

Black Theologian Stirs Controversy After Telling Women's Conference 'Whiteness Is Wicked'

Ekemini Uwan—a Nigerian public theologian specializing in the Bible and racial identity and co-host of the podcast “Truth’s Table”—challenged common assumptions about race during a Q&A interview at the 2019 Sparrow Conference. In particular, she told a crowd of predominantly white women that “whiteness is wicked” and that they must “divest from whiteness.”

After moderator Elizabeth Woodson noted that racial equality matters to God because 2 Corinthians tells believers to be “ministers of reconciliation,” Uwan said that the gospel is offensive and began the broader racial discussion with a discussion of the truth of sin in all of us.

“When you are talking about reconciliation and having to face the ugly truth, I think in order to have a healthy racial identity development, I think we have to be truthful and honest about the truth of race,” Uwan said. “And I think we can do this by looking at the gospel. So 2 Corinthians 5—at I believe verse 21—talks about how Jesus Christ who knew no sin became sin on our behalf. He became a sin offering for us, and the reality is that we say, ‘He looked past my faults’—that’s a nice little church saying—but God did not look past your faults, actually. He saw our faults, He saw that we were enemies of the cross, He saw that we rightly deserved His wrath because we turned from Him and we follow in the footsteps of our first father Adam, right? And so He saw our sins. He put our sins on Jesus. That’s what it means for Him to become that sin offering. ... Then [Jesus] rose bodily as a brown-skinned, Palestinian God-man and is enthroned as that

right now.”

From that basis, Uwan discussed the very concept of race in contrast to ethnicity. Uwan argued that ethnicity is permanent and God-given—something that will continue even into heaven, and simply speaks to a shared cultural heritage and language—while race was artificially created to categorize people into superior or inferior statuses.

“Race is a social construct that was organized around strife, difference, racial stratification so that obviously white people are on top, people of color being on the bottom and blackness being at the very bottom,” Uwan said. “So there’s levels to this. We have to understand that race in and of itself is made up, and it’s not something that we should really seek to redeem. Our ethnicity though, is something that we do retain, and we see that in Revelation 7:9—you see every tongue, tribe and nation gathered around the throne, so we see that beautiful glimpse of what we will see in the new heaven and new earth and that worship that is happening even now. ... That is good, but race in and of itself was always meant to actually put differences between others and is always meant to subjugate.”

Because of that, Uwan said whiteness was rooted in the enslavement of Africans and the genocide of Native Americans. European groups gave up their individual ethnic identities to become a monolithic “whiteness” to contrast against the groups they were discriminating. And by lumping those groups together into monolithic “black” or “Indian” labels, they were also robbing those people of their unique tribal and ethnic heritages.

“We have to recognize and acknowledge that it’s a power structure,” Uwan said. “That is what whiteness is, and so that the thing for white women to do is you have to divest from whiteness. Because what happened was that your ancestors actually made a deliberate choice to rid themselves of their

ethnic identity, and by doing so, they actually stripped Africans in America of their ethnic identity. ... We have to understand something—whiteness is wicked. It is wicked. It's rooted in violence, it's rooted in theft, it's rooted in plunder, it's rooted in power, in privilege."

But Uwan did not stop there, insisting that members of the majority racial group cannot celebrate their heritage. Instead, she said, learn and recover your original ethnic identity.

"I am not pulling something away from you without telling you to replace it," Uwan said. "The goal for you all is to recover what your ancestors deliberately discarded, so that means return to whatever that ethnic identity is. Are you Italian? Are you Irish? Are you Polish? Are you Turkish? Whatever that was, you have to do that work to find out what that is, pull into that, learn what that cultural heritage is, [and] celebrate that. It's going to be work on your part, but that is the work. The work is to divest from whiteness and the work is also for people of color to divest from whiteness too. We do that by not centering whiteness, [by] trying to actually begin to imagine a world where your whole identity is not bound to oppression—which I think is hard to imagine because we live in a white supremacist nation. It takes a lot of work, and you have to do a lot of unlearning."

Woodson then countered by bringing up Galatians 3:28, which says that there is "neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, and there is neither male or female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus." But Uwan responded many people like to use that verse to shut down discussions without really meaning it.

"That Scripture has been used so many times to silence me as a black woman and people of color whenever we bring up whatever grievances and things that we have experienced," Uwan said. "Oftentimes it's used as a way like an 'I gotcha' card. I'll

slam this down: 'It doesn't matter, we are all one'—and all of a sudden nobody sees race, right? It's been used as a way to perpetuate colorblindness, if you will, but the reality is that when it comes to gender, though, all of a sudden that Scripture doesn't apply anymore. So when a woman wants to go preach from a pulpit, all of a sudden we aren't all one now, right? Paul is not saying we have now all become ghosts or just spirits. We are soul and body."

"The reality is that God has made us as we are on purpose, so that means he made me black on purpose and I'm grateful for it, even though it is difficult to be a black woman in America and to be in the church as a black woman," Uwan said. "I love it. I would not trade it for the world at all. But He's not saying that there aren't distinctions, because unity presupposes distinctions. What are we uniting over if we are all the same? There's no tension, there's no difference, there's no nothing, right? Unity is not uniformity."

Uwan said if these remarks are difficult, it may be because race or whiteness has become an idol. She concluded by recommending several books on the topic for people who want to look further into the subject.

"Everything that I am saying is all for the sake of love," Uwan said. "But love comes with truth, and truth is divine. Truth stings sometimes, but I hope you hear its love and grace. I don't hate you. I love you. I want everybody to be free."

However, several attendees at the conference did not take her remarks in love. Several white women walked out of the event. Sparrow's social media accounts omitted coverage of her remarks while promoting all of the other speakers.

Deedee Roe criticized the hostile audience response to Uwan's message in a blog post for *The Witness*.

"So what happens to whiteness when black theology confronts

its idols and takes up room in its sacred spaces?" Roe said. "It claws for its purse in the darkness, storms quietly out of the theater and asks to see the manager because it demands someone pay for failing to protect it from conviction and discomfort. When confronted, whiteness crumbles, falls on its face, head and hands breaking off like the statue of Dagon in First Samuel. We see it for what it really is—an idol meant to destroy us."

Later, after outcry online about the event's treatment of Uwan online, Sparrow's leadership team released a statement.

"We are writing to address the content shared during the testimonial interview at the 2019 Sparrow Conference," the statement—titled "Our Apology"—read. "We publicly apologize to both Ekemini Uwan and the conference participants for not handling such a complex subject with more care and therefore putting everyone involved in such a difficult place. That is not the heart or mission of Sparrow Women and we take responsibility for what happened. We want to be peacemakers and see gospel reconciliation and we fell short of our goal here. We will learn from this and are praying for healing and peace for everyone that participated in this year's conference and those that have been affected by this."

Uwan says she was stunned by the event's organizers' response because she has espoused these anti-racism positions for years. When the event's director, Rachel Joy, invited her to come speak, Uwan told the Religion News Service that Joy said she was a fan of Uwan's podcast, where she's espoused many of the ideas she discussed in the Q&A. In a follow-up blog post, she said that Joy eventually apologized for how she had responded, and Sparrow's lawyers released videos and photos that were initially withheld. Uwan said God would give her "the grace to forgive [Joy] quickly."

"Truth always precedes reconciliation," Uwan wrote. "My personhood is not the bridge. My blackness is not the bridge.

My gender is not the bridge. The blood of Jesus is the bridge, which is made possible by grace through faith in His finished work. I'm not perfect in my work, but I prayerfully employ discernment and pursue wisdom, precision and fidelity, knowing that calling out well-guarded idols can produce protective, defensive and blatantly hostile responses. My prophetic ministry, at its best, is fueled by *agapic* love."

Full video of her remarks can be viewed in the embedded video, and Uwan has made a transcript of her remarks available in an Evernote file.