

Identity: Ethnicity

Westview Church | Ephesians 2 & James 1:17 | Pastor Brett Toney | January 10, 2021

Our Regular Approach to Preaching

Our conviction related to preaching is that in the Bible, we have the personal and sufficient self-revelation of the Sovereign Creator of the universe. The Church is created, shaped, ordered, and instructed by this Word, and as we gather for public worship, we do so to hear from God. Therefore, our preaching ought to be most consistently expositing, explaining, and applying Scripture, letting the emphases and structure of books and larger sections of the Bible determine the message of sermons. Our conviction is that this expositional preaching is the healthiest diet for the local church.

So, as we do something different for the next several weeks by having sermons that are topical or thematic, we aim for these types of sermons to be rare. We're giving the next few weeks to focus on aspects of identity. The prevailing winds of our society's primary worldviews have been strengthening and pressuring Christians to be tossed to and fro (cf. Ephesians 4:14). And pastors are charged by this Word to not only give instruction in sound doctrine but refute false teaching—that teaching and those worldviews which are not in line with Scripture (Titus 1:9). Our aim in this break from the Gospel of Mark is to do that by drawing attention to those worldview winds and exhort you to drop the outboard motor in the water to push against them. We're not going to be able to be exhaustive—the goal is to establish a starting point for ongoing development.

Biblical Overview of Ethnicity

To that end, this morning we are considering the theme of race and ethnicity. In the last year, this obviously has become a topic full of landmines and people talking past one another. Let's avoid that—engage with me and the other pastors about your questions or disagreements or ways in which you're helped. Now at the onset, I think it is important to be clear that “race” is a relatively recent sociological idea—categorizing people based on physical characteristics, namely the shade of their skin. “Race” is not a concept grounded in genetics, and, more importantly, not in Scripture.

The term that better captures Scripture's way of categorizing groups of people is “ethnicity.” Ethnicity captures the language, culture, geography, and biology of a group of people. The word “ethnicity” comes from the Greek word *ethnos*, meaning “people” or “nation”—not like the United Nations but as in the Cherokee Nation. So, let's take a quick survey of how the Bible talks about ethnicity or nations or people groups.

- *Genesis 10*—Here is recorded the “Table of Nations,” those peoples descended from Noah after the Flood, many of which we find referenced elsewhere in the Old Testament. Note that these peoples are categorized by their family heritage, not divided up by skin color.
- *Genesis 12:1-3*—This promise to Abraham is that all the nations, families, ethnicities of the earth will be blessed through his descendant, Jesus of Nazareth.
- *Isaiah 49:6*—The Prophet Isaiah says a good deal about how indeed people of all ethnicities will be saved alongside ethnic Israel; “I will make

you as a light for the *nations*, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

- *Matthew 28:19*—It is in that fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision that Jesus tells us, as we remind ourselves of each week, to “go, therefore, and make disciples of all *nations*.”
- *Revelation 7:9-12*—This the church does such that it is a worshipping people from every *nation*, tribe, people, and language. Yet a diverse, multi-ethnic Church Universal isn’t the ultimate goal—*Revelation 13:7-8* pictures just as diverse a crowd bowing before satanic Beast.

In this very brief survey, we see the whole Bible is communicating that God has created ethnic diversity that such diverse image bearers would unite around God’s chief aim of all of history: the glory of Christ exalted in all of creation. Ethnic diversity is good and beautiful because God created it to be unified in Christ.

The "Gospel" of Prevailing Worldview of Our Day

Now with that cursory biblical vision of ethnicity in mind, we can consider the “gospel” of the increasingly predominant worldview of our day. What so-called “good news” would our society hold out to us in relation to issues of ethnicity and race? I think couching it in those terms helps us see both (a) the religious nature of it—it is not a religiously neutral worldview—and (b) keys us into how this worldview has taken Christian concepts and terms like justice, guilt, and oppression and twisted them for anti-Christian purposes. So, let’s consider this in the simple framework of Creation–Fall–Redemption–New Creation.

- *Creation*: Our society is saying that humanity is fundamentally different based on skin color. People with darker skin are essentially different from

people with lighter skin. We are not one humanity created under Adam but divided by race. That is the “creation” premise, if you will.

- *Fall / Original Sin:* The fundamental problem, the “Fall” for humanity is not sinful rebellion against God, but rather “whiteness.” That doesn’t just mean people with fair skin but a vague category of culture, politics, language, and other facets of life that have been developed by those of Northern European descent within Western Civilization. Intrinsic to “whiteness” is “racism.” Though by “racism” our society does not mean the sin of partiality expressed by an individual against someone with different skin color; rather the term is redefined as being part of the oppressor group. Just being “white” makes you “racist” and an oppressor, whereas other races and demographical distinctions are grouped as the oppressed. Our problem as humans isn’t sin but “whiteness.”
- *Redemption:* Therefore, any hope of “redemption” comes in converting to be “antiracist.” But by that they do not mean being opposed to sinfully ethnocentric partiality or recognizing that every black life matters—that is what the Bible holds out to us. Rather, being “antiracist” is owning “white guilt,” seeing “racism” as *the* issue in all of society’s failures and shortcomings, and pursuing equal outcomes for oppressed races. This is a works-righteousness religion. There is no grace.
- *New Creation:* And with no grace, there is no true hope, no “new creation.” The oppression-power cycle will only continue. Once the oppressed group gains enough power, they will in turn put down the oppressors. The cycle will go on and on.

Grateful Hope in a New Identity

Standing in stark opposition to what our culture would hold out to us regarding race and ethnicity is the true gospel revealed in God’s Word.

Consider the same progression of Creation–Fall–Redemption–New Creation from

Ephesians 2. We are “children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (2:3)—humanity is defined together in relation to God because of our common identity as image bearers. And our common humanity shares a common Fall, through which you and I and all humanity regardless of race or ethnicity are “dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world ... carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (2:1-3). But there is real redemption available, real hope, because of real grace. “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (2:4-5).

And the New Creation we are saved into is a unified, multiethnic one. Being saved by the gift of God's grace, we “remember that at one time you Gentiles”—you *ethnos*, you “nations”—“were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, *who has made us both one*”—Jew and Gentile, Japanese and Korean, white and black—“[Christ] has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (2:11-14).

Friend, it is a false gospel that tells you that your identity is chiefly in the color of your skin. It is an anti-gospel lie that says your biggest problem, our world's biggest problem is racism. It is another gospel that says you are guilty simply by virtue of your ethnic heritage. Saying all will be made right if

“whiteness” is taken down and all are “antiracist” is opposed to Jesus. You are not chiefly an oppressor or oppressed—you are chiefly created in God's image and either continue in opposition to him or are redeemed in Christ.

Our response to this greatest gift of God's grace is not a debtor's ethic that would say we now need to do more and try harder. Any kindness you have received, whether through your own work and effort or by virtue of your family or geography, ought to be received with gratitude. “Don't be deceived ... Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above” (James 1:16-17). Gratitude should be the response to any blessing you receive, not guilt.

And so we come to the Table with gratitude for all that God has done to accomplish our redemption, to give us a new identity, to begin to unwind the web of sinful partiality in our hearts, to provide a framework for making right all that is wrong, to unite us as one new humanity in Christ.