

Race issue 3

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The call to look up

The conversation about the current protests, social justice, systemic racism has universally been stuck at the sociological-political axis. That is, we interpret all that is happening in our nation through political lenses, and any discussion about solutions too often times ends up with a pitch to vote for Joe Biden or Donald Trump (depending on which side you're on). To my chagrin, the conversation *in* the church does not seem all that much different from the conversation *outside* the church. In this article, I wish to interpret current events spiritually. I am no prophet, but I have read enough of Israelite history and church history to offer some prophetically educated insight. It is my humble desire that perhaps I can help turn our eyes upward. After all, at the end of the day, the solution is neither in Donald Trump nor Joe Biden, but in Christ Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

In Psalm 51, David asks the Lord for forgiveness for his adultery with Bathsheba. What he had done was unforgivable: he stole another man's wife, had the husband killed (and that man was one of his trusted friends), then tried to cover it up by acting as a redeemer for the unfortunate widow. One can argue that David was no better than Saul. And yet Saul lost his kingdom while David kept his. David asked for forgiveness from God, and then at the end of his prayer, he audaciously even asked that God would prosper and bless the nation too. And God spectacularly answered David's prayer! Through conspiracy and civil war, David came through unscathed, with his kingdom intact. In fact, even his personal reputation was not marred, at least not in his lifetime (his sin with Bathsheba most likely went unexposed, though I do not have time to develop that here).

Why is it that David and his kingdom prospered, while countless other monarchs lost the kingdom during Israel's history? The answer cannot be that David was more righteous than others (Ps. 51:4-5). No, he kept the kingdom because at the end of the day, when all is said and done, he loved the LORD. He was a sinner who loved God. He knew that the LORD was both just and justifier of the wicked (Rom. 4:5). The same God who condemns David in his sin is also willing to shelter him in his mercy.

This principle applies in the life of every individual, Jews or Gentiles, man or woman, slave or free. This principle applies across generations and across culture. It applies individually and also corporately. This principle applies to America. If you are looking for reasons why this country is in turmoil, there are too many to count. This country of ours, just like David, was born in sin, and her transgressions are ever before God. Slavery, greed, sexual immorality, etc. The list goes on. There is no point debating over this because every person, every country, has enough sin to damn themselves to hell for all eternity. If righteousness were the cause for the prosperity of a country, America has no ground to expect anything but poverty and suffering (just like every other nation). The only hope America ever had in her centuries of existence has been the mercy of God. And now, that mercy has been taken from her, not because America is sinful (she always has been and always will be), but because she has rejected God.

America as a nation no longer wants God. Our country used to be a place where pastors and church leaders were seen as leaders of our communities and politics. Even presidents and governors who did not personally believe in Jesus tipped the hat to God and his clergy. The country as a whole respected the Bible and Christian-Judeo values. Now, from academic professors to media anchors to politicians, American leaders open disdain and mock the name of God. We've kicked God out of our schools, out of our politics, out of our workplaces, and virtually every public space.

And then we had the audacity to legalize gay marriage.

If there ever was a definitive moment in American history when we sealed our own destruction, it was in 2015 when this country legalized gay marriage. In Romans 1:21-27, Paul tells us that when people reject God over and over again, God eventually gives them over to their sins. This language of “giving over” means that he allows them to go their way without hindrance.

The truth is that everyone is a sinner. David was a sinner just like Saul. The only reason David was not condemned like Saul was that God did not take his mercy from him (Ps. 51:11). If God were to take his mercy away from David, he would perish just like Saul, or anyone else. In our sins, we are *a/ways* headed for certain destruction. The only thing keeping us from destruction is God’s mercy. Thus, if God decides to take away his mercy from us, it spells definitive, certain doom for us.

The sign that God has indeed taken his mercy from a people is that he gives them over to sexual immorality, specifically in the form of homosexuality. When you see a country get to the point where gay marriage is normalized, that is definitive evidence that God will now allow this country to do whatever she wants. He will not intervene. In other words, he formally accepts this country’s rejection of his Word.

That being said, our problem is spiritual, not political. The conversation we often have today is how to fix our political or social systems – as though our nation would be prosperous, if only we could fix one more problem. But even if we fixed the police, or the prison system, or the economic system, there will always be another problem to unravel the fabric of our existence. The only sure way to ensure our welfare and survival is to have God protect us from our own sins.

Most Christians always seem to just assume that God wants to bless this nation but our problems are getting in the way. This interpretation of our current situation is possible, but seems less and less likely with each passing day. Instead of seeing God on our side against our problems, we need to consider the possibility that God is against this nation,

and our problems are both the natural result of our own sins, and also God's active judgment against us. God is not here to help; he is here to judge.

It is my interpretation that those who continually seek to solve this nations' problems "horizontally" are wasting their time. Today it is police killings, tomorrow it is another COVID outbreak, the next day a massive school shooting, the next day a resurgent opioid pandemic, the next day another recession, the next day hurricanes and earthquakes, the next day another terrorist attack, the list is endless. God does not bring calamities to a people so they can "solve" the calamities. God brings calamities to people so they can repent. Once we repent, God will solve the horizontal problems. But if we do not repent, God will bring more and more horizontal problems until either we repent or we die.

A MILLION OTHER THINGS

When it comes to repentance, let us not primarily concern ourselves with pointing the finger at the world and blaming it for all of our problems. Even the legalization of gay marriage is trifle compared with the sins that goes on in the church. If the church wants to find the culprit for all of our calamities, she needs to look no further than the mirror.

For it is time for judgment to begin with God's household [1 Pet. 4:17].

One of the reasons I reject the social justice movement is that it gives too much emphasis to secondary and tertiary issues. Even if it can be granted that there is systemic injustice in America that needs to be repented of (see last article for a more detailed take on this particular issue), there are more important issues within the church that we need to change before we attempt to change the world. We need to take the plank out of our own eyes before we take the speck out of the world's eyes. I will give you a few items off the top of my head regarding what I mean.

First, we do not preach the full gospel. A full presentation of the gospel requires that we preach on repentance, judgment, and, by implication, hell. [Mk. 1:14-15, 6:12, Acts 2:38,

17:30-31, 24:24-25, Rev. 14:6-7]. Anyone who does not emphasize these aspects is not presenting a full gospel. From the countless preaching I've heard online, in person, across various denominations and churches across the country, I can tell you that it is extremely rare to find preaching that emphasizes repentance and judgment as Jesus and the apostles did. So many Christians want to live out the social implications of the gospel, but we have not even gotten the gospel itself down! The social implication of the gospel is the absolute epitome of the gospel's regenerative power. But we somehow expect that we can skip the foundations and go straight for the prize. This is the equivalent of expecting a child to fly a fighter jet before he has learned to walk. It is absurd beyond comprehension!

Second, we do not pray. Christians so often talk about the "good old days" of the revivalists during the Religious Awakenings in American history when souls were being saved and society was being changed. But I am curious... why do we seldom mention that the leaders of these movements literally spent hours every day on their knees in prayer, just like the apostles did [Acts 6:4]? Moses saved and structured an entire nation, and he would spend the majority of his day with the LORD in private communion [Ex. 33:7-11]. Martin Luther reformed a continent, and he said that unless he spent 3 hours a day in prayer, he could get nothing done. John Wesley changed a nation, and he spent two hours every day in prayer. William Wilberforce ended the slave trade in Britain, and credited his efforts to his morning devotions with God, *not* his political acumen. Every great Christian reformer has been a soldier in the prayer closet and has emphasized this aspect of his or her life more than anything else. Perhaps we do not mention this because we are lazy. We want the fruit, but we do not want to labor. We want all the benefits, but none of the hard work. Christians who boast about wanting to make great social changes but do not want to pray are ignorant at best, hypocritical at worst.

Third, we do not preach holiness and the fear of God. Holiness is God's primary attribute [Isa. 6:3, Rev. 4:8]. The fear of God is the primary response on our part [Ps.

25:14, 33:8, 86:11, 111:10, Eccl. 12:13, Lk. 12:5, 2 Cor. 7:1, 1 Pet. 1:17, 2:17]. The Bible goes out of its way to emphasize these features. We, on the other hand, go out of our way to avoid them. The fact that the most common objection to the doctrine of the fear of God is the doctrine of the “love of God” – as if the love and fear of God are dichotomous – is already a failure in itself. That response is pretty telling of the lack of basic understanding that the church has of God and how we are to relate to him. God commanded us to love him first and our neighbors second. The problem is the evangelical church too often assumes that she knows her God and can just move on to the second part of that commandment. It is as if most evangelical churches today read the letters of Revelation and automatically identifies itself with Philadelphia. Read it again. We are definitely not Philadelphia. We are Laodicea.

Fourth, we care too much about the approval of the world and not enough about the approval of God. If we had to be honest with ourselves, a driving motivation for many churches who have adopted the social justice mantra is not actually a concern for racial equality. Whatever racism there is today was certainly around ten years ago, twenty years ago, thirty years ago. Why is it that so many churches all the sudden care about it now? If this cause is worth caring about today, it was worth caring about five years ago. The surge in churches chanting for social justice today is less about genuine concern for the issue and more about wanting to be like the nations around them. They chant because it is popular. They chant because they do not want to be criticized. They chant because they love the approval of the world more than the approval of God. Even if social justice is a biblical cause – which it is not – taking it up for the sake of the world rather than God garners no favor from God. In fact, it is the very hypocrisy which Jesus condemned in the Pharisees. They prayed not because they loved God, but to show off. They gave money to the poor not because they were compassionate, but to show off. Everything they did was to show off. This kind of work is not of faith, but of the flesh, and it is sin [Rom. 14:23].

Fifth, there is too much heresy in the church. Take a browse through the list of America's largest churches. Take a browse through the Bestseller section of most Christian bookstores. The vast majority of it is flat-out heresy. Prosperity Gospel. Post-Modern Liberalism. Business Model Church Growth. Secular Psychology. The list is endless. A few years ago, researchers have identified the "Christianity" of younger generations today as Moral Therapeutic Deism. In this version of Christianity, their conception of God is basically a Santa Claus-like being who wants you to be nice and will bail you out of trouble when you need him. Everyone is basically good and when they die, they go to heaven. There is no need for repentance or living a righteous life. There is no need for atonement for our sins. This kind of theology is not abnormal. This is *typical* of churchgoers today. False teaching has done way more damage to our society than bad police officers ever have and ever will. I would love to see churches rise up and protest against false teachers. I would definitely join that movement. Social justice? That's going to have to wait (and it'll be quite a *long* wait).

Sixth, a good majority of people who claim to be Christian in our churches are not actually converted. Billy Graham once said that if even 5% of those who made a decision for Jesus in his crusades were actually saved, he would be happy. A. W. Tozer once noted that he did not believe 95% of professing Christians within the American church were actually saved. A. W. Pink went as far as suggesting that 98% of self-professed Christians were not genuinely converted. Something like 80% of our children leave the church after they leave for college. How can we expect the world to live righteously if those *in the church* do not even live righteously [Gal. 2:14]? How can we seriously point a finger at our neighbor's house for being on fire while our own house is burning to the ground?

There are plenty more problems in the church, but frankly I am already depressed writing this, so I will conclude with this: we need to keep first things first. The church as a whole is not right with God. Not even close. No denomination, race, or generation is exempt from this. The church does not need to go change the world. The church needs

to be changed by the Holy Spirit. Until we get right with God first, there is no point talking about anything else. On the other hand, if we get right with God, he will take care of our physical needs, individually and corporately.

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you [Matt. 6:33].