

The New Testament Instruction on Race and Race Relations

A. Race and Race Relations in First Century Context

1. Racial/Ethnic Distinctions. Racial distinctions based on primarily physical characteristics do not seem to predominate in first century thought. The term “Ethiopian” was used to describe the ‘Burnt Faced’ Men of Africa and India (Strabo, Geography, 2:3:8; cf. the less common “Niger” Ac 13:1). As will be noted, however, differences in physical characteristics were observed and explanations sought. Both for the Jew and the Greek the basic distinction among human beings was ethnic. Beginning with an ethnocentric perspective these two groups classified the rest of mankind in a category over against themselves. If one were not a Greek he was a Barbarian. If one were not a Jew he was a Gentile (sometimes the term Greek was used).

To be a Greek was to be an adherent of Greek culture. Either by descent, or at least by language and civilized manner of life one identified as a Greek lived within the sphere of the culture of Mediterranean lands. These had during the Hellenistic period been essentially influenced by the Greek tongue and civilization. Thus by the first century the term could refer to the Hellenistic inhabitants of the Roman empire. By contrast, the Barbarian was one who spoke a strange language, i.e. one other than Greek and unintelligible to a Greek (Homer, 11. 2:867; Strabo, 14:2:28; cf. 1 Cor 14:11). Therefore, he was of a strange race, geo- graphically and ethnographically foreign to the Greek. In classical times Egypt and Persia were the Barbarians. As Hellenization progressed and the Roman empire expanded the Barbarians became a term restricted to the peoples on the frontiers of Hellenistic and Roman civilization.

To be Jewish was to be by descent a son of Abraham and thus part of a divinely chosen people. To be a Gentile was to be other than a Jew. The term translated from the Greek as “Gentile” has a very general meaning “mass, host, a multitude bound by the same manners, customs or other distinctive features” (TNDT 2:369).

The ancients did make further ethnic distinctions. The Greeks would divide the Barbarians as well as themselves into various ethnic groupings which were normally labelled according to the location or language of the people. Beginning with Greece as the center of the inhabited world and understanding earth’s land mass as surrounded by water, the ancient Greeks identified four peoples as inhabiting the boundaries of earth. To the west were the Celts; to the north the Scythians; to the east the Indians (East Ethiopians); and to the south the Ethiopians (Strabo, 1:2:28).

2. Racial/Ethnic Prejudice. In classical times the Greeks had a strong ethnic pride which translated into prejudice against the Barbarian. Aristotle quotes approvingly from Euripides the sentiment that it is reasonable for Greeks to rule over Barbarians, but not Barbarians over Greeks, for Barbarians are by nature slaves but Greeks free men (Aristotle, Politics 1:2 p.1252b8). Such prejudice continued even as Hellenization progressed so that Diogenes Laertes (3rd A.D.; 1:7:33) still reports Thales' prayer of thanksgiving to Good Fortune that he was born a man and not a beast, a male and not a female, a Greek and not a Barbarian (cf. R. Meir (b. Men. 43b) threefold thanksgiving that he is not Gentile, brutish man or a woman). Barbarians then were prejudicially understood as wild, crude, fierce and uncivilized.

This was especially true of the Scythians. These Iranian nomads had swept down from the South Russian steppes in 700 BC and ravaged Mediterranean states as far as Egypt. They were part of the Medo-Babylonian coalition which overthrew Assyria. They had a reputation of being the lowest of the Barbarians. Greek verbs constructed from their name were used to describe scalping fallen victims, drinking immoderately or drinking unmixed wine; being crude in speech or matters of love (TDNT 7:447-450).

Prejudice against the Ethiopians (it should be remembered that this is a general term referring to any peoples living in the region to the far south of Greece) seemed to center on their manner of life. The physical features were noted but normally not in a pejorative way (Strabo, 3:8:2-3; but cf. 15:1:24 where Onesicritus' description is cited: the sun has discoloured their bodies with a murky dark bloom and curled their hair fusing it by unincreasable forms of fire; cf. "Niger" Ac 13:1 a Latin nickname for Simeon probably because of dark complexion, F.F. Bruce, Acts, 260). Strabo concludes that they have a savage spirit not so much in temperament but in their ways of living. They are squalid all over their bodies and have long nails. They have shrill voices and are as far removed from human kindness to one another. Indeed, they cultivate none of the practices of civilized life as are found among the rest of mankind. This is the basic historical evidence for the attitudes toward black persons in ancient times.

The prejudice of Jews against Gentiles was just as strong, if not stronger, in the first century. The Jew's ethnic identity was grounded in the monotheism of a God who has called one to be a holy people, forsaking the idolatry of the Gentiles. A powerful mixture of fear of contamination and pride of divinely favored position works in the Jewish mind to create a prejudicial disdain for, even revulsion at, the idolatrously unclean Gentile. Of course, the Gentile's disdain of the Jew's imageless monotheism heightened the antipathy (Apollonius Molon in Jas. Apion 2:15). In Palestine, the half-breed Samaritan with his irregular worship also experienced the prejudice of the Jew.

Racial/ethnic prejudice was a definite factor in ancient life and thought. Relations among the ethnic groups in an ever expanding Roman empire was a problem to be constantly addressed. And for Christianity with its gospel for all peoples, the barriers of prejudice spawned by pride, fear, and the desire to dominate had to be broken through if the church was to be a faithful expression of the truths on which it was founded.

B. The Instruction of the Founder: Jesus, the Savior of the World

1. Jesus' Example. If ever a human being lived free from prejudice it was the Lord Jesus Christ. He was "no respecter of persons." He received all men and women alike: the woman who was a sinner, Lk. 7:36-50; tax collectors and sinners, Lk. 15:1-2. He went to all alike, sometimes going out of his way to show that his mission was for all people (a Samaritan woman, Jn. 4:4, 9-10; a tax collector Lk. 19:1-10). It is true that during his earthly ministry he appears to limit his activity to the Jews (Mt. 15:24; cf. Mt. 10:5-6). Still he never turned away a believing Gentile (the Syrophonecian woman, Mt. 15:21-28; the centurion, Mt. 8:5-13; the Greeks, Jn. 12:20-35). And in his teaching he often uses positive Gentile examples to shame the Jews for their lack of receptivity (Mt. 11:20-24; 12:41-42; 21:31, 41, 43). Preparing for the Great Commission which is directed towards all the nations, Jesus' last act was the cleansing of the court of the Gentiles at the temple so that God's house could fulfill its true purpose as a "house of prayer for all the nations" (Mk. 11:17). It is interesting to note that even Jesus' enemies recognized his lack of prejudice. "You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth" (Lk. 20:21).

2. Jesus' Teaching. Jesus the Messiah comes to reign in justice. This means that he is the great leveler (Lk. 1:51-53). He predicts that God's final justice will do just that, bring down the proud and exalt the humble (Lk. 16:19-31; 6:20-26). He inaugurates his reign of justice by calling for repentance and in that way declaring that all men have the same negative identity: sinners in need of salvation (Mk. 1:15; 2:17; Mt. 9:11-13; Jn. 9:39-41). Religiously and ethnically prejudiced persons, such as Pharisaic Jews, however, will not accept this evaluation. They trust in themselves that they are righteous before God and view others with contempt (Lk. 18:9). Jesus interprets to them their sinful condition through the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk. 18:9-14). He concludes "I tell you, this man (the despised tax collector who repented) went down to his house justified rather than the other (the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not like other people, . . . even this tax gatherer); for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted" (Lk. 18:14).

Jesus also declares a new identity in Him which for all, who will accept it, supersedes all previous racial or ethnic distinction. He tells some Greeks that in his death, if he be lifted up from the earth he will draw all men unto himself (Jn. 12:32). The gracious accomplishment of salvation which is received by repentance and faith alone, can extend to all men regardless of racial or ethnic origin (Lk. 3:6; Mt. 12:18; 24:14; 28:18-20). The new identity not only supersedes but eliminates in the spiritual realm racial and ethnic distinctions. It is an identity rooted in a spiritual rebirth from a common heavenly Father. Christians are all sons of God (Jn. 1:11-13; 4:9-11) and hence all have Christ as brother (Mt. 12:49-50). And most importantly, they have one another as brothers (Mt. 23:8). Jesus then tells those who would follow him that they have a new identity as sons of God in which there is no room for prejudice. The identity is offered without partiality to all. It is a product of no human effort so there is no room for prejudicial boasting. It is a universal family in which all are brothers born of the same Father God. Such relationships, exclude racial and ethnic prejudice.

Jesus' teaching also addresses the root sins which issue in racial/ethnic prejudice. He calls for repentance from the root sins of fear and hate (Mt. 5:22-23, 43-48). He challenges men to replace them with vulnerable, self-giving agape love (Mt. 18:35; Jn. 13:34-35; 15:11-17; 17:20-26), the distinguishing mark of a Christian. He denounces prejudicial pride and despising of others (Mt. 7:1-6; Lk. 15:1-32; 18:9-14). He calls for a self-concept and relationships characterized by humility (Mt. 18:1-5; Lk. 14:7-14; Mt. 23:8-12). He instructs his disciples to forswear domination in their relationships involving leadership responsibilities. Rather, service is to be the attitude and action of each to the other (Mt. 20:26-28; Lk. 22:24-29). Love, humility, service will make for harmonious racial/ethnic relations.

C. The Experience of the Early Church in Acts: Growing in Unity as Racial/ Ethnic Barriers are Dismantled

1. Early Church Life and Thought Exclude Racial/Ethnic Prejudice

- a. The Universal Offer of Salvation. Consistently reaffirmed throughout the early church's evangelistic activity was the truth that the gospel message was to go to all people. The Lukan "Great Commission" (Ac 1:8) speaks in geographical terms but it is worked out in Acts in both geographical and ethnic terms. The gospel crosses a number of ethnic barriers as Palestinian Jewish Christian and then Hellenistic Jewish Christian take the message to the ends of the earth. They go to Samaritan (Ac 8:4-17); proselyte (Ac 8:26-40); Gentile God fearer (Ac 10-11); and finally Gentile pagans (Ac 11:20-21; chapter 13ff.). The emphasis is that this message is for all people, even those who are afar off (Ac 2:21; 2:39; 4:12; 13:46-47; 26:17-20; 28:28).
- b. Arguments for the Oneness of Mankind in Early Christian Preaching. Early Christian preachers argue for the oneness of mankind from three directions. First, man has a common ancestor: "and He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation" (Ac 17:26). There is no room for racial pride which sets one people over against another since we are ultimately of one stock (Ac 17:28-29, God's offspring; so the Stoics whom Paul quoted concluded; Aratus, Phaen. 5; cf. Plutarch Mor. 329 B-D). Second, God impartially promises and effects salvation for some from every people, none excluded (Ac 3:25). Peter declares "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him" (Ac 10:34-35; cf. 15:7-9). Third, all man will face the same judgment from the same judge, the resurrected Jesus. Therefore, they are called to repent (Ac 17:30-31).
- c. Unity. The early church shared a common life of fellowship which extended to all areas of life. The visible unity of this church is emphasized in the early chapters of Acts (1:14; 2:1; 2:42-47; 4:24; 4:32-36; 5:12; 15:25). Such togetherness which included sharing of possessions and eating together (table fellowship) tested early the church's commitment to unity over against the natural discrimination of racial and ethnic preference. Luke points out Barnabus' background as a Hellenistic Jew a Levite of Cyprian birth when he presents him as a positive example of sharing goods (Ac 4:36).

An early problem in the church, which was overcome, was overlooking Hellenistic Jewish widows in daily food distribution (Ac 6:1-6).

A more radical problem was that of table fellowship. Pious Jews followed the OT food laws and the rabbinic applications within a Hellenistic culture. They extended OT laws concerning ritual purity so that they viewed not just eating forbidden food as making them unclean but also eating with a Gentile, a participant in unclean idolatrous practices, as also making them unclean. Even as Christians, Jews in the formative days of the church could not easily lay aside this prejudice. When the news comes to the Jerusalem church that Gentile God fearers (Cornelius' household) have received the gospel those of the circumcision take issue with Peter. "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (Ac 11:3). For that party of the church the prejudicial attitude seems to be, "It's all right to preach the gospel to Gentiles but if they become Christians that doesn't mean you have to eat with them in their uncircumcised, unclean condition."

2. The Removal of Prejudice

a. God's Activity. Throughout Acts God supernaturally takes the initiative to firmly lead his church away from the parochialism of Jewish ethnic prejudice into the universal unity of the liberating freedom of God's sons. At Samaria, the Spirit comes on half-breed Samaritan believers as the apostles lay hands on them (Ac 8:17). The Spirit directs Philip to Gaza so that he may speak the gospel to an Ethiopian eunuch (Ac 8:26-40). God brings a dream to Peter declaring all foods clean and as Peter preaches to Gentile God fearer Cornelius and his household the Holy Spirit falls on them (Ac 10:44).

b. Apostles' Interpretation. The significance of these events for the removal of prejudice from Jewish Christians' thinking and practice was not missed by the apostles. Peter learns from the dream, "... God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean" (Ac 10:28). The apostles learn from the experience of the Spirit's outpouring on the Gentiles that indeed he is a non-discriminatory God (Ac 15:7-9). He who knows the hearts, having cleansed the Gentiles hearts by faith, pours out the Spirit on them in the same fashion as he did upon the Jews (Ac 11:16-17). And this only further confirms the truth that salvation comes one way to all through the grace of the Lord Jesus to those who believe (Ac 15:11).

3. Racial/Ethnic Harmony within the Early Church. Based on these truths the church lived in harmony by following two guidelines. They would promote unity by giving special attention to those who under normal circumstances would probably experience discrimination (e.g. the remedying of the Hellenistic Jewish Christian widows' plight, Ac 6:1-6). Further, the promotion of unity would include respecting ethnic differences and scruples. In the case of the Jewish Christian's aversion to eating with uncircumcised Gentile Christians, the church decrees that the Gentile Christians adopt food law restrictions to the extent that the OT gives restrictions for Jew and Gentile dwelling together in harmony in the land (Ac 15:19-20, 28-29; Lev 17-18). For the sake of unity, expressed in the intimacy of table fellowship both segments of the church surrendered some freedom in order that loving oneness might be demonstrated. At the same time, the church insisted that such behavioral restrictions were not cultural/ethnic conditions for salvation. Rather, both

Jew and Gentile were saved by grace irrespective of ethnic identity or behavior patterns, even though in the case of the Jews that identity and behavior had been established by God himself.

D. Teaching of the Apostles in the Epistles

The teaching of the apostles in the epistles expound the themes which have already been laid as a foundation in the teaching of Jesus and the theological interpretation of the early church. Man's identity as sinner (Rom 3:22-23; 2:11; 14:8-12) and his new identity in Christ, saved by grace (Rom 1:14-16; 9:9-12) both exclude any continuing racial or ethnic prejudice. The ethical imperatives to love (Gal 5:14-15, 20, 26; 1 Th 4:9-10; 1 Jn 4:7-21) humility and service (1 Cor 9:19-23; Rom 12:3-10, 16) counteract the root sins of fear/hate, pride/despising/contempt and domination which issue in racial and ethnic prejudice.

So important a concern to the apostles is the removal of prejudice from the Christian's life that four passages in a more or less extended fashion deal with the issue. Paul in Galatians (3:26-29) contends that our new identity in Christ eliminates religio-ethnic-cultural, socio-economic, and sexual distinctions which could be used as a basis for prejudice. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave or free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:28-29). The application of this removal of distinctions which could serve as a basis of prejudice is made in the area of one's spiritual standing with God. No factor of personal history disqualifies one from receiving the grace of God. The implications are that in the whole of the Christian's personal dealings these factors are not used in a prejudicial way (the only limitation is where the divinely revealed creation order dictates different functions for women and men in home or church and even in this matter prejudice is not to characterize divinely mandated discrimination).

Paul attacks the prejudice directly in Col 3:8-11. He calls for a putting off of "anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive speech" (Col 3:8). He calls for a putting on of a new man in Christ in which "there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman ..." (Col 3:11). Rather, "Christ is all and in all." Christ is the main identity which has replaced these religio-ethnic-racial-cultural-socio-economic ones. He is all. And lest we be tempted to conclude via any residual prejudice that some group is beyond God's reach, Paul asserts, "he is in all." Prejudice is excluded. Eadie comments, (Colossians, 234)

This is the glory of Christianity, that as it is developed in the church, it has none of the barriers or predilections which the epistles of this verse indicate as obtaining in the world, and dividing it into jealous and exclusive ranks and castes, but is at once and fully enjoyed by all the believing possessors of our common humanity.

Paul's most thoroughgoing exposition of the removal of prejudice in salvation is Ephesians 2:11-22. Though it speaks directly to the religio-ethnic distinction between Jew and Gentile, it contains principles which are applicable to any expression of prejudice. The cross of Christ has decisively broken down the middle wall of partition which God himself had erected via commandments to distinguish between unholy pagans and his holy people (Eph 2:14-15). Christ's death has made peace creating from the two one new man (Eph 2:16). His resurrection activity involves evangelism in which he preaches peace to both those who are far off and those who are near (Eph 2:17). Christ's salvation creates the same access to the Father for both, through the one Spirit (2:18). This means a new identity for the Gentile in Christ. He is no longer a stranger but a fellow citizen with the redeemed Jew (2:19). His unity is so basic that he is finally described as part of one organism which grows together with the redeemed Jew into the holy temple in the Lord (2:21). Anyone who claims to have experienced such salvation cannot maintain prejudice toward any, especially those inside the Body of Christ.

James, in his instruction against socio-economic prejudice (Js 2:1-13), also gives principles which may be applied to other forms of prejudice. James gives the command: "do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism" (Js 2:1). This alone is enough to show that prejudice is against the will of God. Yet, James goes on to give four reasons why prejudice is unacceptable Christian behavior. It makes persons into judges with evil motives.(v.4). It contradicts the character and example of God. God disregards position and chooses "the poor of this world to be rich in faith ..." (v.5). In fact, to live a life of active prejudice is to by your own behavior blaspheme the name of God (v.7). Prejudice is the breaking of the second great commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (vv.8-9). And this is not inconsequential. "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all" (v.10). Finally, prejudice involves an unmerciful sitting in judgment of another. To continue to be prejudicial in one's attitudes and behavior invites a final judgment which "will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy" (v.13).

E. Conclusion

Both by theological truth, moral imperative, and example Jesus and the disciples who followed Him taught that prejudice of any kind, including racial, has no place in the Christian life. Positively, the universal offer of the Gospel, the one new man which that gospel creates, and the moral qualities of love, humility and being a servant are a foundation and context from which the church may live a life of racial and ethnic harmony and so shine before the watching world.

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