

Racism and the Church: Overcoming the Idolatry

Lesson 1: Coming to Terms with Terms

Introduction: Racism shows itself in many ways, some of them subtle and some of them blatant. When most Americans think of racism, they undoubtedly think of that particular form of racism that played such a prominent role in our country's history, the subjugation of black people through institutionalized slavery in the early history of the United States. This raises questions about the relationship between racism and slavery. Racism as such is not discussed in connection with slavery in the Scriptures. Nevertheless, both the Old and New Testaments present us with a considerable amount of information on the practice of slavery.

God's Word Speaks

Based on the following texts what do we learn about it?

Exodus 21:2-3; 22:3

Leviticus 25:39-43

Numbers 31:7-11

Deuteronomy 5:15; 15:12-18

2 Chronicles 28:8-15

What is specifically prohibited in Exodus 21:16 and Deuteronomy 24:7?

How would you describe the attitude of Jesus and the apostles toward slavery?

Read Matthew 18:22-25; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-25.

In the document it spoke of an official resolution of the South Carolina Lutheran Synod in 1835 rationalizing its acceptance of the slavery of black people in America on the basis of the Bible and thus condemned abolitionists as being in disagreement with "our blessed Savior, who commanded servants to be obedient to their masters, and the example of the holy Apostle Paul, who restored to his lawful owner a runaway slave" (p. 19-20). It is true that St. Paul required slaves to be obedient to their masters "as to Christ." We just read about that in Ephesians 6.

Considering what has been read and said so far:

1. What is the relationship, if any, between racism and slavery?
2. How was slavery in America different from slavery in the Old and New Testaments? How was it the same?
3. What element is specifically missing that distinguishes the American institution of slavery from what we see in the Bible?
4. What relevance, if any, do St. Paul's words about slavery have for the particular form of slavery that occurred in this country—slavery that was rationalized on the basis of racist ideology and racial prejudice?
5. What new "dignity" do Paul's words give to the old indignities of slavery?
6. In Titus 2:10, what is a primary reason for being an obedient slave?

7. Note also the obligations of *masters* when they claim Christ as their Master (Eph. 6:9 and Col. 4:1).

The South Carolina Synod resolution refers also to Paul's example of restoring "to his lawful owner a runaway slave" as further justification of opposition to the abolition of slavery. The reference is to Onesimus, a slave of Philemon, a prominent and devout Christian slave owner. Onesimus apparently fled from his master, taking some of Philemon's possessions before running off (Philemon 18), and ended up in Rome where he sought out Paul. There Onesimus ministered to Paul during Paul's imprisonment. Notice that while Paul's letter to Philemon explains the situation and is intended to accompany Onesimus when he returns to his master, Paul makes a strong case for a change in the relationship between master and slave in verses 14-16. Let's read this. In your own words describe this new reality.

1. What is at the heart of Paul's appeal in these verses?
2. On what basis did Paul want Philemon to respond?
3. If Philemon thought deeply about this new relationship with a person who is "more than a slave," for he is now "a beloved brother," what must his conclusion be?
4. Discuss what you think the conversation between Philemon and Onesimus would probably have been after Philemon had read Paul's letter.

On page 16 of the Study it is asserted that "As an overt belief system racism is now publicly spurned and commonly declared abhorrent in our society. But racism as an ideological reality is, unfortunately, not dead." Three levels of racism are described: **the individual level, the institutional level, and the cultural level.**

1. What examples of *individual* racism can you recall from your own experience?
2. What examples of possible *institutional* racism can you recall from your own experience?
3. If a person from a racial group different from your own was invited and encouraged to join Grace, what would that person need to "give up" and "take on," if anything, to be a full member? If you were that person, what would you be willing to "give up" and "take on" in order to belong to a congregation composed of a majority of people of another racial composition from your own? Do you think your congregation would, in this circumstance, practice "integration" or "assimilation"?
4. The Study (p. 17) identifies *cultural* racism and states: "This is the view that all cultures are inferior to one's own culture, and that those inferior cultures consistently produce inferior results." Discuss ways in which *your* cultural attitudes may cause you to consider other cultures to be inferior. Is it possible that, based on one's Christian beliefs, some cultural assumptions and practices are *not* acceptable? If so, give examples. What does this not say about the *people* in that culture? Is it possible that, based on one's Christian beliefs, some assumptions and practices in *your* culture are not acceptable? If so, give examples. What does this say about the people in your culture?

Conclusion:

Read Genesis 3:1-3. Now answer this: “What does it mean to be human?”

Who do all human beings have as common ancestors (Read Genesis 3:20; 9:18-19)?

How does this help answer the questions, “Who am I?” and “What does it mean to be human?”

What bearing does our use of the Gospel and sacraments have on these questions (Read Galatians 3:26-27; Acts 2:38; Matthew 26:28; Romans 1:16)?

Next lesson: The Bible and Our Origins