

Color Blindness, Political Correctness, or Racial Reconciliation: Christian Ethics and Race

*By George Yancey, Assistant Professor of Sociology
The University of North Texas*

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We hear a lot about the concept of racial reconciliation in Christian circles today. Yet how often do we think about what we mean by racial reconciliation? In one sense, no one is completely sure what it means because this concept easily represents contrasting ideas to different Christians. Nevertheless, it is still important for us to have a well-developed idea of what we mean when we talk about racial reconciliation. It is also important to explore how this idea may differ from non-Christian ideas as to how to solve the social problems of racism and racial alienation in our society. I will use this paper to explore a possible construction of racial reconciliation as a Christian concept and to see how our Christianity may shape a different answer to racial problems in our society than the answers given to us by secular thinkers in America.

To understand what racial reconciliation is, we have to first understand what it is not. There are two basic approaches that dominate how non-Christians attempt to handle racial problems. The first approach is what I call the “color-blind” model. Whenever I teach race/ethnicity, I generally have students (who are usually white) that question why we even have to study about race and ethnicity. Their thinking is that if we can ignore race then racism will disappear. The focus of the color-blind model is that despite the past historical abuses that minorities have suffered, neither whites nor racial minorities today should enjoy any economic or social advantages because of their skin color. Thus we should treat skin color as if it were hair color. The goals of this model are admirable since if we could become “color-blind” then many of the problems connected to racism would disappear. A real question is whether we can have a color-blind society now or whether we still must take “color-conscious” steps to alleviate the racial inequities and tensions in our society today.

It is naïve to believe that race does not continue to affect the life chances of racial minorities. Most racial minorities are aware that white Americans have historically benefited from racial privilege[i] and that this privilege continues to be passed down from one generation to the next. For example, the land where most white Americans live was once the home of Native Americans. Whites today are able to purchase land at relatively devalued prices because that land was stolen from the American Indians. Thus whites, as well as other non-Indian races, currently benefit from these historical sins and it is a mistake to ignore those past misdeeds. Corporate sins, as well as personal sins, must be addressed if we are going to rebuild fallen Native American relationships. Advocates of a color-blind society too easily dismiss the seriousness of historical and structural sins, and are unaware of the ways these sins affect our current racial relationships.ii[ii]

A second way non-Christians have attempted to deal with racism is through the “politically correct” model. The main argument of this model is that by empowering racial minorities we can overturn centuries of racial oppression. In this way the limitations of the color blind model, ignoring the historical and institutional racism that penetrates our society, is corrected with deliberate efforts to institutionally reverse the effects of that racism. For example, racial minorities have historically been barred from employment opportunities. Because of this historical discrimination, it is contended that there should be overt attempts to increase economic opportunities for racial minorities. This has resulted in calls for affirmative action by many supporters of this model.

It has also been contended that the culture and lives of racial minorities have been devalued. Thus, some of the more revolutionary supporters of this model promote the cultural values of racial minorities so intensely that they denigrate almost all European American values, while often ignoring the possible dysfunctions within minority group cultures. Many of those same individuals have such hostility toward majority group culture, one might argue that they seem to believe that to be European-American is to be evil. Even those who advocate multiculturalism, but do not condemn European-Americans and European—American values, tend to cling to a notion that universal norms do not exist, allowing them to accept norms and values from a variety of minority—group cultures.

Nevertheless, because of our sinful nature any society created by humans will contain fallen institutions. All “races” are represented by groups that have historically engaged in brutal practices: the cruelty of human sacrifices practiced by the Aztecs, the enslavement practiced by Africans in Egypt, Oman, and Sudan, and the massacres of Native Americans by European Americans. Furthermore, advocates of the politically correct model do not give enough attention to the personal responsibility of racial minority group members for some of the dysfunctional structures and practices prevalent within their communities. Some supporters of the politically correct model blame the criminally or sexually irresponsible actions of racial minorities solely on white discrimination. This is sometimes called “playing the race card.”

Neither the color-blind model nor the politically correct model fully appreciates the nature of sin. The color-blind model places too much confidence on the willingness of white Americans to seek justice in a meaningful way even if true racial reform inevitably leads to whites losing their historical, institutional advantages. Thus they tend to gloss over how majority group members of today have gained from past racial discrimination. The politically correct model is too eager to praise racial minorities and often fails to acknowledge the fact that sin knows no color. Thus there is a tendency to downplay occurrences of sin within minority group culture or to shift the blame for that sin entirely to majority group members. It should not come as a surprise to Christians that models built upon an overly optimistic perspective of humanity are unable to compensate for the powerful effects of sin.

Certain Christian organizations, Reconcilers Fellowship and Circle Urban Ministry, have concentrated on building egalitarian multiracial ministries. It is out of these ministries that I believe we can find a Christian definition of racial reconciliation. I have called this ideology “reconciliation theology.” Its origin comes from the work of black Christian activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Tom Skinner, and John Perkins, who have called us to confront our ugly racial past and to challenge the social structures that exploit racial minorities. While this is an ideology that is still in its infancy, I think that there are several principles that have developed from this approach that are worth exploring.

The first principle of reconciliation theology is that since Christ calls us to love each other, members of different races must make deliberate attempts to interact with each other. Scriptural evidence of this principle can be seen in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. In 2 Kings 17:24-41, we learn that the Samaritans were a mixed race of people. Because of this racial amalgamation with pagan nations, a serious religious conflict emerged between Jews and Samaritans. Yet Jesus intentionally went into Samaria to serve and to minister to a Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:1-26). Jesus realized that intentional efforts to create interracial interactions are necessary to deal with the historical hatreds and mistrusts that developed between Jews and Samaritans.

There are also minority-group members who fear that their racial cultural distinctiveness will be lost if whites are allowed to intrude upon their lives. Historically, oppressive racial relationships can lead to paternalism in contemporary minority relationships. Interpersonal racial relationships can no longer be hierarchical, with whites controlling the lion’s share of power. We must seek new egalitarian racial relationships.

Advocates of reconciliation theology understand that the mistrust generated from our historically oppressive racial relationships requires that we work to develop interpersonal relations between the different races. It is only in spending time together that we can learn how to relate to each other, to build trust, and to establish new relationships of equality.^{iii[iii]} This can lead to honest and open dialogue that helps us overcome historical forces of alienation. Perkins and Rice's book, *More Than Equals*,^{iv[iv]} documents how honest discourse between whites and blacks can lead to an interracial ministry that promotes racial healing rather than further estrangement. When Christians of different races develop primary relationships with each other, then they can develop more sympathy for the plight of individuals of other races. Perhaps it will be through these types of relationships that politically conservative white Christians will cease to label politically liberal black Christians as "fallen," and politically liberal black Christians will stop seeing politically conservative white Christians as "sinners."

A second important principle in reconciliation theology is that Christians of all racial and political backgrounds must oppose social structures of racial inequality. While overt racist laws have been taken off our books, the devastating effects of centuries of racism still haunt us. The color-blind model breeds a limited understanding of racism because it focuses only upon overt and individualistic discrimination. This rings hollow for racial minorities because they understand that racism still has a significant effect on their educational and economic outcomes. Dealing with the societal structures that have created these conditions may be costly to white Christians. However, an unwillingness of Christians to deal with ways that racism has structurally manifested itself and to concentrate only on instances of individual racism cheapens the message of the gospel.

God's hatred of oppressive social structures is quite evident in the Scriptures. For example, Isaiah 1:18 is often quoted as an example of how God will take away our sins and wash us to be as white as snow. What are these sins for which we need God's mercy? In the next few verses we learn that God wants us to defend orphans and to help widows. In other words, to aid those who are the poorest and most disenfranchised in our society. He is also concerned about corrupt government (v. 23) and an illegitimate justice system. Passages calling for social reform are common throughout the Old Testament. Clearly the Scriptures picture sin not only in personal failure, but also in institutional structures. Given such a scriptural understanding, it seems plausible to argue that the social structures created by America's racist past are corrupt and must be dismantled. Racial minorities are not going to be very interested in the message of Christianity if white Christians do not show a desire to help them to overcome historical economic injustice.

Related to the second principle is a third principle: namely, that whites have historically benefited from racism and thus are called to an attitude of repentance for these historical and structural sins. Repentance for these corporate sins is a difficult but necessary step in the process of American racial healing. Yet, rather than attempting to manifest corporate repentance, some white Christians have developed a cognitive denial of the historical evils of racism. In a 1996 text, I point out that Americans tend to resist the notion of corporate sin because of the individualistic society in which we live.^{v[v]} However, corporate repentance is a biblical call for us to hear and heed.

Let Thine ear now be attentive and Thine eyes open to hear the prayer of Thy servant which I am praying before Thee now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Thy servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against Thee; I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against Thee and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses. (Nehemiah 1:6-7)

We have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly, and rebelled, even turning aside from Thy commandments and ordinances. Moreover, we have not listened to Thy servants the prophets, who spoke in Thy name to the kings, our princes, our fathers, and all the people of the land. (Daniel 9:5-6)

Note that neither prophet is repenting of personal sins, but rather each is repenting of the sins of their people. Yet they express contrition as if it were their own personal transgressions. These passages teach us that corporate sins must be handled in much the same manner as personal sins—through repentance and renewal. The unrepentant attitude of some white Christians makes it unlikely for them to seriously deal with the effects of historical and institutional racism. When white Americans fully realize how much they have, even unintentionally, drunk from the bitter cup of racism, then they will realize that they can no longer deny the effects of corporate racism. Only then can they develop the attitudes found in Nehemiah and Daniel.

The last principle of reconciliation theology is that just as Christ has forgiven us, so also must racial minorities engage in an attitude of forgiveness. This is not a request, but a command from our Savior. In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus links the forgiveness we receive from God to a command that we forgive others. Ephesians 4:32 also makes this argument. Forgiveness is not based upon whether we feel like forgiving, but instead it is a basic obligation for faithful Christians. Thus, minorities must volitionally choose to forgive the historical abuses suffered by themselves and other members of their race, as well as forgive the contemporary consequences of those abuses.

This forgiveness does not come without costs to racial minorities. Some of them realize that they can use the guilt of whites to create power for themselves. Shelby Steele notes that African-Americans labeled victims gain a certain amount of status in our society.^{vi} Racial minorities are sometimes hesitant to develop an attitude of forgiveness because they fear that they will lose the leverage necessary to gain the social justice they desire. To forgive does not mean that racial minorities cannot fight institutional racism, but it does mean that they should not exploit “white guilt.” Care must also be taken to avoid an unjustifiable “playing of the race card.” While racial minorities have every right and responsibility to confront racially insensitive majority-group members, they must not use racial accusations to cover their own sins. Unfortunately the politically correct model has sometimes been used to endorse the sinful actions of racial minorities on the grounds that since they have suffered so much themselves, it is all right for them to use any means necessary to gain social power. While there are structural elements within the Eurocentric American society that must be addressed, we also must confront minority-group members who engage in destructive behavior.

Racial Alienation is the result of ethnocentrism by both whites and non-whites. Racial minorities are concerned that whites will not deal with their legitimate concerns and help them overcome the centuries of racial abuse they have suffered. Majority-group members are concerned that racial minorities will attempt to use legitimate racial concerns to gain an unfair advantage over them. When majority group members are willing to acknowledge that our racist past continues to affect the life chances of racial minorities, then they lessen the fear of racial minorities that whites will not help them overcome racial abuse. When racial minorities practice true forgiveness in response to whites, then majority group members have more confidence that racial minorities are not just seeking to use historical racism to justify unfair gains for themselves. Reconciliation theology can best be conceptualized as a call for both whites and nonwhites to focus on the racial concerns both have. From this Christian perspective we can develop a framework of mutual accountability that will revolutionize American race relations.

Ultimately, neither of the two secular models is satisfying. Many Americans realize that we do not have a society where racial colorblindness is possible. They acknowledge that one’s race still matters. Steps must be taken to ease some of the problems racial minorities face. Yet many of these same individuals are uncomfortable with the lack of personal responsibility some racial minorities exhibit. Though racial minorities have additional social and economic barriers that whites do not have, many believe that racial minorities should take responsibility for their own problems as well.

Reconciliation theology offers a third way to examine the problems of race within our society. It is an ideology that evangelicals may be able to use to attract non-believers who are dissatisfied with

the answers that they have received from the two secular models. It is also a model by which Christians can gain a better understanding of racial issues. Therefore, we must find ways to communicate our vision of reconciliation to the larger American society. We need our churches to go beyond superficial racial platitudes to make the Body of Christ an instrument that develops healthy, close, egalitarian, and reconciled racial relationships. ■

ENDNOTE

[i] McIntosh, Peggy, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies" in *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*, Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia H. Collins, eds. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1998), 94-105.

[ii] A good examination of how historical racism has enfranchised certain institutional advantages for European-Americans relative to African-Americans can be seen in the work of Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). The authors show how residential segregation was enforced through historical discrimination, they demonstrate how this historical segregation continues to deprive American blacks of economic and educational opportunities, and they document why it is difficult for blacks to end residential segregation and thus reverse the effects of historical racism. I would encourage anyone who wants to understand how powerful the effects of historical racism can be to read this work.

[iii] My own research suggests that whites in integrated churches tend to have more progressive racial attitudes than whites that attend churches that are segregated. Yancey, George "An Examination of the Effects of Residential and Church Integration on Racial Attitudes of Whites" *Sociological Perspectives* 42:2 (1999), 279-304.

[iv] Perkins, Spencer and Chris Rice, *More than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

[v] Yancey, George, *Beyond Black and White: Reflections on Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House Company, 1996).

[vi] Steele, Shelby. *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1990).

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