

ESV Study Bible, Resources

Biblical Ethics: Racial Discrimination

The Unity of the Human Race: Evidence from Scripture

Racial discrimination has a long and sad history, but the Bible consistently views it as contrary to God's moral will. The entire human race has descended from Adam and Eve ([Gen. 1:26–28](#)), and Eve is “the mother of all living” ([Gen. 3:20](#)), that is, of all living human beings. This means that all human beings share equally in the exalted status of being made “in the image of God” ([Gen. 1:27](#)). Furthermore, Paul says in [Acts 17:26](#) that God “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.” The biblical record clearly indicates there is only one fundamental race of human beings, all descended from a single set of parents.

The Unity of the Human Race: Evidence from Genetic Science

Recent genetic studies from the Human Genome Project give interesting confirmation to the very large degree of genetic similarity shared by all human beings and the extremely small degree of genetic dissimilarity distinguishing one people group from another. The best of contemporary science shows that the human genome sequence is almost exactly the same (99.9%) in all people. In fact,

DNA studies do not indicate that separate classifiable subspecies (races) exist within modern humans. While different genes for physical traits such as skin and hair color can be identified between individuals, no consistent patterns of genes across the human genome exist to distinguish one race from another. There also is no genetic basis for divisions of human ethnicity. People who have lived in the same geographic region for many generations may have some alleles [possible forms in which a gene for a specific trait can occur] in common, but no allele will be found in all members of one population and in no members of any other.

Why then do people with different racial characteristics originate from different regions of the world? The human race, starting with Adam and Eve, has always included not only genetic variations of eye color, height, and facial appearance, but also of skin and hair color now

associated with different racial groups. At some early point when people began migrating to various parts of the earth, some variations within the one human gene pool became geographically isolated from other variations, so that people living in what is now northern Europe came to look more like each other and different from people living in what is now Africa, or Asia, or North America.

Another interesting implication of this has to do with genetic inheritance of skin color. Modern genetic studies show that when a lighter-skin person has a child with a darker-skin person, none of their children will have skin darker than that of the darkest parent. This means that if the hereditary transfer of skin color has operated in the same way from the beginning of human history, then the genetic variety in skin color (which is a very tiny difference from the standpoint of human genetics) must have existed from the very beginning. This suggests that Adam and Eve's children (see [Gen. 5:4](#)) would have likely had different skin colors, and that Adam and Eve would have likely had different skin colors as well.

Interracial Marriage in the Bible

Given the biblical evidence regarding the unity of the human race, it is not surprising to find that the Bible includes examples of marriages between different ethnicities or “races” that are treated as perfectly normal and good. For instance, Joseph (who was of Semitic origin, a descendant of Abraham) married Asenath ([Gen. 41:50](#)), the daughter of an Egyptian priest (who was African). From this marriage came Ephraim and Manasseh, two of the largest of the 12 tribes of Israel ([Gen. 41:51–52](#)). In addition, Moses married a “Cushite” woman, also an African woman from the region of modern Ethiopia and Sudan ([Num. 12:1](#)). Indeed, God punished Miriam and Aaron for criticizing this marriage ([Num. 12:4–9](#)). In addition, there are non-Jewish ancestors in the line of Jesus the Messiah. Matthew's genealogy mentions that Jesus' ancestry included Rahab, who was a Canaanite ([Matt. 1:5](#)), and Ruth, who was a Moabite ([Ruth 1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10; Matt. 1:5](#)).

There was some prohibition of marrying foreigners in the OT (see [Deut. 7:3; Ezra 10:11](#)), but as the verses in the previous paragraph show, this did not necessarily prohibit marrying people of a different ethnic group but only prohibited marrying outside of faith in the one true God (see [Deut. 7:1–2; Ezra 9:1–2, 11, 14](#)). The NT counterpart to this OT law has nothing to do with race or ethnic identity, but only teaches that believers should not marry unbelievers (cf. [1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14–18](#)).

The Curse of Canaan

Sometimes in the history of the church an invalid and indeed shameful argument has been used to justify racial discrimination. The argument is based on a false interpretation of the curse uttered against Noah's grandson, Canaan: "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers" ([Gen. 9:25](#)). It is simply not possible to connect this curse of Canaan's descendants with people of dark skin, or with the members of any contemporary portion of the human race. [Genesis 10:15–19](#) shows that the descendants of Canaan actually moved to the region of modern Palestine, where they lived in Sodom and Gomorrah as well as other nearby cities. Therefore, Noah's curse on the descendants of Canaan was fulfilled initially when God, in the day of Abraham, destroyed the cities of the Jordan plain ([Gen. 19:24](#)), and then later when Israel, led by Joshua, conquered the land of Canaan and in the process destroyed what remained of the sinful Canaanite tribes (see [Deut. 7:1–2](#)). These groups were not connected to the people of Africa.

NT Teaching

Several NT teachings are relevant to the issue of racial prejudice and discrimination. The parable of the good Samaritan ([Luke 10:25–27](#)) was in part designed to expose the wrong of the ethnic prejudice that existed between Jews and Samaritans (the Samaritans were a mixed race of people—half Jewish, half Gentile). In [Matthew 28:19](#) (cf. [Acts 1:8](#)), Jesus told his followers that they should "make disciples of all nations" (i.e., all ethnic groups), and Paul condemned racial discrimination in the church when he said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus" ([Gal. 3:28](#)). Paul also taught that the wonderful "mystery" revealed in God's plan for the church is that "the Gentiles are fellow heirs [with the Jews], members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" ([Eph. 3:6](#)). He taught that unity among multiple ethnic and racial groups in the church demonstrates in an amazing way "the manifold [Gk. *polypoikilos*, "having many facets, diversified, very many-sided"] wisdom of God" so that it is "made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" ([Eph. 3:10](#)). In other words, when the gospel brings Jews and Gentiles, and by implication people of every ethnic background, together in one church, it gives testimony, even to the angels and demons in the spiritual realm, of how wonderful God's plan is to unite all different kinds of human beings in one body, the church of Jesus Christ.

It is therefore a terrible tragedy when Christians of any particular racial background exclude people of other racial or ethnic backgrounds from participating in certain local churches. Such thinking is completely contrary to what God intends. In the book of Revelation John's heavenly vision of the glorified church is described as:

a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ([Rev. 7:9–10](#)).

If this is God's great plan from the beginning of time until the end, then surely the Christian church of today should be a living example of racial harmony, characterized by full inclusion of people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds united in serving Christ and his universal kingdom on earth.

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