We have a problem. No one really denies it. We recognize that we live in a nation with deep racial tensions and these tensions are reflected in the membership of our churches. For the Christian this is not merely a problem because of the violence spawned by racial tension or the angst generated by the marginalization of fellow human beings. For the children of God this is a family affair. Our Father is being scandalized because his children are practicing the worst kind of sibling rivalry. I beg my patient reader to consider carefully the following points.

1. The book of Acts has more to say about ethnic evangelism than it does about geographic expansion. Long before Paul’s travels in the second half of Acts, God laid a foundation for Gentile evangelism. It hardly needs to be pointed out that this would be a big deal for the likes of Luke. Before Christians spread the gospel to all the world, they had to be convinced of the humanity of other ethnic groups. That is harder for God to do than one might think. His progress with Peter, for example, was slow yet clearly deliberate. In Acts 6 Peter was forced to deal with the racial tension between Hebrew widows and those of a more Hellenistic background. Granted, both were Jewish, but some were not quite as kosher. In chapter 8 Peter was sent with John to check out the newly founded Samaritan congregation. We now have “half-breeds” trying to soak up some of God’s grace. We next find Peter in chapter 9 living at the home of Simon the Tanner. Because his job rendered him ritually unclean, this would certainly stretch Peter’s comfort zone. In chapter 10 all heaven breaks loose and Peter sees a vision of unclean animals. When God orders him to eat; Peter objects strenuously. Later he would realize that the visual aid was not about food but about Gentile inclusion in the church. God punctuated the point with these memorable words: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean!” The vision was augmented by a direct communiqué of the Holy Spirit who ordered him to follow the three Gentiles who “coincidentally” arrived at Simon’s gate at that precise moment. He followed them to Cornelius’ house where he preached the good news of Jesus. The Holy Spirit made yet another appearance and Cornelius & Co. spoke in tongues. Peter finally got the point and baptized them into Jesus. The Holy Spirit made yet another appearance and Cornelius & Co. spoke in tongues. Peter finally got the point and baptized them into Jesus. It is no small wonder, then, that Peter spoke up at the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 in defense of Gentile inclusion. Even so, Paul would later rebuke Peter for his ethnic exclusivism (Gal 2:11-14). We should learn two lessons from this. First, racism is a difficult hurdle for most of us. To deny that we have a problem is probably more arrogant than most of us can afford to be. Second, this is no small issue in the Bible because it is no small issue for God. Ethnic evangelism is a key theme in Acts and in fact the key theme of the great commission. When Jesus said to make disciples of all nations, the word literally means, “All ethnic groups.” Please do not misunderstand. God wants all people in his heaven, but not simply to get a good head count. This sort of thing is not nearly as important to God as it is to some preachers. Nor do we evangelize other groups because as good humanists we need to be nice to each other. It is not even that God adores diversity or loves the whole world. Wake up people! This is not about us, it is about God. The reason God craves all ethnic groups in heaven is because anything less is beneath his dignity. Isaiah 49:6 says, “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” We evangelize the whole world because only then can we approximate the praise our great God deserves in every language and tribe and culture.

2. We seem to think that racial unity requires ecclesiastical homogeneity. In other words, we keep inviting Hispanics and African Americans to join in our services. We naturally assume that they would feel blessed to be associated with us. The problem is, our worship style (music, preaching, length, times, etc.) does not necessarily meet their needs. We probably would not be comfortable with the physical expressiveness of an African American congregation, nor the inattentiveness to the clock of a Hispanic congregation. Why, then, would we assume that they would be any more comfortable in our worship services? What we are really asking them to do is be White. There is nothing wrong with being White, but there is something terribly wrong with assuming that this would be every else’s dream.
Every person has a heart language. And even if someone learns five or six other languages, they will still pray in their heart language. This heart language does not just involve vocabulary, it involves social mores, body language, and community values. We are experiencing the same difficulty with Scripture choruses vs. hymns. We are not simply asking older people to sing off the wall rather than from a book. We are asking them to abandon the song and style that was sung at their husband’s funeral. Granted, we should all be flexible, especially for the sake of evangelism. However, it is unfair and probably unrealistic to ask a culture group to blend its worship heart language with another’s. The bottom line is this: I’m suggesting that the path to ethnic unity is not through ecumenical communal services, but through evangelical community service. Churches who worship with idiosyncratic groups must begin partnering with other churches to overwhelm a particular geographic area with the tangible love of Christ. For example, Anglo churches with professional and financial resources should partner with Hispanic churches with knowledge, experience and connections to minister to migrant workers. This is only one example of literally thousands that could preach racial reconciliation to the broader unchurched community.

In order for this to work, however, there will need to be some Barnabas who take on the risk of an Antioch. He must be full of the Holy Spirit and a person who is respected in both communities that are being united. He must be a man who risks his own reputation for the likes of Saul of Tarsus as well as a John Mark. This may also mean that this “Son of Encouragement” gets nasty enough to actually stand nose to nose with Paul and tell him he can not work with him if he is not committed to reconciliation. Paradoxically, racial reconciliation is worth fighting for. The young have the boldness and ideological fervor. But they lack the wisdom and graciousness as well as the sociological experience it takes to speak two heart-languages. To you young and eager bucks I say, “Grow up graciously. Earn the right to be heard.” It takes a whole lot of listening before you will be prepared to speak. Don’t tear up the church in the process of trying to mend it.

3. It has become apparent to me that racial reconciliation is not going to be brought about through governmental programs, humanistic propaganda, sensitivity training or integrated education. In fact, our efforts over the last 20 years have largely encouraged ethnic groups (Anglo included) to protect their own turf and to demand their own rights. Jesus, however, calls for abandonment of self and service to others. As long as each of us is protecting our own interests, racial tensions will continue to rise. Yet I’ve noticed two places where racism is minimized. That is on the battle field and the athletic field. There the adversary is clearly identified. And our differences are insignificant compared to our shared goals. The key, therefore, to racial reconciliation is to gather diverse groups under a banner that is larger than themselves. The good news for Christians is that Jesus is our banner. If we will focus on him, we will, by necessity, be brought together. It is with this observation that I make the bold declaration that only in the church of Jesus Christ will our culture find racial reconciliation. There is simply no other banner large enough to encompass our pluralistic society.

4. Our prejudice is not true racism, rather it is melaninism. We are not divided over ethnic lines but over pigmentation. Here’s what I mean. In the ancient world there was racism against other nationalities but the color of their skin had little or nothing to do with it. In fact, the Ethiopians fared pretty well in ancient literature. They were viewed as brave, religious, strong, beautiful, and erotic. Other nations were despised because of historic rivalry and militaristic threat, not because of how dark their skin was. Our “racism,” however, is directly related to how dark a person’s skin is. I was asked just the other day at a revival meeting what my views were on interracial dating. I responded with a question, “You mean like a Scandinavian marrying an Irish woman?” “No,” he said, “You know what I mean.” I asked, “How would you feel about a white woman marrying a Chinese man?” He did not have a great problem with that. “What about a white woman marrying a Mexican?” That he did not like so much. “What about a Black man marrying a white woman?” This was his real objection. In his defense, he had grown up with rife racial tensions of East St. Louis. But that does not change the fact that the Bible says, “From one man he made every nation of men” (Acts 17:26). There are very real racial tensions that some grow up with. These are real difficulties that we can’t simply brush aside. This does not change the fact, however, that God has spoken and that he has imbedded his own image into each human soul.
I am not suggesting that we should prefer other nationalities to marry. The truth is, I don’t care much at all about your preferences for matrimony. You may have a penchant for blonds; you may want someone taller than you; you may prefer short, bald, and squatty. Go for it! Your personal preference is not what is on the table for discussion. The issue is, if you object to someone else’s preference, to someone else’s love, you are objecting because you think there is something morally wrong with a white person intermixing with some lesser race. You can shroud your objection in “concern for their children.” But your heart of hearts betrays that you really think they are committing a mild form of bestiality.

Allow me to close this section with this caution. Young people, you marry into a family. And if your parents object to who you marry you will likely live with a schism in your soul for a very long time. Even if your parents are wrong in their objection, that probably does not make it right for you to defy them. My experience has been that godly parents learn to look past color (as well as body piercing), but they need as much time to fall in love with your partner as you needed. Be considerate of your parents and give them as much time to adjust to your decisions as it took for you to make them.

5. You are either part of the problem or part of the solution. If you saw a child being pushed around on a playground by a bully and did nothing to stop it, would you not think yourself a bad person? When you have the authority or power to stop injustice and don’t you are part of the problem. The fact that I am white does not make me a better person than an oriental. It does, however, give me certain advantages. When I walk into a bank for a loan, I never imagine that my skin color would be a factor — Hispanics do. When I drive by a police car, I never worry about being pulled over because of my race — Black men do. When I sit in a job interview, I never wonder if my credentials will be questioned because of my nationality — Native Americans do. Because I am freely granted certain ethnic privileges, I am morally obligated to use my influence and advantages to bring about racial reconciliation, especially in the body of Christ. Let me say this clearly: Doing nothing is a sin (James 4:17). So, what are you doing to ameliorate the suffering of the ethnically disenfranchised in your community?

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