from present or historical injustice Christians should seek a more just result, while also recognizing that not all disparities are the result of injustice. (Matthew 25:14-30, I Corinthians 12:4-11, Matthew 26:11, 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 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 in assessing our varying levels of culpability in sin and responding biblically:

- 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.<sup>2</sup>
- Restoration: I will seek to undo the effects of my sin on those it has harmed.

(2 Corinthians 5:10, Daniel 9, Numbers 16, 1 Corinthians 5:1-6, Luke 19:8)

### 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, as well as examples of how to apply that teaching to practices, philosophies and terms in the addendum, believers can apply these principles to others 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

Approved by the Board of Elders: January 12, 2022.

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

## A Theology of Ethnicity, Race & Justice Addendum

This addendum seeks to offer application of our theology of ethnicity, race & justice through some suggested practices and to some of the more relevant terms and philosophies in the current conversation about them (as of the origination of this document.) The list of terms in this addendum is incomplete, but we trust they give examples of how to apply biblical thinking that provides a road map for how to do so with other related terms and ideas.

### **Practices that Help Us Apply Our Biblical Theology**

We recognize that the number of ways we can apply biblical theologies of ethnicity, race and justice are numerous, diverse and good. We offer the following suggestions to help us grow together in love.

#### **Inner Life**

- Pray that the Lord would help us love people without partiality or prejudice, give us a heart that longs for justice for the oppressed and move us to act like the Good Samaritan.
- Identify when we are responding defensively around these subjects and seek to understand whether those responses are coming from unfamiliarity, a right concern for truth, sinful attitudes or some combination of the three.
- Read and listen to other Christian voices from different ethnic backgrounds to understand how they encounter the world.
- Learn about the racial history of our country through books, online resources, events, museums, etc.

#### **Relational Life**

- Cultivate relationships across ethnic and socio-economic lines, intentionally pursuing fuller friendships in those places, humbly seeking to listen and learn. When those opportunities are lacking, we can seek to change our patterns to make them more available.
- Participate in intentional conversations with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds to build relationships and increase understanding.
- Seek to understand, empathize and love others well, especially when conversations become sensitive or hard to hear, and we may be tempted to react or respond too quickly.
- Choose to engage in situations and conversations in this area, rather than remaining silent, even when it is challenging.



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### Communal Life

- Give generously of our time and money to support efforts to care for people in need throughout our community.
- Support businesses run by ethnic minorities to foster greater ethnic diversity in our community, as an expression of God's kingdom on earth.
- Assess systems critically, through a biblical lens, asking whether they produce just or unjust results for image-bearers. Support just systems and advocate against unjust ones in places where God has called you and given you influence.
- Partner in areas where God has called our church to engage in this work, including foster care, refugee resettlement, the Community Resource Center, Center for Champions, Wildheart Ministries, etc. To see a full list of ministry partners, visit [westshorefree.org/serve](https://westshorefree.org/serve).

### Related Terms & Philosophies

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 (as of the origination of this document) 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. It builds on the work of critical legal studies and radical feminism and draws from philosophers such as Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. The CRT movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feeling and the unconscious. Unlike traditional civil rights, which stresses incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism and neutral principles of constitutional law.<sup>3</sup> 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 not to use it as a tool in the pursuit of biblical reconciliation and 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, nor should we categorize all ideas and applications we don't like under those broader philosophies in order to dismiss them. This is a real danger for Christians, one which can prevent us from pursuing the Lord's work of justice if we are not careful.

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

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), pp. 3-5.



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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 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 deeply important and spiritual issue.

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.

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 often 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.
- Some, but not all, proponents of CRT deny that people from oppressed groups can be guilty of racism. This is because they view racism as predominately, if not strictly, a structural issue. 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.

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



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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. These differences often lead to very different experiences in life. 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. While our experience or parts of our God-given identity effect how we see and interact with the truth, the truth is not determined by those things.
- 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, nationality and gender.

### **White Fragility**

White fragility is a term introduced by Robin DiAngelo and explained in her book by the same name. While many people use this term in different ways, we will interact with her use of it as the person who coined the phrase. 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. Genuine questions and even expressions of remorse may be efforts to maintain cultural power. Finally, DiAngelo asserts, a white person can't use objective standards to assess situations without having their conclusions dictated by their racism.<sup>4</sup> 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. We may indeed be guilty of defensiveness, seeking to maintain a position of power rather than using power to serve and love our neighbor, and of racist thoughts and feelings. When our views and actions are challenged, our first reaction should not be defensiveness but listening and then returning 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

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Carlick, "An Interview with Robin DiAngelo about White Fragility", *Penguin*, Penguin, June 16, 2020, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/june/robin-diangelo-white-fragility-author-interview.html>.



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righteousness. We should not presume this revealing work will happen naturally or easily. It requires diligent prayer, waiting on the Lord, humility, and is always best done in close relationship with other Christians.

- Truth is objective, absolute and knowable because God reveals what is true. 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. The reality of our restored relationship with one another in Christ leads us to understand that our work toward reconciliation and justice along ethnic lines may not be exclusively relational but will be highly so. Relationship building, question asking, and mutual trust will be crucial in advancing God's kingdom in this area.

In summary, we do not recommend the use of the term white fragility. We believe it carries unbiblical freight which makes it untenable, but also that its uncharitable assumptions create an unnecessary barrier to fruitful conversation. We recognize this is an issue of application about which faithful Christians may disagree. Some may choose to use the term. We encourage those who do to make every effort to separate it from its significant unbiblical concepts and to speak in love and gentleness when doing so.