

THE REFORMED FAITH AND RACIAL HARMONY

JOHN PIPER

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith (Romans 3:28).

My main point today is that *the more you understand and the more you cherish the biblical vision of God as absolutely free and gracious and sovereign over all things, the more you will love and live and labor for racial diversity and racial harmony.*

A year ago at this time I was wrestling to put into words my understanding of how “the soul dynamic” of the African-American experience relates to a biblical vision of the Sovereignty of God. The upshot of that wrestling was the message I gave to the Pastor’s Conference. Carl Ellis coined the term “soul dynamic” in his book, *Free at Last* (InterVarsity, 1996, p. 266). You can see what that means and how I wove the two together by [getting that message](#) from Desiring God Ministries.

What I want to do this morning is continue that effort to think biblically about the relationship between racial harmony and the biblical vision of God in the Reformed Faith. I believe what I will say relates to all ethnic groups and the tensions that sometimes rise between them. But I admit that my focus is mainly on the historic and ever-present and unique and critical issue of black-white relations (which are even now in the news again, because of the President’s weighing in on the University of Michigan’s admission policies and Condoleezza Rice’s subsequent comments). It is ever present – if not explicitly, then just beneath the surface. If you don’t feel that, it’s because you are part of the majority culture so that it never enters your mind that someone might treat you differently because of your race.

Our Prayer

My prayer this morning is that you would see racial harmony, and what it costs to pursue it, as a necessary fruit of embracing the biblical vision of God expressed in the Reformed Faith. In other words, [I pray that you will love the God of the Bible and labor for racial diversity and racial harmony and racial justice](#) – that is, labor for love.

Pastor Sherard’s article in this week’s STAR got it exactly right. Among the many powerful things he said there was this crucial prayer:

My prayer for us at Bethlehem is that we will love racial harmony because we love the gospel and that we strive to be known as a gospel centered church that exalts the glory of God and the person of Christ and who, as a result of gospel passions,

reflect the multicolored wisdom of God. He is faithful and *He*, by sovereign design, will do it!"

In other words, racial harmony has roots in the gospel and in the sovereignty of God. That is why it matters. Where it doesn't flourish, the cross of Christ is dishonored and the sovereignty of God is obscured.

The Reformed Faith

What I mean by the Reformed Faith is the biblical vision of God and his ways recovered in the Reformation under leaders like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli. I don't mean that all these men taught was true. Only the Bible is perfectly true. I mean that all these men saw the same thing at the center of the Bible and spoke it with power. We see the same things in the Bible and so we believe them and love them. Being biblical is more important than being Reformed. But at the center, being Reformed is being biblical.

One way to describe the Reformed Faith is with the five "alones." Salvation is by *grace* alone, through *faith* alone, because of *Christ* alone, to the *glory of God* alone, on the authority of *Scripture* alone. At the center of these "alones" is the precious teaching of justification by faith alone. That is not my focus this morning, but I don't want you to miss its relevance for racial harmony. Listen to the way Paul draws this out in Romans 3:28-30:

We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God he God of Jews [one ethnic group] only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also [all ethnic groups]? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith [Jewish ethnic group] and the uncircumcised through faith [the rest of the ethnic groups].

In other words, the fact that there is one God who justifies human beings in his court in one way – by faith alone – is made a race issue by Paul. Justification is by faith alone precisely, Paul says, to nullify ethnic advantages and feelings of superiority or exclusion. "Is he not the God of the nations!" Yes, and he will justify in only one way – a way that makes clear that ethnic distinctions do not create advantages or disadvantages. They do not save and they do not damn. Christ saves. Sin damns. And everyone is justified by faith alone.

But my focus today is on another way of summing up the biblical vision of God and his ways in the Reformed Faith. At the heart of the Reformed Faith are what we sometimes call the doctrines of grace. Sometimes we sum these up in the acronym TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. I said that my main point is that *the more you understand and the more you cherish the biblical vision of God as absolutely free and gracious and sovereign over all things, the more you will love and live and labor for racial diversity and racial harmony*. When I said that I had in mind this vision of God – the one expressed in these five biblical "doctrines of grace."

So let me take them one at a time and give some biblical basis and then mention how they relate to racial diversity and racial harmony.

1. Total Depravity

The Bible teaches that, since the original sin of Adam, all humans are spiritually dead and morally incapable of submitting to God in faith and obedience. We have a mindset that "cannot submit to God." Romans 8:7-8, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." The reason for this moral inability is given in Ephesians 2:1, "You were dead through your trespasses and sins." The natural person – the way we are by nature – apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, does not see the truth as true and desirable, but considers it foolishness. So he cannot embrace it as true and precious. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."

The implications of this doctrine for racial harmony are huge. Most often Christians celebrate the great positive common denominator among races, namely, that we are all created equally in the image of God (Genesis 1:27; 5:1; 9:6; James 3:9). That is true and powerful and relevant. But there is a problem if we treat that doctrine in isolation. The problem is: we are not good enough to hear it and make good use of it.

If you convince a sinful, depraved, unrepentant, unregenerate person that he is created in the image of God, you will probably fuel his innate pride. And that pride will so distort a person's view of reality he will easily convince himself that he is above others. What is desperately needed is another conviction – no less strong, but shattering to pride – namely, the conviction that all human beings, including me, are corrupt, depraved, guilty, condemned, and under the just sentence of hell where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth: red and yellow, black and white.

The ethnic diversity of hell is a crucial doctrine. Romans 2:9 puts it like this: "There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek." God is no respecter of persons in salvation or in damnation. The human race – and every ethnic group in it – are united in this great reality: we are all depraved and condemned. We are all lost in the woods together, sinking on the same boat, dying of the same disease.

If we saw this more clearly, two things would happen. We would be humbled and frightened and made desperate like a little child to find a Savior. I have never seen a white-hooded Klansman or a Farrakhan follower who was brokenhearted for his sin, humble, and desperate for a Savior. The other thing that would happen if we saw how united we are in sin is that the sins of others would look like the outworkings of our own hearts, and we would be slow to judge and quick to show mercy.

The doctrine of total depravity has a huge role to play in humbling all ethnic groups and giving us a desperate camaraderie of condemnation.

2. Unconditional Election

This is the doctrine that we have seen most clearly in our study of Romans 9. God chooses his people before the foundation of the world apart from any conditions in them. It is unconditional. This does not mean we don't have to believe on Christ to be saved. Nor does it mean we will be condemned apart from sin and guilt. We are saved by faith. And we are

condemned because of sin and unbelief. What it does mean is this: whoever believes and is saved, and whoever rebels and is not saved, is ultimately decided by God.

Acts 13:48 puts it like this after Paul's sermon in Antioch of Pisidia: "When the Gentiles heard this they were glad and glorified the word of God. And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." First comes God's sovereign "purpose according to election" as Paul says in Romans 9:11, then comes faith. So the "purpose that accords with election" is not conditional on faith or any other human decision or feeling or behavior or distinctive. It is unconditional. God is free and unconstrained by anything outside his own will when he elects his people.

This means that God does not choose his people on the basis of skin color or any other ethnic distinctive. No ethnic group can say they are chosen because of God's preference for their physical or psychological or spiritual qualities. And no ethnic group can say that they are not chosen because of their qualities. God's choice is unconditional. It is not based on anything in us. He is absolutely free and unconstrained. This is his glory, his name. And acting this way is his righteousness.

Therefore unconditional election severs the deepest root of all racism and all ethnocentrism. If I am among God's elect, it is owing entirely to God's free grace, not my distinctives. Therefore there is no ground in God's election for pride. And there is no ground in God's election for despair. Nothing in me caused him to choose me. And nothing in you could have stopped him from choosing you. When it comes to election, we are on the absolutely level field of unconditional mercy: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Romans 9:15).

3. Limited Atonement (Definite Atonement, Particular Redemption)

The main point of the doctrine of limited atonement is not to assert that Christ did not die for everyone in the sense that John 3:16 says he did: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, *that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" That is absolutely true: Christ died so that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. Christ's death is sufficient for all, and should be offered to all as gloriously sufficient to save them if they will believe. "Limited atonement" does not deny any of that.

What it denies is that God's design in the atonement is the same for everyone. It affirms that Christ dies for his *bride* in a way that is different from the way he dies for *all* people. Ephesians 5:25 says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." In other words, Christ died for the church, his bride, with the sovereign purpose that he would *accomplish* her salvation in the cross. He would purify her and purchase her. He was dying not just to create an opportunity for her to believe, but to purchase the belief itself. His death was not just sufficient for the salvation of the church. It was efficient, effective, and decisive for the salvation of the church. Jesus says, "I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15). "I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you [Father] have given me, for they are yours" (John 17:9). "And for their sake I consecrate myself [to die], that they also may be sanctified in truth" (John 17:19).

And Paul carried this understanding of Christ's work through when he said in Romans 8:32-33, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how shall he not with him

freely give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?" In other words, all those for whom he died will most certainly obtain all things – they will finally inherit the kingdom of God. His death is effectual for the elect.

Which means that no person, no matter what ethnic group, ever made any contribution to the ransom that frees him from the slavery of sin. We are all equally slaves to sin and corruption and futility and death and condemnation because of our depravity. That is our common slavery. We saw that. Now we see that the payment for our liberation – the blood and righteousness of Christ – is so complete that we could not and did not make any contribution to it – whether by our willing, or running, or ethnic distinctives. When Christ died in our place and for our sins, the whole ransom was paid. So fully paid, in fact, that our freedom was not just offered but secured, guaranteed.

The cross of Christ is a great leveler of human beings not just because it shows that we are all desperate sinners, and not just because it can only be received by faith, but also because it is such a full and effective ransom for the elect that no child of God dare ever think that we made any contribution to purchase. No color, no ethnicity, no intelligence, no skill, no human wealth or power can add anything to the all-sufficient, all-effective sacrifice of Christ. We are one in our utter dependence on his blood and righteousness.

4. Irresistible Grace

Just as the cross is effective in purchasing the elect, so that grace of God is effective in drawing the elect to believe and be saved. Irresistible grace does not mean you can't resist the grace of God when he is drawing you to himself. It means that when he chooses to, he can and will overcome your resistance. He may allow resistance for a long time (Acts 7:51). Recall how Paul said that God set him apart before he was born (Galatians 1:15). But think of all the persecution that God tolerated in Paul before he decided to move in power and take him captive on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-20).

Irresistible grace simply means that, since no human being can submit to God because of our hardness of heart and rebellion and spiritual deadness, the only way any of us is saved is by sovereign grace. Jesus said, "No one comes to me unless the Father draws him" (John 6:44). "No one can come to me unless it is granted to him by my Father" (John 6:65). We are saved by grace through faith, Paul said, and that is not of ourselves it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). Our faith is a gift from God. And so is repentance: 2 Timothy 2:25, "God may perhaps grant them repentance."

This means that not only did your ethnic distinctives contribute nothing to your election, and nothing to your ransom by the cross, but your ethnic distinctives also contributed nothing to the rise of your faith and the emergence of your repentance. We are all equally dependent on irresistible grace to be called and to believe and to be saved.

Not only that but irresistible grace also means that there is no scoundrel – no racist, no black or white or brown or red or yellow arrogance that God cannot overcome and subdue and bring to humble repentance and faith and everlasting holiness and joy. We are comrades in dependence on irresistible grace, and comrades in hope that none of us are too far-gone in our racial sins to be saved.

5. Perseverance of the Saints

This simply means that those whom God calls, he keeps. If you are a true believer, you will persevere in faith and obedience (not perfection) to the end and be saved. God will see to it. “Those whom he predestined he also called and those whom he called he also justified and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:30). “My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me; and I give them eternal life and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27-29). “I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6; see 1 Corinthians 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:23f).

What does this mean for racial harmony? I pick out one implication. If the pursuit of racial harmony is woven into the very fabric of God’s sovereign grace, and if therefore pursuing racial harmony is part of what it means to be a Christian, then the promise of perseverance is a promise to keep us pursuing till we die or Jesus comes.

This is utterly crucial, and crucial to believe. Because of all the issues, even abortion, which we will address next week, this one we are tempted to abandon more often because of we get wounded along the way. If you have a thin skin, or if you have a bigger sense of rights than mercies, or if you have small faith in God’s persevering grace, you will set out on the road of racial harmony and then quit. Because you are going to be criticized. You will try to say something or do something and the first thing you hear is: you said it wrong, or you should have said it a long time ago, or you should have also said such and such, or it was not the time to say anything.

What will you do when that happens? I pray that you will persevere. I pray that you will ponder your own sin, your own unconditional election, your ransom by the blood of Christ, your own miraculous and merciful awakening to faith, and the promise of God to complete the word that he has begun – and then press on in what you know is right, and show that Christ is your comfort in life and death.

Take heart and inspiration from people like John Perkins, who left Mississippi when he was 17 after his brother was murdered, vowing never to return. But after he was converted to Christ in 1960 he went back and has been fighting for racial harmony for over 40 years. He wrote in the foreword to Dwight Perry’s book, *Building Unity in the Church of the New Millennium* (Moody, 2002), that he had seen in this book what he wanted to see and said, “I can almost say as Simeon said when he saw the child Jesus, “Now may this old man depart in peace” (p. 20).

Get old in the pursuit of Biblical truth, persevering obedience, and racial harmony.

Delivered on January 19, 2003, at Bethlehem Baptist Church.