

One Race

There are many voices in our heads these days. Some are loud and shrill. Emotions run hot. Nerves are on edge. I know mine are. These months are taking their toll on us. I don't know about you, but I'm feeling off balance, upset, disoriented. Partisan politics and race rhetoric is at a fever pitch. The news cycle is unrelenting. I feel like the pounding hoofs of the four horses of the Apocalypse are upon us. A global pandemic is sweeping the planet threatening economic collapse and in some places massive starvation. Racial injustice has reached a painful tipping point, mandating police and judicial reform, exposing deep patterns of discrimination, dehumanization, and anger. I'm taking long walks and praying.

I want to process all that we're going through as a follower of Jesus Christ. I want the voice of Christ to silence the uproar around me and the din of the crowd. I want the word of God to control my thinking, my emotions, and my actions. Christ has made his followers one new creation living in one new community, one new race. The Bible insists on a sociological, as well as a personal, conversion. Christ remakes the individual from the inside out, redeeming, reconciling, and renewing. Christ places his new creation in his Body.

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” Ephesians 2:19-22

So real was the oneness of this new humanity that Paul spoke of the church as being one new person. We are this third race—holy ones, members of God’s household, and joined together to become a holy temple. We used to be foreigners and strangers but now we have immigrated to a new country, we have been adopted into a new family, and we belong to a holy temple in the Lord. Early Christians had a sense of place, a feeling of being at home, not in a facility but in a family of shared faithfulness to the Word of God. With the literary care of a poet, Paul orchestrated a word play on the Greek word for “house” (οἶκος). In Christ we are no longer *aliens* (ἄραιοι), but members of God’s *household* (οἰκεῖοι), *built on* (ἐποικοδομηθέντες) a sure foundation, and the *building* (οἰκοδομῆ) is *built together* (συνοικοδομείσθε) into a *dwelling place* (κατοικητήριον) of God. Paul’s intentional selection of the household of faith language underscores the relational nature of the church.

The relational and spiritual character of this “house,” built by God *of people*, is no less material, temporal, spatial, and concrete, than if it had been built with stone and steel. The good news is proclaimed and lived through the local church, through the community, rather than through the individual. In a world of hostility the church is an alternative society, a visible sign of the kingdom.

Since the walls of ritual, tradition, laws, and regulations, have been broken down in Christ, we must be careful not to re-erect those old walls. Our relationship to the world is essentially

positive. The gospel is not about what we are against, but what we are for. We must never lose sight of the glory of God and this wonderful news that the walls of hostility have been broken down in Christ. Paul pictures open borders in the Kingdom of God, a more-the-merrier household of God, and an organically growing temple in the Lord.

God's purpose is that we not divide along ethnic, cultural, racial, social, gender, and generational lines. We were meant to be fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation provided by the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. "The church gathers around the character of Christ, not the characteristics of people" (Markus Barth). It is important to maintain the distinction between being in Christ and being of the world. It is the difference between being guided by God's indwelling Spirit for the good of the world and being shaped by the spirit of the times. Paul became all things to all people "so that by all possible means [he] might save some" (1 Cor 9:22).

This is different from becoming all things to all people in order to win their favor. Paul insisted on doing everything for the sake of the gospel. His refusal to be judgmental did not discredit discernment. His rejection of prejudice did not sanction disobedience. This is why he said to the believers living in Ephesus,

"So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed" (4:17-19).

Since the Christian community is founded solely on Jesus Christ, it is a spiritual reality. Our life together is not based on a sociological or psychological compatibility, but on the relationship created by the Holy Spirit, "who puts Jesus Christ into our hearts as Lord and Savior" (Bonhoeffer).

One of my seminary students credits his wife with reshaping his experience of Christian community. Left to himself, he gravitated to people who shared his small world. His small group of Bible study friends were all guys like himself, similar in age, race, education, and cultural experience, but thanks to his wife, that's beginning to change. He writes,

The primary catalyst for my growing desire to embrace the larger Christian community has been my wife. She lives with a sense of mission that I admire. Six years ago she introduced herself to a young girl at church who seemed a bit lost. She could not get the girl out of her mind for several days after that and she eventually tracked down her contact information, and gave her a call. The girl was a meth addict, looking for answers in the midst of her seemingly hopeless struggle. I have watched my wife persevere in that friendship, despite suicide attempts, two stints in rehab, a DUI arrest and conviction, and other personal

issues that would have driven me away long ago. I have listened as my wife speaks grace and truth into her friend's distressed life. I have also watched my wife cultivate relationships with our neighbors. She is always ready to interrupt her plans for a conversation or to accept an invitation from someone she barely knows. She has demonstrated a willingness to follow Jesus into new relationships, to odd places and to seemingly odd people.

One of my biblical heroes is John Perkins. You won't find him in the Bible, but you will find the Bible in John Perkins. In college, I read his story, *A Quiet Revolution*, and the eyes of my heart were opened. I saw the transforming power of Christ's love in the life of a man who had reason enough to hate. In his book, he describes the night he was brutally beaten by the police in Brandon, Mississippi. He had participated in a nonviolent civil rights march earlier in the day and had been arrested. He describes how God moved him from hate to love:

During my night in the jail at Brandon, God began something new in my life. In the midst of the crowded, noisy jailhouse, between the stomping and the blackjacking that we received; between the moments when one of the patrolmen put his pistol to my head and pulled the trigger—"click"—and when another later took a fork and bent the two middle prongs down and pushed the other two up my nose until blood came out—between the reality and the insanity, between the consciousness and the unconsciousness that would sweep across my dizzy mind, between my terror and my unwillingness to break down, between my pain and my fear, in those little snatches of thought when in some miraculous way I could at once be the spectacle and the spectator, God pushed me past hatred. Just for a little while, moments at a time.

How could I hate when there was so much to pity? How could I hate people I suddenly did not recognize, who had somehow moved past the outer limits of what it means to be human....? But I don't think it was just the pity I had or the deep sickness I saw alone that pushed me past hatred. It was also the fact that I was broken...The Brandon experience just might have been a way of God bringing me to the place where he could expand his love in me and extend my calling to white people as well as black people...And I believe that it was in my own broken state that the depth of the sickness in those men struck home to me, and the fact that I was like them—totally depraved. I had evidence before me and in myself that every human being is bad—depraved. There's something built into all of us that makes us want to be superior. If the black man had the advantage, he'd be just as bad. So I can't hate the white man. It's a spiritual problem—black or white, we all need to be born again...

The failure, the frustration, the powerlessness of my situation as a black person in the South pressed me. What it was squeezing out of me was more and more bitterness. Like a lemon—so fresh and sweet looking on the outside but hiding such a sour taste. And the bitterness just made the frustration worse.

I saw how bitterness could destroy me. The Spirit of God had a hold of me and wouldn't let me sidestep his justice. And his justice said that I was just as

sinful as those who beat me. But I knew that God's justice is seasoned with forgiveness. Forgiveness is what makes his justice redemptive. Forgiveness! That was the key. And somehow, God's forgiveness for me was tied up in my forgiveness of those who hurt me.

"For if you forgive people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive people their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Mt 6:14-15).

We were right...But now God was saying, "Being right is not enough. You must also be forgiving." Reconciliation is so difficult because the damage is so deep."¹

John Perkins found God's severe mercy in a Brandon city jail pushing him beyond bitterness and hate to love and forgiveness. The sinful opposition of men was miraculously turned into the discipline of his loving heavenly Father. This unusual transformation of raw evil into divine goodness ought to be the common experience of the followers of Jesus. God takes what would break us, if we were left to ourselves, and makes us into his children, reflecting his love and holiness.

After all these years, John Perkins is still going strong. In *Reconciliation Blues*, Edward Gilbreath describes John Perkins' closing words at a racial reconciliation summit held in Indianapolis in 2005. Leaders from a variety of Christian organizations and institutions spent the morning reflecting on the discouraging and difficult task of racial reconciliation. They sat together in a large circle commiserating on the set backs and failures of racial reconciliation in America. The more they talked the more it looked like they would all leave the summit more disillusioned than they had come. They were singing the reconciliation blues, when unexpectedly John Perkins walked into the room. At seventy-five in 2005, Dr. Perkins, was recognized by many as a modern-day evangelical prophet, an elder statesman of Christian ministry. He had earned the respect of these leaders by his humility and faithfulness to the cause of Christ.

Dr. Perkins was asked by the moderator, "What is your sense of God's message for us today?" He stood in the center of the circle and began to sob. But he was not weeping over race relations, he was weeping over his son. John described his profound discouragement over his son Spencer's death from a heart attack, the very son who had led him to the Lord forty-eight years ago. He shared how he was angry with God, but that God quickly "sobered" him and brought to his mind Jim Elliot's quote: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

After a few seconds, John said, "I love Spencer, but God loves him more." For John Perkins to talk about the loss of his son in that context rather than focus on racial setbacks, lifted his Christian calling above race and focused it on obedience to Christ. Dr. Perkins concluded, "What is God telling us? I feel he's telling us Philippians 1:6—'He who has begun this good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.' It is God who gave us this

¹ John Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1976), 190-191.

ministry, and he will be the one to fulfill it. We just need to continue to give our hearts and souls to loving others and living the gospel in an incarnational way, and then trust God to bring the change.”²

The reason for John Perkins’ “long obedience in the same direction” lies in his understanding of the ministry of reconciliation, that God is reconciling the world to himself in Christ. He agrees with the apostle, “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Cor 5:14-15).

The borders of the Kingdom of God are wide open. The gospel message is all encompassing, “whosoever will may come.” No matter how deep the depravity or painful the social alienation, there is room at the table of the Lord in the Household of Faith. There are no walls of hostility keeping anyone out of the Temple of the Lord. Markus Barth calls the message of Ephesians two “the key and high point of the whole epistle.”³ In a world of evil and hostility, the gospel of Jesus Christ is an inclusive invitation to an exclusive Savior and Lord. We come as we are but we do not remain as we were. We are new creations created in Christ Jesus. We have a new citizenship, a new family and an entirely new indwelling Spirit.

There are some practical implications to this “one race” reality that require our attention:

1. We did not always live in the Household of Faith. The apostles emphasized our new personal and political identity, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:9-10). We were called out of darkness. Once we were not a people. That has big implications for those who define themselves as white or black. If we are in the habit of identifying “my people” as our ethnic group, we should reconsider and begin to think and act as the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. “My people” are my brothers and sisters in Christ and not my racial group. Our first step toward being a household of faith is a deep-seated, inextinguishable longing, a yearning of the soul, to follow Jesus and belong to the Body of Christ. This is not to be confused with a wishful longing to be “one big happy family,” but it is a profound conviction that God makes His presence felt in and through the church.

2. There is a radical difference between a nominally Christian culture and the sociological conversion of the household of faith. We do not live in a Christian nation governed by Christian laws. We live in a secular, pluralistic state with a thin veneer of Christianity. The 19th century Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard passed down a description for our current, national version of Christianity. He called it *Christianity without Christ*. Our judicial system and our medical system reflects the will of powerful lobbies and interest groups, based on greed and fear.

² Edward Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical’s Inside View of White Christianity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2006), 186.

³ M. Barth, *Ephesians*, 275.

The driving force beyond our systems of justice, medicine, education, and welfare is not Jesus' kingdom ethic. But we can't be police officers, lawyers, judges, doctors, nurses, teachers, journalists, employers, city planners, landlords, renters, bankers, etc. without acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. We should be known as a people who seek first Christ's kingdom and his righteousness (Matt 6:33).

3. The followers of Jesus Christ are tempted to believe that their faith and identity in Christ are marginal to today's pressing social, economic, and political concerns. Who are we to bear witness in these troubled days? Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* addresses the followers of Jesus Christ, both black and white, when she describes Tom's suffering under his slave master Simon Legree. "The gloomiest problem of this mysterious life was constantly before his eyes, – souls crushed and ruined, evil triumphant, and God silent." Like Tom, at the end of a grueling day, many wonder if the word of God has lost its power. The Simon Legrees of the world mock, "Well, old boy, you find your religion don't work, it seems!" Their scornful byline uttered in contempt, "This yer religion is all a mess of lying trumpery."

Harriet Beecher Stowe describes Tom's despair.

*The atheistic taunts of his cruel master sank his already dejected soul to the lowest ebb; and, though the hand of faith still held to the eternal rock, it was with a numb, despairing grasp. Tom sat, like one stunned. . . . Suddenly everything around him seemed to fade, and a vision rose before him of one crowned with thorns, buffeted and bleeding. Tom gazed in awe and wonder, at the majestic patience of the face; the deep, pathetic eyes thrilled him to this inmost heart; his soul woke, as, with floods of emotion, he stretched out his hands and fell on his knees, – when, gradually, the vision changed: the sharp thorns became rays of glory; and in splendor inconceivable, he saw that face bending compassionately towards him, and voice said, "He that overcometh, shall sit down with me on my throne, even as I also overcome, and sat down with my Father on his throne."*⁴

Tom's vision of a crucified Jesus who is the risen and glorified Lord remains just as important in the twenty-first century as it did in the nineteenth century. The modern religionist and the atheistic secularist write this off as an escapist figment of the imagination, a distracting fantasy, but if Jesus Christ is not at the redemptive core of our needed social and ethical changes we will only grow angry or more frustrated. Until Jesus is at the center of every pursuit, every quest, every passion, we will remain foreigners and strangers, but in Christ we become fellow citizens with God's people, members of his household, a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

One Blood

John Perkins' latest book is provocatively entitled *One Blood*. We are all made in God's image, the sons and daughters of Adam, with red blood coursing through our veins, and by God's mercy we are the children of the second Adam if we have availed ourselves of God's grace and we have

⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Random House, 1996), 553,555-6.

been washed by the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14). The phrase *One Blood* can be traced to Cotton Mather, an early American white Puritan theologian, who wrote a tract in 1706 entitled *The Negro Christianized* (1706). Mather makes a thorough biblical and logical case against racism. He writes:

“One Table of the Ten Commandments, has this for the Sum of it; Thou Shalt Love thy Neighbor as thy Self. Man, Thy Negro is thy Neighbor. It were an Ignorance, unworthy of a Man to imagine otherwise. Yes, it thou does grant That God hath made of *one Blood*, all Nations of men; he is thy Brother, too.”⁵

Princeton University professor Albert J. Raboteau in his ground breaking work *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* argues persuasively that gospel evangelism, baptism, and Christian education had a powerful leveling effect, tearing down the wall of racial hostility. The shared experience of repentance, conversion, baptism, and discipleship drove the one blood conviction home. But it was precisely the impact of Christianization that led nominally Christian Southern plantation owners to discourage baptism lest their slaves think that they were free or equal to whites. This fear led colonial legislatures across the South to pass acts that denied that baptism altered a slave’s bondage. The “egalitarianism implicit in Christianity” caused slave masters to discourage missionary access to slaves out of fear “that a Christian slave would have some claim to fellowship, a claim that threatened the security of the master-slave hierarchy.”⁶

The sad truth is that those who advocated “for the evangelization of the slaves felt obliged to prove that Christianity would actually make better slaves.” Instead of fighting racial slavery in America, Southern pastors commended the gospel “by presenting it as an attractive device for slave control.”⁷ The tragic irony of this is that the gospel compels personal and sociological conversion, overcomes and racial and social barriers, and makes us one in Christ (Gal 3:28). The apostle Paul’s letter to Philemon underscores this truth. The inevitable and unrelenting impact of the gospel replaces the master - slave relationship with one new family, one new race. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the epilogue to his book, Perkins writes, “We are one human race. We are one blood, all created from one man, Adam. And we are saved by one blood – the blood of Jesus, the Son of God who gave his life to reconcile us to the Father – and to one another.”⁸ Perkins continues, “We are at a pivotal moment in history, and the things that are happening now reveal how much work is left to be done. This struggle for reconciliation is not going to be won in the streets. It’s going to be won by believers in Jesus Christ who choose to live out the truth of the gospel. . . .It’s going to be won by those who will be courageous enough to stand and tell the truth about the ugliness of ethnic hatred and the beauty of Christian brotherhood. . . .The Church must speak out

⁵ Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity* (1706) (<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1028&context=etas>).

⁶ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 1978, 2004), 98-102.

⁷ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 103.

⁸ John M. Perkins, *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love*, (Chicago: Moody, 2018), 171.

with one voice against bigotry and racism. We have been too quiet. The time is now. . .It will require us to hold fast to his vision for one Church and the biblical truth of one race.”⁹

We are his people, the church of God, bought “with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). It is around the communion Table that we gather and hear Jesus say, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28). What the world rejects, we embrace. “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:10-13).

⁹ Perkins, One Blood, 173-174.