



Statement on Christianity, Race and Ethnicity

In his first public sermon, Jesus Christ taught his early followers to pray for God's Kingdom to come and for God's will to be done on earth just as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). Many Christians who have thoughtfully offered this prayer over the past two millennia have recognized the difficulty of perfectly doing God's will in a broken world where oppression, discrimination, evil and injustice are far too common. In part this difficulty stems from the individual brokenness of every human being, Christian and non-Christian, which blinds us from seeing clearly where we personally sin and fall short of God's will. In part the difficulty stems from the fallenness of human cultures and societies, which can amplify the sins of individuals by establishing patterns and systems of brokenness and injustice.

Thus, we begin by humbly acknowledging that GCU is imperfect in its ability to engage issues of race, racism and injustice. Navigating discussions of race, ethnicity and justice in ways that are entirely satisfactory to all parties involved is extremely difficult. Nonetheless, as a Christ-centered university, GCU is committed to a continual and intentional pursuit of truth and justice through civil discourse, social action and compassionate service even if the results are partial and imperfect. Christ alone was capable of living a life of sinless perfection and he alone is able to guide individuals and communities toward renewal, reconciliation and restoration. We look to him for guidance as we seek to grasp truth, experience grace and more fully demonstrate his love to one another and the neighboring community.

Jesus on Race and Ethnicity

A brief survey of Jesus' life and teaching provides a few key insights into Jesus' views on race and ethnicity. To state the obvious, he was born within the tribe of Judah and thus identified as a non-White male who adhered to the Law of Moses. His lineage can be traced back to various Jewish ancestors including King David and, before David, to at least one Gentile woman resulting in a mixed racial heritage. Indeed, throughout his ministry within the land of Israel he regularly encountered Gentiles, or non-Jewish people, whom he treated with dignity and respect that ran counter to the norms of the culture into which he was born. He showed compassion to a Roman centurion (Matthew 8), kindness to an outcast among the Samaritans (John 4) and grace to a woman from Phoenicia (Matthew 15).

Jesus' embrace and inclusion of non-Jewish men and women comported perfectly with the clear teaching of Genesis that all human beings have been created in the image and likeness of God and are therefore worthy of dignity, respect and value (Genesis 1:28-30). In this way he extended the blessing of Abraham (Genesis 12:3) to "all families of the earth." As a result, he fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which envisioned the coming Messiah as one who would be a "light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6) in addition to the Savior of Israel.

The resolve of Christ to include all races and ethnicities in God's Kingdom enables his followers to grasp more clearly the breadth and depth and height of God's love. God, according to Jesus, is not merely a White man's God nor is he merely God of any single race or ethnicity. Rather, God's vision for humanity encompasses those from every "nation, tribe, people and language" (Revelation 7:9). All are welcome in this Kingdom and no single race or ethnicity may lay claim to superiority or supremacy over others.

As can be imagined, this way of speaking of God's will was not acceptable to the religious and cultural authorities of Jesus' day. Jesus' embrace of all races and ethnicities was met with persecution, aggression and violence that would ultimately cost him his life. His kindness and mercy toward all was not acceptable to all. The broken systems and authorities in power subjected him to a series of unjust trials and finally crushed him on a Roman cross. But through his death, burial and resurrection to life he accomplished something that his enemies could not have envisioned. His victory over the powers and authorities of his day gave rise to a new, albeit imperfect, people made up of many races and ethnicities that we now call the church.

Race, Ethnicity and the Church

Those who follow Jesus often pray for his will to be done in their lives and in the communities they inhabit, which includes his will as it relates to race and ethnicity. Near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, he instructed his followers to go and make more followers, or disciples, of all nations by teaching them the things that he had taught and lived (Matthew 28:18-20). For the first followers, this initially meant telling those in the nearby city of Jerusalem, then the surrounding area of Judea, followed by the area of Samaria and eventually by spreading Jesus' message to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). They were to share the good news that those who were once "far off" and alienated from God had been brought near to God in Christ. He had accomplished the unthinkable by "breaking down the wall of hostility" that had formerly separated Jews and non-Jews in order to make them one (Ephesians 2:13-14). He has made peace between groups that were previously hostile to one another and has reconciled all to God and to one another (Ephesians 2:15-20).

This reality has proven challenging throughout the history of the church, and the struggles of Jesus' followers to perfectly live out this ideal are evident even in the pages of Scripture. Within the early church, Jewish disciples of the risen Christ struggled in relating to men and women of Gentile heritage. At times they excluded those they should have embraced and counted as their equals in the household of God. At other times factions arose that included power struggles, cultural misunderstandings and matters of conscience that were ostensibly connected to various rituals, traditions and cultural norms.

Regardless, members of the early church grappled with the challenges that a God-size vision for race and ethnicity demands. As was to be expected, unlike Jesus the church has been imperfect in its pursuit of this vision. But, even with limitations, the impact of the Kingdom has been undeniable. The message of Christ was carried quickly into parts of Judea and Samaria before his followers entered Gentile regions such as Syria. In short time the message began to spread throughout the Roman empire and churches sprung up in major cities. A learned man from Ethiopia became intrigued by the writings of Isaiah and asked to be baptized in Jesus' name. Afterward he carried the message into Africa.

Others carried Jesus' message of peace and reconciliation to the ends of the known world before New Testament narrative comes to an end. The rest of the story of race, ethnicity and the church would play out over the centuries that followed in Europe, Africa, Asia and eventually the Americas and Australia. On each of these continents different racial and ethnic groups were offered the same message of truth and grace. And each group had to grapple with the vision of God as it relates to peace and reconciliation for themselves and their societies. In all cases, racial and ethnic strife had manifested itself in various ways prior to the arrival of the Christian message. In the best cases, the message of Jesus subverted hostility and injustice, replacing them with peace and reconciliation with God and others.

Challenges in Our Day

Sadly, in many cases race, racism and injustice have not been adequately addressed and the biblical vision of racial reconciliation has not been realized. To deny this grim reality would be a lie and unbecoming of a Christian institution. Consequently, we must work together by first doing what all Christian communities are called to do: namely, speak the truth to ourselves about these matters so that we can address these realities in Jesus' name. Knowledge of the truth provides the only path to genuine freedom (John 8:15). Second, we must speak truth to one another in love (Ephesians 4:15) as a way of moving toward reconciliation. And third, we must put those words into action in ways that bring peace and prosperity to those around us.

GCU affirms that redemption is ultimately possible through Jesus Christ alone and that the Christian life must involve compassion and care, not only for the spiritual needs of mankind, but also for needs that stem from poverty, oppression and injustice. The university humbly engages in conversations and activities that meet these needs and will continue to do so to the best of its ability. As Paul wrote to early Christians in Galatia when they were experiencing trying times, both with physical persecution and racial/ethnic internal divisiveness caused by inequality: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest, if we do not give up." (Galatians 6:9)

For its part, GCU will not give up on its commitment to do good by continuing to follow Jesus' word and deed in addressing issues of inequality.