



# PERSPECTIVE

OCTOBER 2017

LEARNING TO

TALK ABOUT

RACISM



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## Learning to Talk about Racism

Our national conversation about race reignited in August after the “Unite the Right” march in Charlottesville, Virginia. Rally organizers opposed the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue. Counter-protestors quickly descended on the scene. The day culminated in James Fields plowing his car into a crowd and killing Heather Heyer, one of the counter-protestors. The U. S. Attorney General called it domestic terrorism. The fire only grew hotter when the President’s initial remarks failed to single out and condemn the white supremacist movement. Within a few days, the whole country debated the meaning and value of Confederate statues sprinkled throughout the States, but especially in the South.

Whatever your opinion of political correctness, Stonewall Jackson, Black Lives Matter, or the posture of athletes for the “Star Spangled Banner,” on this we can agree: there is no escaping the conversation about race—especially for Christians.

### IS RACISM A GOSPEL ISSUE?

The church can’t ignore the issue of racism any more than we can ignore the issue of abortion, same-sex marriage, or divorce. We worship a holy God who made everyone in his own image and likeness. Each man, woman, and child on the face of the planet is marked by the *imago dei*—the stamp of God’s glory is in all of us. This profound truth demands we see, treat, and honor one another as valuable and equally worthy of dignity and respect.

It’s increasingly clear we live in the New Babylon, not the New Jerusalem. Our neighbors cast aside babies in the womb, denying their humanity. They approve of homosexuality, refusing to submit their own feelings to nature’s order and God’s will. They promote a culture of no-fault divorce, counting “for better or for worse” as a dusty relic of a bygone era. Neither is racism a thing of the past. It endures. The church should care and speak.

In a hyper-politicized culture it’s easy to dismiss racism as a political issue. We must avoid this mistake, not only because everyone bears the *imago dei*, but because the church is to be a refuge for redeemed sinners from all ethnic backgrounds. The church is for all those united by the gospel. In the church we worship Christ together. Neither our economic status, nor our last name, nor the color of our skin defines us. Christ does. Racism is a

worldview that works against Christian unity. That makes it a gospel issue.

### THE SCANDAL OF THE CHURCH

It’s easy to forget the wonderful scandal that was the early church. The divide between Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles was every bit as sinister as the racism we see today. Paul, writing to Jewish and Gentile Christians, stated in Ephesians 2:14, that Christ “made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.” How can the believer not marvel at this new reality? God created “one new man in place of the two” (Eph. 2:15). This is the work of the gospel. Only the gospel has the tools to fix the persistent problem that is racism.

Mankind can level a metropolis with a nuclear bomb. Only Christ can create a people with a wooden cross. We are apt destroyers. God is Creator. He spoke the world into existence with a word. Then, after sin divided humanity, God spoke again through Christ to reconcile enemies to the Father and to each other through the blood of Calvary. This is the power of the gospel.

### WHY NOT TALK ABOUT RACISM?

Tragically, most churches in America—reflecting most communities in America—don’t demonstrate this reconciling power. The reasons are complex. Talking about this is important. In my experience, Christians find it awkward to talk about racism. It’s uncomfortable. Why is this the case? Why don’t we talk about racism more? There are many reasons.

#### *Most Christians are averse to conflict.*

It’s true our Savior told us to be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9), but sometimes making peace requires speaking truth—even in the midst of controversy. The last thing we want to do is enter into a conversation likely to end in rancor. We know people have strong opinions about racism—even in the church. Two people may agree racism is wrong but disagree over how serious a problem it is and how it manifests itself in day-to-day life. Knowing such conversations could throw kindling on the fire, some Christians avoid them altogether. Fear of conflict is no excuse for silence.

#### *We don’t know how to think about the past.*

The controversy over Confederate statues is evidence of this. Men and women we greatly admire lived lives and spoke words we heartily reject. From the anti-Semitism of Martin Luther to the slave-holding of Jonathan Edwards, Christian history is filled with contradictions

deep enough to befuddle the most thoughtful believer. It will take much work, thought, and prayer to properly address these issues.

### ***We fear being politically correct.***

In other words, we recognize being a Christian means going against the grain of society. So when we see the public championing racial reconciliation, we can be skeptical. Sometimes the most strident critics of racism are also advocates for LGBTQ rights. The association of the political left with racial reconciliation may keep Christians silent on this important issue. Some Christians fear talking about racism because they don't want to buy what the mainstream media is selling.

### ***We want to move on from the sins of the past.***

We have no doubt racism is what fueled slavery and Jim Crow. But that was the past! A few years ago a well-intentioned, middle-aged woman came up to me in the foyer after the Sunday morning service. She told me about a speaker she recently heard who challenged the audience to think carefully about racism. She didn't appreciate the admonition. "I don't know what he was talking about," she said to me, "racism doesn't exist anymore." She considered racism old news. She was blind to the fact racism still exists. If "moving on," means ignoring present sin, we aren't ready.

### ***We underestimate the effect of racism on our minority neighbors.***

There is a mountain of evidence, anecdotal and tested, that racism is alive and well<sup>1</sup>. During my time in Atlanta I've met pastors who began a ministry only to discover their new church is blatantly racist. One church refused to baptize an African-American boy who'd come to saving faith through a youth outreach. The other refused to allow an African-American couple into membership. This isn't ancient history—it's the past few years.

## **HOW TO TALK ABOUT RACISM**

I understand why we are slow to discuss racism, but discuss we must. It's a gospel issue after all. When I read Ephesians 2:13–16, I wonder, "How can we not talk about racism?"

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 and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and

might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Gentiles, once far off, have been brought near. More than that, Christ has made Jews and Gentiles one. In other words, he didn't turn Gentiles into Jews or Jews into Gentiles. Rather, he made "in himself one new man in place of the two." He reconciled both to God so that now the hostility that once existed is abolished. Peace is now possible. Let this sink in: all those from all nations whose sins have been atoned for by the blood of Christ are *one* new humanity in Christ. Amen.

We must talk. But how? How can we grow in our ability to talk about this matter? How can we have honest, helpful, gospel-centered conversations in the church about racism? I humbly offer the following pastoral imperatives:

### ***Appreciate everyone's background.***

Though we all share Christ, we all have a background that shapes us. This background isn't to be ignored, it's to be appreciated. When Jews came to Christ, they didn't cease being Jewish. The same is true for Gentiles. The same is true for each of us.

I grew up in Oregon. That experience is part of who I am. Nearly every time it rains in Atlanta, I remember my childhood in one of America's wettest states. I still root for my hometown team. Settling in Georgia doesn't mean I have to turn my back on the state I once called home. No one expects this.

Churches will be filled with people from different places, diverse backgrounds, and with different skin color. Don't be colorblind. Though our identity is in Christ (Gal. 2:20)—praise God!—Jews are still Jews, Gentiles are still Gentiles, blacks are still blacks, whites are still whites, Asians are still Asians, and Latinos are still Latinos. Just because this isn't the most important thing about us doesn't make these differences unimportant. They are part of who we are.

The beauty and glory of the church is appreciating our differences even as we revel in the one thing we all have in common, that which is most important, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### ***Seek to understand one another.***

It's not enough to appreciate we all have a background, we need to do all we can to understand it. Everyone has a story.

My grandfather, Ephraim, left his *shtetl*—a predominately Jewish village—in Russia-Poland and moved to New York in 1921. He lived with the scars of racism on his neck. His father saved his life by cutting Ephraim out of the tree where the Communists had strung him up and left him to die. Life as a New York Jew in America's depression years was not easy.

Today, my family is bi-racial. We adopted our African-American daughter in 2015. She is now a Menikoff. I recently read her a children's book about the brave men and women of the underground railroad. How can my little girl understand this? It's part of American history but, in a unique way, it's part of *her* story.

Sometimes I wonder what my step-grandfather thought about our adoption. He died a few years ago, but he grew up in a different era—in the Northwest where the population was not diverse but racism still existed. I'll never forget the day he announced he was canceling a cable subscription to the Portland Trailblazers basketball games. His reasoning? The team didn't have a token white-player on the roster.

This is my story. You have one, too. Events in your life have shaped your views on the subject of racism. The more we understand each other the better able we are to discuss racism.

#### ***Show compassion.***

Consider the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Samaritans were considered half-breeds, looked down upon by their Jewish neighbors. When the traveling Samaritan saw the beaten Jew lying on the side of the road, the world would have expected him to keep on moving. He didn't. He showed mercy (Luke 10:27). He loved someone who didn't accept him.

My white brothers and sisters, especially, need to grow in this area. A few years ago, while with a group of local pastors, I mentioned a pastorate that opened up here in Atlanta, a church in an ethnically-mixed community. An African-American brother asked a simple question, "Would the search committee accept a black pastor?" Sadly, we knew the answer. This was an established but dying Southern Baptist congregation. We doubted they would embrace African-American leadership.

My pastor-friend understood, he wasn't surprised, and he didn't appear hurt. But shouldn't we have enough compassion to appreciate the indignity of the fact that

this pastor would not be welcomed simply due to the color of his skin? Yes, we should. We must.

#### ***Acknowledge that the issue of racism is complicated.***

Defining racism, getting to root causes, ascertaining how it affects us, understanding systemic injustice...these are hard issues. They can't be handled easily, and they should not be dismissed lightly.

An elderly brother tells me of the days he would go into downtown Atlanta and ride the elevator up an office building. He said it was accepted and expected practice for black and brown riders to get off the elevator when a white man or woman got on. Was my elderly friend being racist the moment he stepped onto the elevator? Segregation was part of the culture—it was the air most breathed. Those African-Americans who stepped off the elevator each day were the victims of a system saturated and stained by racism.

How systemic racism is at work today may be difficult to pin down. Personal racism practiced by individuals has affected institutions and communities. Today it shows up in where people live and shop and where they work and play. It may not be easy to explain how all this happened. The problem is definitely complicated. It's right to admit that.

#### ***Admit that there are advantages to being white.***

This is not always true, but it is usually true. For example, if you are part of the majority culture, your story can be easily grasped and understood. Your story is dominant. Maybe you grew up in a middle class family, went to college, and found a job in the big city. Some of you may have had a head start compared to the majority of African-Americans in this country. If this is you, you were privileged to grow up in a neighborhood with good schools, guidance counselors, and perhaps even the expectation you would go to college.

Generally speaking, there are financial advantages to being white. For example, a number of years ago, the median net worth of whites was much higher than blacks: \$43,800 for whites compared to \$3,700 for blacks<sup>2</sup>. That's not a small difference. Again, this is not true across-the-board. But it's more often true than not.

Can we find examples of reverse discrimination, of whites being turned down admission or even a job because of established minority quotas? Of course we can. But, to oversimplify a complicated problem, the exception proves the rule.

There are other advantages. For example, if you are white, when you go into a room, everybody usually looks like you. You don't stand out. If you want to blend in, you can. It can be uncomfortable for an African-American or a Latino or an Asian to attend our predominately white church. Many are willing to be uncomfortable because they value what's going on here, but we should recognize that whites simply don't face this same challenge.

***Be patient as you have these conversations.***

Many whites are afraid to broach the topic of race. This is in part because they don't want to offend and they think they may say something unhelpful. Nobody wants to put his foot in his mouth. But it happens. If you're a minority, I hope you'll be gracious as we attempt to listen, learn, and contribute to the conversation.

I wholeheartedly agree those in the majority culture need to learn to listen. We need our minority brothers and sisters to drive the conversation. I'm eager to see that happen. As brother and sisters in Christ, we all need to learn to listen well to one another.

When I first came to Mount Vernon I organized a panel discussion during Sunday School on the topic of race. I had an African-American and a Dominican brother on the panel. Being new to Atlanta, I wanted to better understand the problem of racism as it affected the church. I hoped our church would grow in this area. However, I quickly became aware of ways I brought certain assumptions about race to the table. I'm grateful these brothers were patient with me as I asked questions. We need to be patient with each other.

There are so many things we can do as Christians to work toward racial reconciliation. Repent of past (or present) racism. Befriend someone who looks different or has a different background. Pray for our church and our nation—that racism would wither and die. But none of this will happen unless we are first willing to talk.

**"A GOOD FIGHT OF FAITH"**

To talk about racism is going to be messy, but it's worth it. The gospel demands we speak about it and, by God's grace, we can. Even though the dividing wall of hostility has been brought down (Eph. 2:13), by God's grace, we must do the hard work of keeping it down. Ministers of the gospel will speak about the gospel's demands (Eph. 3:7).

The English pastor Abraham Booth fought hard to end the slave trade in the seventeenth-century. He found the

practice abominable and did what he could to crush it.<sup>3</sup> As a Christian, he had a responsibility to speak out against sin inside and outside the church. The church is equipped with no other weapon than the Bible, but God's Word is fierce and, when accompanied by the Holy Spirit, can accomplish much.

Booth charged believers to speak boldly: "The military service of a Christian, as such, is entirely of a spiritual nature. It is a *good fight of faith: a striving against sin*, in himself, and in the world around him." Obviously, by "spiritual," Booth did not mean to imply the church should withdraw from social issues—the way so many in America have done. Rather, Christians united by the gospel will share Christ's heart for holiness and justice.<sup>4</sup>

In these trying times, part of the "good fight of faith" is simply listening to one another within the church. It's not easy to enter into dialogue on this issue, but it's good, and we do so with great hope. After all, when Christians speak we don't come with memorandums of understanding to guide our conversation. We come with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23).

I am not hopeful society as a whole will solve racism. Unredeemed men and women will always find a way to fight, but the church must be different. The Holy Spirit has given us everything we need to have meaningful and productive conversations. More than that, the church is a place where racism can be put to death. After all, our hearts have been knit together by the blood of Christ. We are one, and we await that glorious day when those "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" stand before the Lamb and cry out, "Salvation belongs to our God" (Rev. 7:9, 10).

~Aaron Menikoff

<sup>1</sup> The book to read is Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>3</sup> England outlawed the slave trade in 1807.

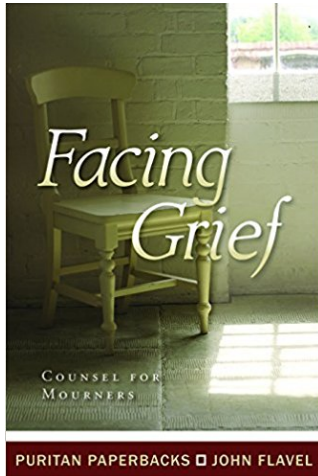
<sup>4</sup> Cited by Aaron Menikoff, “The Cross and Social Reform,” in *“The First Counsellor of Our Denomination: Studies in the Life and Ministry of Abraham Booth (1734–1806), eds. Michael A. G. Haykin and Victoria Haykin* (Particular Baptist Press, 2011), 128.



## ***Facing Grief: Counsel for Mourners***

Written by John Flavel

Bookstall Price \$10



Every one of us will face loss in our lives. So, why don't we talk about it more? John Flavel offers a book "full of Scripture, counsel, warning and wisdom gained from prayerful reflection on the personal experience of affliction in loss and grief" (Dever, viii). Throughout his lifetime, death and grief were no strangers to Flavel. He outlived both parents, one child, and three wives.

Flavel begins by showing us Luke 7:13, where it says Jesus showed compassion to a woman in mourning but then tells her to "Weep not." Flavel uses this verse

to launch into the rest of the book, going back and forth explaining why it is good for Christians to mourn, but that there is danger in becoming so wrapped up in our grief that we lose sight of God and His purposes. He also reminds us that our delight is to be found in God alone. He gives 20 points to consider when we face grief, all revolving around Scripture and where to find our true hope. He ends the book by addressing those who think their circumstances are beyond the applications of this book (Spoiler: This book applies to all circumstances of loss), and then gives 7 rules for avoiding excessive sorrow.

I'll confess that I felt unqualified to review this book at first, as I have not experienced loss of a close loved one in many years. I can say with confidence that I'm glad I read it, and would recommend it to anyone who has or will experience loss at any point in their lives (Read: Everyone!). It is not only a reminder of how to view death through a biblical lens, but also life. We are to live our lives set apart from the world, and that includes how we grieve loss.

To the lost, this book may appear harsh, as though it lessens the value of human life and relationships. On the contrary, it reminds us of the greatness of God and that our primary delight can and only be found in our relationship with him. "A husband, a wife, a child, are great, very great things...but surely they will seem little things, next to nothing, when the Lord shall set himself by them before the soul" (79).

– RECOMMENDED BY ERIN BASURTO

### Excerpts From the Book

## 1

"When affliction sours the spirit with discontent, and makes it inwardly grudge against the hand of God, then our trouble is full of sin, and we ought to be humbled for it before the Lord."

–When Sorrow Becomes Sinful, p. 29

## 2

When speaking of Patrick Mackewrath, a believer in Scotland: "...one day, after a sharp trial, having his only son suddenly taken away by death, he retired alone for several hours, and when he came forth, did look so cheerfully that to those who asked him the reason thereof, and wondered at the same in such a time, he told them. He had got that in his retirement with the Lord that, to have it afterwards renewed, he would be content to lose a son every day."

–Godly Mourners Comforted, p. 78

## 3

"[Non-Christians] will be drawn to think that whatever fine talk you may have about God and heaven, your hearts were most upon the same things that theirs were, since your grief for their removal is as great as theirs."

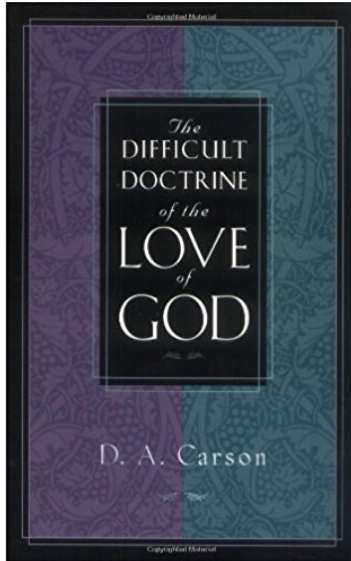
–Godly Mourners Comforted, p. 83



## ***The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God***

Written by D.A. Carson

Bookstall Price \$14



“God is love”.

Sounds simple enough and very straightforward. But now, try explaining that verse. What does it mean? How does it apply to us individually as believers? What are the implications of that verse to the world of unbelievers who we interact with on a daily basis? In *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, D.A. Carson undertakes what may appear on the surface to be a very simple task—to explain the doctrine of the love of God. Nonetheless, when we look at the entirety of scripture, God’s love cannot be separated from his sovereignty, his holiness, his wrath,

his providence, or his justice. Our human limitations box the idea of “love” into a sentimental category that has to do more with feelings than actions. Add to that the doctrinal weakness we observe in many evangelical churches, and an orthodox view of what is meant by the “love of God” is severely diminished.

Carson discusses in great detail God’s love in conjunction with his sovereignty and his wrath. While God is love, he is not wrath. Yet, in God, wrath and love are not mutually exclusive. His wrath against sin functions in conjunction with his holiness. Scripture confirms that God hates sin and God also hates the unrepentant sinner and sets his wrath against him because of his holiness. Yet, perhaps the most beautiful and overwhelming truth is that God loves the sinner, through no intrinsic value of the sinner himself. This supposed contradiction, that a God of love can also be a God of wrath, is perhaps best understood when we gaze upon the cross.

Carson concludes that we must work to understand the multi-faceted love of God so that we may be, as Paul prays in Ephesians 3, “rooted and established in love.” The more we understand “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,” the more we will be transformed so we can be more effective mediators of that same level of love to others.

– RECOMMENDED BY ANN CASAS

### Excerpts From the Book

## 1

“With such sentimentalizing of God multiplying in Protestant churches, it does not take much to see how difficult maintaining a biblical doctrine of the love of God can be.”

–On Distorting the Love of God, p. 13

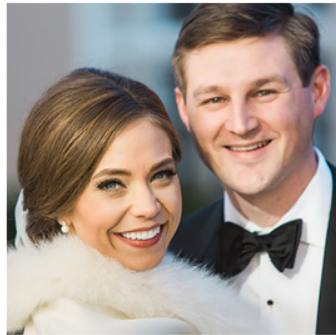
## 2

“Do you wish to see God’s love? Look to the cross.  
Do you wish to see God’s wrath? Look at the cross.”

–God’s Love and God’s Wrath, p. 70

# NEW MEMBERS

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Will & Kaki  
Davis



Kristen Van Waters



*Mount Vernon*  
BAPTIST CHURCH