

# The *SBJT* Forum: Racism, Scripture, and History

*Editor's Note:* Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, J. Daniel Hays, Paige Patterson, Ken Fentress, Michael A. G. Haykin, Anthony Carter and A. B. Caneday have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

**SBJT:** In your book *Love in Hard Places* you gave us some reflections on racism. Summarize some of the more uncomfortable thoughts that spring to your mind when you think about this subject.

**D. A. Carson:** Different people will find different things uncomfortable. In no particular order of importance, the following items would certainly be included in the list of many thoughtful Christians.

(1) In North America, racism is commonly associated with Black/White relations. World wide, however, racism has many permutations. By and large, the Japanese look down on Koreans; by and large, the Chinese look down on both of them; and the tribalism that is never too far from the surface of many African nations is, from one perspective, yet another form of racism. Indeed, where racism ends and resentment caused by differences in ethnicity begins is part of the difficulty of thinking clearly about this subject. Anti-semitism, for instance, can be interpreted as a species of racism ("Aryan supremacy"), yet it is commonly intertwined with ideology (e.g. Nazism) or even with aberrant theology (e.g. "God-killers"), and almost always with stereotypes (e.g. hook-nosed, unscrupulous

moneybags) and deep suspicion of the "other," whatever the "other" is (in this case, stereotypes of yarmulkes, men with black hats and curls, Sabbath observance, and much more of the same). To think clearly and penetratingly about racism is immensely challenging.

(2) In the American context, it is difficult to disentangle racism from the history of slavery. But some brute facts cannot be avoided.

*First*, until the beginning of the nineteenth century slavery was a phenomenon found in virtually every major world culture. Hittites had slaves, the Chinese had slaves, ancient Israelites had slaves, dominant African tribes and empires had slaves, the Greeks had slaves, the Romans had slaves, and so forth. Not for a moment does this excuse the barbarism of the institution. Indeed, its essential barbarism is precisely why Old Testament legislation sought to limit it (with the Year of Jubilee) and mitigate its damage (with codification of various laws). Nevertheless, one should remember that during the period in which approximately eleven million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic as slaves (many not making it across: the conditions on the boats were inhuman),

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approximately thirteen million Africans were shipped north as slaves, often up the Arabian Gulf, to Arab and North African states.

*Second*, one of the distinctives of American slavery (as opposed to, say, ancient Roman slavery) was that it was tied to blackness, to Africans. In the Roman Empire, there were African slaves, of course—but there were also Jewish slaves, Syrian slaves, Cilician Slaves, English slaves, Italian slaves. People sometimes became slaves out of bankruptcy, so there was no bar on race. On the other hand, there were also people from all of these backgrounds who were well-to-do, or noble, or at least free. Thus there was no necessary cultural association between slavery and one particular race. In the American experience, however, only Africans were slaves, and, at least initially, virtually all Africans were slaves.

The result is a residue not easy to measure, but deeply ingrained in our cultural self-perceptions. Racism can be found in our attitudes toward other immigrant groups, of course (hence expressions like “wops,” “chinks,” “slant-eyes,” etc.), but only African Americans were slaves, not European Americans. The inevitable result is twofold: on the one hand, there is long-persisting and scarcely-admitted assumption among many, many, non-African Americans that African Americans are inferior, along with some unvoiced assumptions that “they” should grow up and get over it; and, on the other, there is a long-standing fear among African Americans that they just might be inferior, or, at least as bad, that other Americans might *think* them to be inferior, so that they can never measure up. Add to this cultural mix a lot of Jim Crow laws within living memory, and Jim Crow attitudes even

when the laws have been overturned, and we instantly see that we have a long way to go.

*Third*, this history accounts for the fact that many African Americans have a different definition of racism from that of European-Americans. The latter assume that negative bias toward another race, whether in thought or deed, is racism; the former assume that negative bias toward another race, whether in thought or deed, *plus power*, is racism. That means that if African Americans indulge in nasty stereotypes of European-Americans, or for that matter specifically of, say, Jews, or of Asian-Americans, they do not perceive themselves to be racists, because they do not have the power. By this definition, most Whites are racists; Blacks are not, by definition. This is one of the legacies of slavery. From the point of view of many Blacks, if Whites prefer their own company and entertain stereotypes of Blacks, it’s racism; if Blacks prefer their own company and entertain stereotypes of Whites, it’s both understandable and deserved. But on this point, we are not going to make any headway until all of us face up to the ease with which suspicion of the other, not least in the matter of race, contaminates all of us.

(3) We cannot avoid facing up to the fact that in Great Britain, the strongest Christian voices at the beginning of the nineteenth century were at the forefront of the fight to end slavery, but in this country very often the strongest Christian voices were at the forefront of the fight to preserve it. Yes, I know, the situation was more complex than that. In Britain, countless tens of thousands of Christians within the Anglican Church were most reluctant to end slavery in the British Empire. Nevertheless, the Methodists,

fired up by the preaching of the Wesleys, Whitefield, Harris, and their heirs and successors, fomented a social revolution that transformed much of the social structure, and part of that transformation was the abolition of slavery. The result was that in the minds of countless observers, virulent Christianity was associated with the *front* end of healthy social change. The slave trade across the Atlantic was largely stopped, long before the Civil War, by British gunboats (as they also stopped the trade in the Arabian Gulf), once the Empire had adopted its abolitionist stance. But here, however complicated the factors (e.g. debates over states rights), the fact of the matter is that the area of the country with the strongest percentage of articulate Christian voices left the perception in the eyes of many that Christianity is to be associated with the *back* end of healthy social change. We have not exhausted that legacy. To this day, the parts of the country that have the highest number of Christians are the parts of the country still most segregated. I have visited numerous astonishingly integrated churches (integrated, that is, both with respect to the membership and with respect to the staff) on the coasts, but far fewer in the more “conservative” and “Christian” parts of the country. It is difficult to avoid the impression that improvements in the arena of racism are not, by and large, being led by Christians (with some notable exceptions, of course), but by others, whom we end up following. Yes, I know that nasty PC (= political correctness) factors rear their ugly head. But after we have introduced all the footnotes we might wish, the patterns of improvement, or lack of improvement, around the country, speak with terrible clarity.

(4) It is often said that in America 11:00

a.m. on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour every week. That may be the case. But there are many anomalies to the situation. If European-Americans tend to gather in monochrome churches, so also do African Americans—and so also do most Asian-Americans (or, more precisely, there tend to be Korean-American churches, Chinese-American churches, Vietnamese-American churches, and so forth). Some of this is merely the pattern of immigrant groups: when German Baptists came over, they started German-language churches, wanted their kids to marry German Baptists, and so forth—and similarly Swedish Baptists, Norwegian Lutherans, and so forth). By the second, third, and fourth generations, the European immigrants tended to become more integrated with the broader culture; the jury is out as to whether this will happen as extensively with Asian Americans. I know more than a few Chinese-American churches with third- and fourth-generation Chinese American members, where the largest congregations are in English, but where there are scarcely any European-American or African American members. Are they racist? Very often the first generation of any immigrant group wants the children to marry others within that immigrant group. But by the fourth generation, what is going on when the same exclusivism still pertains? Or is this merely a question of people with shared outlook and inherited culture preferring to be with others of the same heritage, without despising those of other heritages? And then we must ask, of course, at what point a similar generosity of spirit may legitimately apply to Black or White congregations? It is extraordinarily difficult not to maintain a double standard here—yet perhaps a double standard is

in some measure needed, because only one “immigrant” group was subjected to slavery. (The indentured labor of some workers, both European and Chinese, as brutal as it sometimes was, nevertheless falls into a different class than slavery, from which there was no reprieve.) Nevertheless, far more hard thinking needs to be done in this area than has been done so far.

(5) Yet there is at least something to be said for targeting particular groups as groups. I know a church in Sydney, Australia, which has begun a Greek outreach (for Greek immigrants), a Mandarin outreach (for Mandarin-speaking Chinese immigrants), a Cantonese outreach (similarly), a Korean outreach, and so forth. These Bible-studies-cum-house-groups eventually become congregation-size. Yet a concerted effort is made, not least by the leadership of each group but also by the leadership of the whole, to foster more and more mixing as people grow up in Christ. What that strategy might look like in any subculture will vary a great deal, but surely it ought to be something toward which we press. The goals of evangelism demand that we become “all things to all people so that by all means we may win some” (1 Corinthians 9), which presupposes that we recognize difference; the goals of church unity presuppose that we recognize *in practice* and not just in theory that the church is the *one* new humanity in which old barriers have been torn down (Ephesians 2). We are to be an outpost of heaven, where one day we will find gathered around the throne men and women from every tongue and tribe and people and nation. Let that witness make its own contribution to the truth taught by the Master himself, that people will know we are his disciples if

we love one another (John 13:34-35). The steps we might take to help bring this about will vary enormously in different parts of the country. Certainly we are not to blow everything up and call it faithfulness. But we must be doing *something*, with deep intentionality, or we will achieve nothing more than what is already being done by the changing tides of history and the pressures of pluralism. We will be mere culture-followers. And where is the Christian witness in that?

(6) Does one have to say that the old “curse of Ham” theory is still embraced by some ignorant people whose exegesis of Scripture leaves a great deal to be desired? An excellent antidote is found in a volume I included in the NSBT series, viz. J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003).

(7) I suspect that the real proof of being entirely free from racial prejudice does not take place when one has cut out scurrilous language, or when one can boast of having a few friends who belong to the “them” group (whatever group is referred to by “them”), or when one manages to survive the annual pastor-swap (Black pastor in White church, and vice-versa). It takes place when European Americans and African Americans disagree with each other, or razz each other, and *never* have to be “careful” about what is said for fear of racially hurt feelings. It occurs when, after a White man has been mugged by a Black man, the former automatically thinks of the latter as a thug, a nasty mugger, not as a Black thug. It occurs when a Black person, harassed by a White civil servant, does not chalk up the institutional rudeness to whiteness and condescension, but to rudeness and incivility. It occurs when we applaud the triumphs of someone very

different, and refrain *even from thinking* that the triumphs are not bad considering the person is Black, or that the triumphs are only to be expected, considering that the person had all the advantages of being White.

We have a long, long, way to go. The fact that there is no utopian fix until Jesus comes back does not warrant cynicism or want of effort. Even now, we gather in the heavenly Jerusalem around the throne of God (Hebrews 12), and we recognize how all that we have received, both in this life and in the next, flows from grace, and so we see ourselves as debtors. We recognize the bleak sinfulness of our own hearts apart from grace, and we hunger to edify brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of background, education, race, or ethnicity. In small but significant ways, we take steps to bring about at least partial reality of the triumph that will be transparent in a new heaven and a new earth: the glory of redeemed men and women drawn from every tongue and tribe and people and nation, singing praise to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.