

5 Things We Absolutely Need if We Want Racial Reconciliation

A few years ago, my dear friend Bishop Harry Jackson called a few leaders and discussed his plans to initiate an event to deal with the issue of the worsening racial divide in America. The result was “The Reconciled Church” event on Jan. 15 (providentially the date of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday), which was hosted by Bishop T.D. Jakes in the Potter’s House church in Dallas, Texas.

On this day, about 100 national leaders representing the black, brown and white community from all political stripes came together to have an honest dialogue. To help prepare for this event, I submitted this paper for them to use as needed, so that we would have a theological and philosophical underpinning capable of sustaining long-lasting kingdom friendships that would glorify God. Regarding the subject at hand, one would have to be blind to reality if they do not think there are serious issues regarding systemic race relations in America.

What is worse is that the church often succumbs to the worldview of the world instead of vice versa. Regarding ethnic reconciliation, God is allowing the conversation to come back to the forefront in our nation, which grants Christian leaders the opportunity to frame the narrative biblically. I will try to avoid the use of the word race because its Darwinian implications connotes a theory that some races have evolved more than others, which plays into the hands of the racists.

The following are five components I believe are absolutely necessary for true ethnic reconciliation. Missing any of the following will result in superficial reconciliation that

cannot weather the storms of life in the 21st century. Furthermore, as we will see, biblical reconciliation does not depend upon a person having a robust knowledge of all the facts, complete understanding and/or full agreement in all the issues of the day.

1. Biblical reconciliation.

Biblically, we must start off with the belief that there is only one human race made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). That being the case, if Adam and Eve were our first parents, then all humans are brothers and sisters. God only divided the nations to stop their rebellious collaboration against Him (Gen. 11:1-9), not because of supposed biological divergence between humans.

Our biological differences are only skin-deep. Hence, foundationally, there is no biblical case for being against ethnic integration in marriage, family, work, church or society at large. Also, to bring up the curse Noah laid upon his son Ham (Gen. 9) is erroneous, as well.

Tony Evans aptly summarizes the biblical response: “[T]he Bible says that Canaan, Ham’s son, was cursed, not Ham himself. Thus, only one of Ham’s four sons, not all four, were cursed. How then could all black people everywhere be cursed?

... The Bible places limitations on curses—only three or four generations at most (Ex. 20:5).

... The curse on Canaan and his descendants—“Now there, you are cursed, and none of you shall be freed from being slaves”—finds its most obvious fulfillment in the ongoing defeat and subjugation of Canaan by Israel (Josh. 9:23; 1 Kings 9:20-21).

... The descendants of Ham’s other sons—Cush, Mizraim and Put—have continued to this day as national peoples in

Ethiopia (Cush), Egypt (Mizraim) and Libya (Put).

... God says that curses based on disobedience are reversed when people repent and turn again to obedience (Ex. 20:6). This is certainly sufficient to negate the Christian endorsement of the American enslavement of black Christians.

Furthermore, we see the biblical model played out in heaven when every tribe, nation and tongue is worshipping together before the throne of God (Rev. 7:9-10). Jesus taught us to pray for His kingdom to come and His will to be done upon earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:6-9), which means that the biblical model for ethnic peoples is to be in unison as we praise and serve God.

The fact that some have also used this verse (Rev. 7:9,10) to say that the Bible teaches that the races of humans should be separate because in heaven ethnic peoples and nations still have their own distinctions is also erroneous since many of the nations in history are made up of various ethnic peoples who have intermarried. Thus, the word “nations” does not necessarily imply a so-called biologically pure ethnic breed—but a common culture, language and allegiance to a set of values in a particular geographic region of the earth. Finally, as Christians, we are to derive our primary identity in Christ—not in our ethnicity.

Although God is not colorblind and created different ethnic expressions of humanity, we are all children of God when we receive Christ in which the dividing wall between ethnic groups has been torn down, and we are all one new man—regardless of skin color, gender and culture (Eph. 2:11-19, Gal. 3:28, 2 Cor. 5:17).

2. Philosophical reconciliation.

By “philosophical,” I am referring to a view of “how we shall then live” in light of what the Bible teaches—hence,

philosophy in this context is abstracted out of our biblical theology. Why take this approach? Historically, religion has always been the underpinning for the theory of life, values or the worldview of a society; this is why our first point was based upon biblical premises.

The philosophical concept also leads to the implementation of public policy, since philosophy both precedes and gives birth to political theory. When it comes to ethnic reconciliation, this philosophical component is perhaps the hardest of the five about which to come to an agreement. This is because of the various ways different ethnic groups have interpreted and applied Scripture due to their different cultural experiences, education and history. In spite of the inherent difficulty in having philosophical agreement, it is still important to have dialogue that involves presenting our biblical and philosophical perspectives so we can attempt to arrive either at agreement or mutual respect and understanding.

The recent events in our society from last year have shown the vast philosophical and ideological divide in some aspects of said ethnic philosophical views. For example, this divide was salient in the way the majority of African-Americans and Caucasians have interpreted the Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner tragedies, or the way biblically conservative blacks and whites have typically voted politically the past 50 years.

We have painfully found out that just because we believe in the same Bible, attend the same church, and or serve the same Lord does not necessarily mean we always have the same philosophy, especially in regards to culture, policy, economics, law and the process and view of justice.

3. Empathetic reconciliation

By “empathy,” I am referring to the ability of an individual to place himself or herself inside the universe of another

person in order to feel their pain and joy, as well as see their perspective. This is different from sympathy, which merely involves feeling sorry or having pity upon somebody. The ethnic divide will not be solved by sympathy, since this can imply that one group or person is superior to the one they pity.

This can also lead to paternalism, which is when one person or group relates to another group with the intention of giving advice or aid (like a parent would their child) without thinking that the recipient of their advice has anything of substance to offer in return. Paternalism may be solicited by some poverty-stricken leaders in developing countries, but in regards to this present conversation in America, it can never lead to a true partnership replete with mutual respect and understanding.

If the ball is going to be pushed further down the field, the biblical definition of love (1 Cor. 13) demands that we live in understanding with each other (out of which arises the fruits of patience, meekness, gentleness and love, as found in Gal. 5:22-23). Those who walk in empathy understand that there are various ways to interpret the world, and in spite of their philosophical differences, ask many questions of those with opposing views so that their own views can be informed more thoroughly.

Furthermore, human beings are not just robotically driven by facts and figures—they are emotional beings whose lives are often shaped by how they feel—thus, for one ethnic group or individual to dismiss the pain, anger, resentment, disappointment, hopelessness and humiliation of another ethnic group is to dismiss a large part of humanity. Consequently, those of us on the cutting edge of reconciliation between ethnic groups need a full dose of empathy, which will counterbalance, any philosophical differences to the point in which honest, loving, meaningful discourse can transpire irrespective of our presuppositional underpinnings.

4. Contextual/ historical reconciliation

By contextual/historical reconciliation, I am referring to the fact that the primary ethnic groups presently discussed (African-American/Caucasian) generally have a history of interface together in this country, both good and bad. Consequently, it behooves leadership representing both groups to have at least a general knowledge of their history together in order to have the context to properly inform both their orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

Without a conversation rooted in real history, the dialogue will be based on ignorance and will be at best, superficial. Also, in order to arrive at a better understanding of this context, broad reading (read books by liberal and conservative/black and white authors) and intentionally pursuing deeper relationships across the ethnic borders are essential for a broader horizon and mutual understanding to develop. Those who take the time to plumb the depths of the history of their ethnic people in America may indeed be shocked to find out they have built much of their thinking on a narrative rooted in false presuppositions.

5. Experiential reconciliation

By experiential, I am referring to going beyond philosophy, talk, church meetings and wishful thinking so as to intentionally develop a meaningful friendship with the ethnic "other" in your proximity. About 20 years ago, the Lord led me to gather about 20 of the top white/black leaders in New York City together in a small apartment for dialogue. We had an intense but necessary conversation that led to a 48-hour "racial reconciliation retreat" with about 50 key leaders.

After hours of prayer, discussion and strategy, at the end of the retreat, we all came to the conclusion that at the end of the day, the only solution capable of eradicating racism in the church was to develop deep, meaningful relationships

between ethnic people. After that meeting, we had annual "Unity Communion" services for the next three years, in which white and brown pastors celebrated Communion with African-American pastors in a black church in Crown Heights. The results were amazing, and we have since developed kingdom-focused relationships that have endured the test of time, which has resulted in many significant outreaches and the formation of multi-ethnic coalitions.

The bottom line is this: Reconciliation will only become substantive when it goes from the mystical/abstract to the experiential. In regards to the subject at hand, any thing less than developing true, deep, covenantal relationships with other ethnic leaders, will violate the command given to the church by Saint James: Be doers of the Word and not just hearers deceiving themselves (see James 1:22). Only experiential reconciliation with individuals will enable us to humanize people and transcend the divisive narrative many in society have attached to certain ethnic individuals and groups.

In conclusion, walking in all five of these components of reconciliation is necessary to successfully come up with solutions to deal with the systemic racism that still exists in both the church and society.