

Psalm 18*Isaac Watts (1674–1748)*

Just are Thy ways, and true Thy word,
Great Rock of my secure abode:
Who is a God beside the Lord?
Or where's a refuge like our God?

'Tis He that girds me with His might,
Gives me His holy sword to wield,
And while with sin and hell I fight,
Spreads His salvation for my shield.

He lives, and blessed be my Rock!
The God of my salvation lives:
The dark designs of hell are broke;
Sweet is the peace my Father gives.

Before the scoffers of the age
I will exalt my Father's name,
Nor tremble at their mighty rage,
But meet reproach, and bear the shame.

To David and his royal seed
Thy grace for ever shall extend;
Thy love to saints in Christ their Head
Knows not a limit, nor an end.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***Am I My Brother's Keeper? A Dialogue about Race and the Church: Part 4***Jon Pratt and Emmanuel Malone***Who is qualified to participate in a discussion about race in the church?**

JP: When I first contacted Emmanuel and asked him to consider writing about this issue of race in the church, he graciously agreed to do so with one condition: that a White person join the conversation so both perspectives could be heard.

I was genuinely encouraged by Emmanuel's outlook, which is solidly based upon Scripture's teaching that all human beings are part of one human race and all are created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). Furthermore, Christians of any ethnic group are "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19). His opinion also flies in the face of our secular American culture today. Many believe that because White people are the majority and hold the position of societal power, they are not permitted to have a part in conversations about race, for they are to blame for our current situation: "How can Whites relate to the Black person's experience? It is high time their voice is silenced; they have had their opportunity to speak and act righteously and have miserably failed." Sadly, this is the opinion of many people of color in America today.

There is no room for such thinking in the church. Early in the formative years of the church, the apostles dealt with the racial tensions in their world between Jews and Gentiles: Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:44; 11:17), Paul and Barnabas at Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:44-48), Peter and the Judaizers at Antioch of Syria (Gal 2:11-14), and the circumcision debate at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Clearly, the path to racial harmony in the church was not lined with roses. But Paul and his fellow apostles adamantly spoke in favor of ethnic unity (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:11-16). Indeed, we are all members of the one body of Christ and should treat each other with respect and dignity (1 Cor 12:12-26). This includes giving one another the opportunity to talk, to suffer, to rejoice, and to worship together.

EM: Great question. I personally long for my White brethren to lend a voice. Too many one-sided claims are being made, especially through the media.



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The majority race must share their concerns. The concerns between Blacks and Whites will differ, but that is okay; the conversation must begin. As an example, Barna Research recently highlighted the stark contrast in perspectives between White and Black “practicing Christians.” Two examples from the poll: (1) 75% of Black Christians agree somewhat that the U.S. has a history of oppressing minorities, while only 42% of White Christians agree somewhat. (2) Only 38% of White Christians believe the U.S. has a race problem, and 78% of Black Christians believe our country has a race problem (labeling is Barna’s). What is the substance of these perspectives? Truth must prevail in the discussion. What do the facts show? Barna’s survey asked the question, “Is the cause for economic disparity between races due to systemic racism?” White people might say, “No, it is an individual problem.” Black people say, “Yes!” But what are the actual contributors? Statistics measure qualities or outcomes but they do not give you cause. Systemic racism must be defined, then proven.

If truth is the objective, then a person’s position or ethnicity has no inherent supremacy. Humanity is not the source of truth. Jesus Christ is truth, in being, word, and life (John 1:1; 14:6; 2 Cor.1:20), and the truthful way of life is found in Scripture.

The challenge for Whites is two-fold: boldness and motivation. If White Christians speak the truth with boldness, they must be ready to be labeled a racist by the secular world. Prayerfully in a Christian setting, lessons will be learned, and transformation accomplished. Second, White Christians must be willing to become part of a solution. Barna’s survey showed only about one-third of White Christians were interested in addressing the problems of racial injustice, while 70% of Black Christians reported being motivated (stats taken from Barna [<https://www.barna.com/research/problems-solutions-racism/>]).

Is integration a good and reasonable goal for local churches? If so, how can churches promote it?

JP: I think it is reasonable for a church to have a similar demographic to the community in which it is located. Of course, the “community” is going to vary depending on whether a church is urban, suburban, or rural. What is the area’s ethnic makeup within five miles of an urban church? 20 miles of a suburban church? 30 miles (or more) of a rural church? Other factors play into this as well, especially if a church is located near an immigrant population that prefers services in another language. But as the Lord allows, our churches should look like the neighborhoods in which they are found.

While we cannot force diversity, we can certainly pray for the salvation of those in our community who are “other.” We should make special efforts to be hospitable to minorities by inviting them into our homes and actively befriending them; in short, we must seek to build personal relationships with those who are different than we are. As every member is called to serve in

the body, we should be sure to enlist minorities to serve as greeters, ushers, worship leaders, Scripture readers, Bible teachers, deacons, elders, etc.

EM: Every local church should have an objective to reach her community. If the area of ministry is diverse, I believe that the local church should purpose to reflect the ethnicity of the community. The Great Commission is to all ethnic groups. The task is not easy.

An important step is for church leadership to promote a vision for diversity and unity. The first question any congregation should answer is “What kind of church do we want to be?” Next, learn about the people living within the area. Then launch the congregation to reach inside their sphere of influence. Three years ago, a Chinese lady in our church took the initiative and coordinated a Chinese New Year’s celebration. Five hundred Chinese came the first year, 1000 the next year. Last year we limited the invitation so we could have a better opportunity to build relationships. It has been a marvelous learning experience about Chinese culture. Several Chinese attend a Sunday morning Bible discovery class. The church has gained a strong connection with the Chinese community. (These are highly educated and professional people who live scattered throughout the community. They are not concentrated in one section of the city.) We have received testimony how grateful they were that we reached out to them and that we were willing to reach out to them through cultural engagement. When we show people we care about who they are, we gain a gateway into their heart for the gospel, and we build lasting relationships.

If the local community does not possess a sizeable ethnic population, a local church can seek a relationship with a church comprising other ethnicities. The connection does not have to be ecclesiastical like some church groups have chosen (e.g., sharing pulpits and choirs). I am talking about a greater bond of friendship. There are many ways connections can be formed (e.g., small reading groups, discussion groups, work projects, or showing hospitality in the home). In Philadelphia, representatives from two White congregations drove 25-30 miles to meet with a predominantly Black church. Relationships were built through work projects on the church building. In the aftermath of the Floyd incident, these churches are planning another discussion group. Building relationships helps build trust, and when people trust one another, they can better serve one another and listen to one another in times like these.



This essay is by Jon Pratt, Vice President of Academics and Professor of New Testament at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
