

# **It's Time to Dump the Race, Religion, and Gay Narrative**

A narrative has been written by the powers that be, in the media and popular culture, which has successfully divided humanity into segments related to ethnicity, religious beliefs, and sexual preference. Consequently, neighbors of diverse backgrounds interact and view each "other" with a particular categorical lens replete with disdain, because it assigns baggage and demonizes absolute strangers, making them the objects of our scorn and derision. For example, a non-religious person sees their neighbor holding a Bible and going to church on a Sunday and immediately they may categorize them as a right-wing fundamentalist who ignores science and wants to impose their religious worldview on the rest of society. Also, a Christian's view of their Muslim neighbor may arouse suspicion of terrorism and religious scorn. A person with a skin color different from others may make some feel uncomfortable in certain settings. A person perceived as being gay may be categorized as a participant of the far-left militant movement that is trying to stamp out religious freedom. What is most unfortunate about all this is that there are professional race-baiters, anti-religious bigots, and gay haters who thrive and even make their living by exacerbating prejudicial fears and perpetuating hate in this toxic, vitriolic environment. With this kind of political opportunism those on opposing sides can do no right! Even if someone in another camp has a good motive in aiding others, these militants will attempt to frame a sinister motif. In a letter to the Corinthian church, Paul rebuked this congregation for acting like mere men because they were filled with strife, envy, and contention towards one another (I Corinthians 3:1-3). In other words, the Christian ethos is supposed to be elevated above the fray of fleshly, self-serving ambition, and perceptions so we can walk in love towards all people. Not

only as individuals, but corporately, God requires His body to represent Christ to this world by bringing light and illumination instead of responding to the darkness (human ignorance) in ways dictated to us by the opportunists who leverage their influence by objectifying and dividing humanity. (Of course I am not dismissing the reality that we have to confront ideological differences that exist in society. But when engaging at a macro level, one needs to be careful with wording lest they unnecessarily alienate all individuals with sweeping assertions.) Jesus taught us not to allow how others treat us to dictate how we should think and act. Instead, He called on His followers to love their enemies, do well to those who hate them and despitefully use them and to pray for them. Jesus was even called "a friend of sinners," which is a profound statement meaning that even if someone by their lifestyle or ideology was rebellious or dismissive of God's laws, He valued them enough to get to know them and vice versa instead of objectifying and avoiding them. Jesus didn't trust Himself to any man (religious or non-religious) because of our moral depravity, but that didn't stop Him from loving and laying down His life for us. Jesus demonstrated that when opposing sides take time to get to know one another through sincere dialogue and fellowship there is potential for them to understand and love one another. (This is true even when dealing with the radical opportunists.) Truly, the only ones Jesus was ever angry with were the religious leaders in proximity to His own religious framework, who closed the doors of the kingdom of heaven to sinners. Instead of being sucked into the present, divided left/right, gay/straight narrative of the world, the church needs to rewrite their story of engagement with humanity through the love and wisdom of God. In our Biblical ethos, we should not only hold a high view of Biblical ethics related to the moral law of God, but the Biblical narrative also demands an ethic in which we do good to all men (Galatians 6:10) and love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Jesus defined "neighbor" in Luke 10:25-37 as someone in proximity to us who is in need; He

also praised a Samaritan for demonstrating love, in spite of the Samaritan being of a mixed ethnicity (half-Jewish) and having a different ideology and religious perspective from Jesus. Hence, Jesus taught that ethnic, ideological, and lifestyle differences should not hinder us from serving and loving humanity. (Jesus almost got thrown off a cliff for reminding religious people that on two occasions God bypassed His own people when He sent both Elijah and Elisha to aid non-Jews living in a foreign land; see Luke 4:25-30.) Hence, Biblically, loving a person doesn't necessarily equate itself with condoning or conforming to a person's ideology or lifestyle. That being said, we are not supposed to ask our neighbor if they are gay or straight before we aid them, love them or risk our lives for them when they are in danger. Just because the world defines the totality of a person by their skin color, religion and/or sexual lifestyle, why should the church do that? (Of course, professional activists have framed a narrative that connects same-sex marriage with the civil rights narrative, something many African Americans reject.) The word of God teaches that the totality of a human person is much more than that (Psalm 139:13-18; 1 Thess.5:23). I thank God Jesus took time to know me and reveal Himself to me even when I was uninterested and had no desire to know Him. The church needs to proactively and comprehensively frame our life on a Biblical morality that loves and reaches out to all humanity with respect and dignity since all humans were created in God's image. I have attempted to live by this ethos and it has confounded both friend and foe alike. For example, two days after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, instead of objectifying all Muslims I went into a local mosque to tell their leader that I am available to help them if they started to get persecuted. Their leader was so moved he started weeping and hugging me and all those around him were also weeping; thousand year walls began to fall before my eyes. In the mid 1990s I gathered 25 of the leading African-American and white New York City pastors together in a small apartment to have honest dialogue regarding our racial

divisions. The result has been deep and abiding ministerial partnerships that have lasted for almost 20 years. Along these lines, although my Biblical ethic informs me that the re-definition of marriage is wrong (Genesis 2:20-25 and Matthew 19:4-6), I have never allowed anti-gay rhetoric in my midst and have always blamed the high rate of divorce on heterosexual marriages for this cultural phenomenon. (Also, in the past I have publicly denounced the Westboro Baptist church because their hate-filled anti-gay rhetoric does not represent the God we serve.) In the early 2000's I participated in a press conference with a high level New York City political leader along with clergy who identified themselves as part of the LGBT community, when a rash of violence and bullying was committed against New Yorkers perceived as gay. At one point an influential liberal writer for a popular New York City newspaper even called me up and asked me how I was able to stand for Biblical marriage without utilizing hate speech. I told him it was because my view on marriage was not disconnected from my high view of all humans as image-bearers of God. In other words, all humans warrant love, respect, and dignity. (I do not believe my views regarding marriage are grounded in bigotry but in the fact that both men and women are different and marriage coheres those distinctions for the benefit of society, since children need both a mother and a father.) Often when I preach on the kingdom, I tell Christian leaders they are not called to take their cities but to love and serve their cities. This is where our God-given moral authority comes from when we meet the practical needs of the people in our communities with no agenda but sincere love, we will be respected even by those who oppose our views on religion, marriage and politics. Although we have a duty to uphold religious liberty, we also have a duty to protect at-risk gay youth who are threatened with physical harm, and bring relief to gay men dying of AIDS. As good neighbors, we need to stop dehumanizing those we disagree with and take time to get to know them personally. If the church is going to make a positive impact in our communities, we need to follow the

way of Jesus and resist responding to the pre-programmed rhetoric of those who make a living dividing us all. Consequently, it is absurd if someone were to brand me anti-gay because I disagree with them on same-sex marriage given my history and given the fact that in my worldview, "gay" or "straight" doesn't define the totality of a person. In my view, human identity emanates from being an "image-bearer" of God (Genesis 1:27), which ultimately means that all humans are God's offspring according to Acts 17:28. Disagreeing with a person's view on a particular issue doesn't necessarily mean you are against them as an individual. (With that faulty line of reasoning you actually have a better case for calling me "anti-evangelical" or "anti-church" since some of my writing is, as an "insider," attempting to bring correctives to the church.) All humans deserve civil rights, but all rights as citizens should be framed in the context of what is deemed best for society for generations to come. (Of course, some special interest opportunists on both sides revert to name-calling and "categorizations" when someone disagrees with their view of civil rights.) In light of this, Christians need to seriously exegete the implications of the Ten Commandments and Biblical civil law, but at the same time understand and practice the way Jesus summarized the fulfillment of the law with two commands: love God with all our hearts, and love our neighbor as we love ourselves. On these two commandments the whole law hangs (Matthew 22:37-40). Elevating love in our praxis for cultural engagement doesn't betray the gospel neither is it merely a ploy to obtain cultural credibility. Pure love is the highest motive of the gospel (John 3:16). In summary, if the church successfully reframes and rewrites the present segmented (human) narrative, we will be a force for good and may possibly redefine human relations person to person and community by community, which would enable us to function as the salt of the earth and light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). **Joseph Mattera** has been in full-time church ministry since 1980 and is currently the Presiding Bishop of Christ Covenant Coalition and Overseeing Bishop of

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