

One People: The Church, Race, and the Gospel

Walk Together

Colossians 3:11-17

Mark Vroegop

“Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through hi.” (Col. 3:11–17).

This Sunday, we begin a short series entitled One People: The Cross, Race, and the Cross. I’d like you to join me in a prayer of lament:

O Lord, how long will your church be divided along racial lines? How long will the lingering effects of animosity, injustice, and pride mark your blessed bride? How long, O Lord, will my white brothers and sisters not understand the pain in those whose experience is different than ours? How long, O Lord, will my minority brothers and sisters struggle with distrust and feel misunderstood and ostracized?

God, grant us the heart to weep with those who weep. Give us empathy and understanding. Create trust where there is pain. Give us the grace to persevere, to repent, to forgive, and to love. Make your Church—our church—the united bride you want her to be.

These divisions of mistrust and historical bias run deep, O God. Without you, nothing will ever change. In our pain and our weariness, we express our hope that Jesus can change our hearts and unite the Church. We believe the gospel is greater than our divisions. And we long for the day when the world will take note of how we loved each other. So, help us to meet each other in this prayerful journey. We come to love, to listen, to lament, to learn, and to leverage what you do in us. Hear us as we weep together that we might walk together.

Imagine a sea of people—as far as your eyes could see—standing in front of Jesus. Everyone is wearing white robes and holding palm branches. Their anthem rolls like a crashing wave over the crowd as they shout: “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” With one voice they offer a glorious tribute to their Savior. Jesus stands alone as the victor. Sin is defeated. Satan is banished. Redemption accomplished.

But what makes this scene compelling is not just the celebration. It is the composition of the crowd. This eternally assembled multitude is the gathering of redeemed saints from “every nation, from all tribes, and peoples, and languages.” Think of what it would look like: a landscape of faces with various hues, beaming as they gaze upon Jesus. Imagine the beautiful tapestry of skin color, the varying shades of ethnicity all assembled in the presence of the King of Kings: African, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, European, South American, and Pacific Islander all praising Jesus. Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda, White and African-Americans, Brahmins and Shudras in India, and White and Black South Africans all proclaiming their allegiance to the risen Christ. Imagine historical divisions and prejudices gone. The pain of partiality and injustice erased. Superiority and pride never again rearing their ugly heads.

Standing before the throne of God is a global, diverse, and unified multitude rescued by a Jewish carpenter named Jesus.

This was God’s plan from the beginning.

One People

The aim of the death and resurrection of Jesus is the redemption of people from every nation. The book of Revelation looks forward to this glorious day as a diverse group of people gathers before the throne of God. It’s a compelling vision of the future. But is it only in heaven? What if this unity in Christ could be tasted now? What if the church could look a little more like the seventh chapter of Revelation? What if there was such a unique unity among us that, like the church at Antioch, people didn’t know what to do with it?

That’s the vision for this series—to help us look and act more like the Church Jesus bought through his blood. My dream is to help our church lead the way in bridging a painful divide that still exists in the church in the United States.

I’m sure you’ve heard the statement that “the most segregated hour in America is 11 a.m. on Sunday morning.” Tragically, the effects of hundreds of years of slavery and the legacies of segregation under the Jim Crow laws have created canyons of pain and distrust among those who are called to be part of the body of Christ. Additionally, the political, social, and media landscape has fossilized our divisions. It has created “echo-chambers” of information and opinions. Instead of building bridges toward one another, it feels as if racial fissures are widening, maybe even deepening. Sure, there are examples where multi-ethnic churches are thriving in their diversity and in spiritual health. But on the whole, the evangelical church in America doesn’t look like heaven or Antioch.

If we’re honest, it’s hurt our witness.

As a whole, our culture is not marveling at our unity and love across ethnic fault lines. No one feels the need to create a new name for Christians because of our inexplicable and other-worldly unity. Additionally, most of us aren’t sure what to do about it, or even how to talk about it.

However, I think John Perkins, evangelist, civil rights activist, and author of *One Blood*, believes the church is the best place for racial reconciliation. He writes, “There is no institution more equipped and

capable of bringing transformation to the cause of reconciliation than the church. But we have some hard work to do.”¹

Surveying the Landscape

As we begin this three-week series on racial reconciliation, I want to acknowledge some of the challenges that we face as we talk about this. Let me address four concerns:

1. **Divisiveness:** Some people are understandably nervous about this because they believe talking about racism only makes things worse. To that, I would simply say that ignoring the issue has been the issue, and the Bible calls to deal with hard topics because they show us our maturity (1 Cor. 11:19).
2. **Distraction:** Some would argue that this is an issue that detracts from other, more important, issues such as failing marriages, sexual sin, wayward teenagers, pornography, or the challenges of singleness. I think if you search my sermons over the years, you would find all of these issues addressed far more frequently than what we are going to talk about. And I would say what is important is a matter of personal experience and opinion.
3. **Dilution:** Some people think that talking about this will dilute the preaching of the gospel or take us down a path of what some call “liberal theology.” I hope to show you how connected the issue of racial harmony is to the gospel. Furthermore, I want us to see that theologically conservative churches have often been on the wrong side of history or have even been complicit in racial disunity.
4. **Disappointment:** Other people, especially those in our minority community, have hopes and dreams which have been dashed in the past. Some are worried about being disappointed yet again. My prayer is that we can simply make some progress together, trusting God to help us walk together.

Now I’m sure there are more concerns, and I’d be happy to address yours, but I think that these provide a good starting point. I realize that talking about racial harmony invites us into a complicated and potentially loaded conversation. But I also think it is an opportunity for the gospel to shine brightly.

Gospel Position

Colossians 3 is our text today, and it is a helpful passage that connects spiritual position, posture, and practice. As is common with Paul’s letters, he starts with the theological foundations. We see this in the following places in Colossians 3:

- In verse 1 Paul talks about being raised with Christ. He’s referring to the spiritual reality of sharing in the spiritual victory of Christ.
- Then, in verse 3, Paul describes Christians as having died. This is another reference to union with Christ. Jesus’s death and resurrection created a new position or standing for those who have received him.

¹ John Perkins, *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2018), 63.

If you skip over to verse 10, you'll see this again. But this time, instead of arguing from spiritual position to practice, he reverses it. He instructs the church to put off lying *because* they have put on the new self. There is a new identity, a new position, called the new self, that is bought by the blood of Jesus. The new spiritual position is powerful.

But also notice that this new self is “being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col. 3:10). In other words, the target for what Christians are to look like is none other than Jesus. Now, what shapes “image” more than just about anything else? Your culture and ethnicity.

For example, my father and his parents were born in the Netherlands. They immigrated to the United States after World War II. They eventually took up residence in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Why there? Because there were other Dutch immigrants who lived there. And there were particular values and presuppositions about life that were built into that culture and our lives. Hard-working, frugal, disciplined, and not very emotional would be the normal image of a Dutchman. My goodness, the Dutch figured out how to reclaim their land from the ocean. My name literally means “early-up.” That’s the culture. That’s the image.

And while I love that heritage, it isn’t perfect—even in ways I don’t fully realize. Because it’s my culture, there are aspects of it that I don’t see. There are blind-spots, assumptions, and beliefs that are hard to deconstruct because they feel foundational. Discovering those assumptions is emotional and painful. That’s what some of you felt in our worship last weekend. It didn’t speak to your heart, and you struggled not thinking “this is wrong.” This is why people from the same cultures gravitate toward one another. It’s just easier.

The church growth movement thrived on the homogenous principle. It’s the idea that the fastest way to grow the church is to gather people together who have the same culture, background, and values. You can grow a church numerically that way, but you are playing right into the brokenness of our humanity.

Yet Paul says there is something more foundational, and he applies it directly to the most significant cultural and ethnic divisions in the culture (v. 11). When Paul says “here,” he is referring to the church. And in this new people—the dead and raised with Christ, new-self community—there is a new identity rooted in Jesus. And the oneness of this people gets underneath the most apparent and deeply-entrenched identity markers such as: ethnicity (“Greek and Jew”), religious background (“circumcised or uncircumcised”), cultural (“barbarian and Scythian”), and socio-economic (“slave and free”). Instead, “Christ is all and in all.” In other words, the gospel gets underneath the most basic categories and assumptions of life and transforms them. There is a more powerful position than the most common and emotional categories like ethnicity and culture.

I want to be sure that we understand a few terms that I just used. It’s hard to have a conversation about this topic if we don’t understand exactly what we mean.

- **Ethnicity:** Classification of groups of people based upon cultural and/or geographic origins
- **Culture:** The typical beliefs, behaviors, and customs of a group of people
- **Prejudice:** Beliefs and attitudes toward a person based upon that person’s association or group

These words have powerful connotations and holds on us. They are informed by our backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs.

Let me address two words that are loaded: *race* and *racism*. The term “race” has a lamentable history because it goes beyond ethnicity (e.g. British, French, Dutch, Italian, African, Asian). There is only one divinely-created race—the human race. But over time in the United States, ethnicity was deconstructed into the racial categories that no longer had anything to do with ethnicity but with the color of one’s skin—white and black (colored). Why did that happen and how is it connected to racism?

*The economic machine created by Europeans was expanding at a torrid pace, and its dark secret was its reliance on slave labor as its primary fuel. The horror of slavery was a major moral crisis for America, but instead of acknowledging the sin of that enterprise, we went in the opposite direction. We began to deemphasize the differences within various European ethnicities and began to describe white people as a human collective that was inherently superior to people of color.*²

“Race” became a socially (not culturally or biblically) constructed word and by the end of the nineteenth century, “white” was an all-encompassing term. And its roots are in the grievous sin of slavery and the belief that whites were superior.

Racism is the systemization of racial ideology in language, laws, culture, and thinking. It is treating people unfairly, unkindly, and unjustly based upon the belief that they are inferior. Racism had enormous effects on how people relate to each other. Let me give you an example:³

If you traced the immigration patterns of the Irish to America, you would learn that in their early years they were mistreated, oppressed, and seen as inferior to other European ethnic groups. Because of their suffering, they formed a unique bond with African Americans. They lived in the same neighborhoods and competed for the same jobs. When the census of 1850 was taken, the term mulatto was introduced for the first time and was used primarily to describe a person of both Irish and African American descent. The Irish immigration overlapped with the development of the social construct of race. Since the Irish wanted to be accepted as white, they embraced racism against African Americans. In essence, the Irish became white. Their ethnicity was eclipsed by “race,” and racism within the culture of the United States allowed them to do so.

Now, why have I taken so much time to define these terms? Not only because that is a starting point for understanding and a discussion, but also because when we read Colossians 3:11, we don’t feel what they would have felt with those identity markers. We don’t have a history with those terms. And without feeling that, you miss the power of what is being said.

Paul’s point is that the gospel is powerful enough to create a new starting point, a new foundation, and a new identity. The “new self” which is being renewed after the image of the Creator can transform the

² Daniel Hill, *White Awake: An Honest Look at What it Means to be White*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2017), 51.

³ A summary of pages 51-21 in Daniel Hill, *White Awake: An Honest Look at What it Means to be White*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2017).

most deeply held and emotionally-load categories in our culture. Jesus becomes more foundational than our history, our ethnicity, and our culture.

That's the power of the gospel-brought position. It humbles those who think they are superior. It gives value to those who have been told they are sub-human. The gospel can unite people who should have hated each other.

As we think about ourselves, we have to ask where do we get our sense of identity? We have to ask ourselves about what has formed our understanding as to who we are and to our history. And we must commit to allowing the gospel, not our cultural narrative, to shape us. This is a personal thing for all of us. It is personal for me.

Several years ago, I shared a personal story that I believe illustrates this. When I was in seminary, I worked as an Admissions Counselor for the undergraduate college associated with my seminary. My territory included inner-city Grand Rapids, and part of my role was to meet with urban, African-American pastors. One day I was meeting with a wonderful, evangelical pastor who was a leader in the city, and we were talking about the challenges that African-American kids faced – the things that served as barriers toward their success. And after he made a comment about societal challenges and lack of opportunity for African-Americans, I pushed back and said, "Wait a minute. My grandfather came to this country in the '40s, unable to speak English and with five kids. He worked himself to death to make a life for his children. This country is filled with opportunity." This was a very familiar argument among my white friends, church, and school. After he sighed, he said, "But Mark, the difference is that your grandfather could be hired in the 1940s because he was white. My grandfather would likely not have been hired for the same job. And think of the difference that makes." His words broke my heart, not only because he was right, but because I had never had that thought. Never. I began weeping in his office, and when my African-American co-worker asked him what was going on, he said, "Our brother just saw something he has never seen before." He was right.

That moment was consequential because it challenged my cultural presuppositions. You see, within Western Michigan there is even a mantra: "If you ain't Dutch, you ain't much." And I began to see that statement differently. It grieved me. In order for racial reconciliation to happen, we have to get underneath our cultural, historical, and familial assumptions. We have to come back to the gospel.

Do you think of the gospel as merely something that relates to whether you are going to heaven or not? Do you see your relationship with Christ as more foundational than any other identity marker? We all develop our sense of identity, fairness, equality, and history from somewhere. The aim of this series is for you to see the issue of "race" in light of the position created by the cross of Jesus.

Gospel Practice

Second, I want you to see how this position translates into action. The positional truth is transformational at multiple levels. If you were to read on in Colossians 3, you'd find how Paul applies this to wives, husbands, parents, employees, and employers. In other words, spiritual position is meant to have implications that are moral, social, and societal. For example, what you believe about the gospel

affects your perspective on lying and adultery. What you believe about the gospel affects how you love your friend or your spouse. The gospel also affects our response to society at large. To be clear, I'm not advocating for a social gospel—a belief that replaces the care for souls through salvation with a concern for good works. But I do think that the gospel has social justice implications. Christians should love what God loves and hate what he hates. And we should do what we can to make wrong things right. I think William Wilberforce was living out the gospel in his efforts to abolish the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in the 1800s.

We see this in verses 12-14 of Colossians 3. They are implication verses of the positional realities that Paul has just talked about. He reinforces this by using more positional language (“chosen ones, holy and beloved”). Then he lists the kind of behaviors that should characterize God's people. It's quite a list: compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving one another. Who doesn't know this should characterize Christians?

But here's what you might not know. When Paul says “put on,” the original language would indicate that these things were already true. The people weren't to do something new. They were to act in a manner that agreed with who they already were. That's why the NIV translates “put on” as “clothe yourselves.” “Be who you are” is the sense. In other words, compassionate hearts, kindness, patience, etc. are supposed to characterize the body of Christ. God rescued them so that they could walk together!

Then we come to verse 14, where love binds everything together in perfect harmony. The word means a position of maturity and perfection. And the ESV translators chose the word “harmony,” linking what was said back in verse 11 (“Here there is neither . . .”), to this. What is harmony? It is two different notes that together make a beautiful sound—unique notes on a piano, that when played together, sound better than when played by themselves. That's what the church was meant to be.

Verse 15 presses this even further by addressing the matter of the peace of Christ ruling our hearts. And by adding the reference to being called into one body, it is clearly not just referring to emotional peace in our souls, but a heart-based peace with other people while being thankful.

When we think about what it means to be one people, how you approach the issue of gospel position and gospel practice is critically important as we walk together.

Next Steps

So what do we do next? Over the next two weeks I'll unpack more of this, but let me suggest that you take some steps toward walking in step with the gospel.

First, for some of you, it was a good start that you came and listened to this message today. You dealt with the internal tensions. You may not fully agree with me, but you were here and you listened. Well done.

Second, I would like you to think a bit differently about the subject of ethnic harmony and racial reconciliation. Many of us think that it's enough for us not to be a racist. We don't commit acts of racism, and we don't think of people as inferior. Most Christians are non-racists. But I'd like you to

consider moving into another position—the anti-racist category. In the same way that you shouldn't commit abortion or just think abortion is bad, you should work to be anti-abortion. I want you to pray with me about what it looks like not only to put off hatred and to feel love for one another, but also to actively practice love in tangible ways. Consider how you can walk in redemptive ways against racism.

Finally, you might wonder what exactly that looks like. The hard part is that we are coming at this topic from different places and backgrounds. But let me suggest a five-fold commitment path:

1. **Love** – To affirm my oneness in Christ and my brotherly affection for fellow believers
2. **Listen** – To be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to become irritated
3. **Lament** – To talk to God about the brokenness in the world, history, the church, and myself, along with a commitment to weep with those who weep
4. **Learn** – To be ready to learn from one another and to grow in my maturity in this area
5. **Leverage** – To take steps toward living out the gospel with harmony, peace, and justice

And if we can do this in real and practical ways, perhaps we can see God continue a work that he has started among us. I think we should try because:

“There is no institution on earth more equipped or capable of bringing transformation to the cause of reconciliation than the church” – John Perkins.

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