

Black Lives Matter

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Black Lives Matter. This simple phrase both unites and divides the nation—and Christians. Many have united to endorse the phrase: they wear it on t-shirts and face masks, paint it on roadways, carry it on placards. Large crowds march to show solidarity, to affirm that black lives *do* matter. But others avoid the phrase, including many Christians. They say, “All Lives Matter” or “Unborn Lives Matter”; or the #BlackLivesMatter movement is evil; or people just need the gospel.

Yes, All Lives *do* Matter. It is Christians who most strongly can say this, because we believe God created all mankind in his image. Yes, we affirm that this includes the unborn, and so we observe Sanctity of Human Life Sunday every January. If you don’t have this Judeo-Christian framework, then it’s hard to affirm *why* all lives matter. Yes, there is an official organization, the Black Lives Matter Global Network, and it does advocate causes we don’t agree with. Yes, people need the gospel, but among the suffering black community are many Christians who already have the gospel.

But can we say, “Black Lives Matter,” without endorsing the organization, without denying that All Lives Matter, including the Unborn, and without detracting from the importance of the gospel?

1. A Biblical View of Peoples

All humanity is in the image of God, but we encompass a rich diversity. In the Bible’s Table of Nations (Gen 10), after the Flood, Noah’s three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, spread out across the earth by their clans, by their languages, in their lands, and in their peoples. Seventy different peoples, living in their own land, speaking their own language. If you look in a Bible Atlas you may see three intersecting arcs demarcating north, south and east. Much later Japheth will be associated with Europe, Ham with Africa, and Shem with Asia. This fanciful reading of Genesis 10 will have great implications. What these diagrams get right is placing Israel at the center, which is odd since Israel is not listed; it does not yet exist. Out of these 70 peoples God called Abraham to leave his land and start a new people in a new land. This new people was to be for the benefit and blessing of all the peoples. God called Israel not because she was better than the other peoples but to be an instrument of blessing to them. Israel mattered to God because all the peoples mattered to God. It was hard for Israel to remember this.

Just before the risen Lord Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples asked, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). That’s nationalistic thinking: Israel matters most. Jesus replied, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Ten days later the Spirit came and the church was born. Persecution scattered the church from Jerusalem, preaching the gospel as it went. As the gospel spread further from the geographic center of Jerusalem, those who responded to the gospel were more removed from the ethnic center of “pure” Judaism: half-breed Samaritans of impure blood; the Ethiopian eunuch from Cush in black Africa; a Roman centurion of the hated occupying army; and finally pagan Gentiles in Antioch. Antioch, itself a multi-cultural city between east and west, didn’t know what to make of this odd mix of people, so they called them Christians, Christ-people. This expansion kept pushing the comfort level of the apostles in Jerusalem. They convened a council to discuss the situation. How far could their imagination expand without breaking? They concluded that what had happened was indeed in fulfillment of Israel’s Scriptures. God was restoring David’s fallen tent, but it didn’t look at like what they had expected. Paul, who, as a young man, had a narrow view of purity and superiority, had his new Christ-centered imagination expanded most of all:

- There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal 3:28-29)
- Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. (Col 3:11)
- For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one...that he might create the two in himself into one new man, so making peace. (Eph 2:14-15)

Jew and Gentile together as the people of God in Christ through his Spirit. No longer a particular people in a particular place, but all the peoples gathered together in one person, in Christ, as equal. It's a breathtaking vision that reaches its climax in John's vision of the saints gathered before the throne of God and of the Lamb, from every nation, tribe, people and tongue (Rev 7:9).

So, if this is the New Testament vision, in fulfillment of the Old Testament, how did we reach the situation in Christian America where, as Martin Luther King said, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is 11 o'clock on Sunday morning"? How did Christian America enslave an entire race of people, creating this great gulf between black and white? Why this failure of the Christian imagination? Where did the concept of black and white come from in the first place? To answer this we have to face up to some uncomfortable truths.

2. White and Black

Jesus was not white. Paul was not white. The Greeks and the Romans were not white. White and Black are social constructs of the Modern world. Their origin lies in colonialism and slavery.

As a boy I loved reading about the voyages of discovery: Vasco da Gama of Portugal rounding the Cape of Good Hope (1497); Ferdinand Magellan, for Spain, rounding Cape Horn (1520) and circumnavigating the globe. Then came the Dutch and the British. They all sought treasure, whether gold or spices, and they built empires. Exciting stuff for boys—and for adult boys!

But there were much I did not learn about. As the Portuguese pressed further down the west coast of Africa, they brought back African slaves and opened the first European slave market in 1444. In 1452 the Pope issued an edict (Papal Bull) to the King of Portugal:

We grant you by these present documents, with our Apostolic Authority, full and free permission to invade, search out, capture, and subjugate the Saracens and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ wherever they may be...and to reduce their persons into perpetual servitude.

Two years later came another Papal Bull confirming Portuguese dominion over all the new territory. Thus was born the doctrine of discovery: a European Christian power gains sovereignty to the heathen territory and peoples it "discovers."

The Spanish started their own voyages of discovery, west across the Atlantic, but in search of the same prize, the East Indies. "In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue." He landed not in the East Indies, but in the Bahamas on October 12, Columbus Day. The next year, 1493, came another Papal Bull, this time to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, granting them all the lands west of a line down the Atlantic. With papal authority Spain and Portugal literally divided the non-Christian world in half for their respective empires.

In 1492, the year the Columbus sailed, two other major events happened in Spain: the Jews were expelled, and Granada fell, bringing an end to 800 years of Muslim presence. The Spanish became preoccupied with blood purity, rooting out anyone suspected of Jewish or Moorish ancestry. The transformation of Europe into the Christian continent, was now complete. It was the territory of the sons of Japheth. It had dominion over the rest of the world, granted in Christ's name by the Pope, the vicar of Christ. Europe was white, Europe was Christian, and Christianity had become the white man's religion.

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By the time England took to the seas it was a Protestant country and ignored the Papal allocation to Spain and Portugal. In 1607 the English established the Colony of Virginia and the settlement of Jamestown, and in 1619 the first slaves arrived. A plantation economy developed, with an insatiable demand for slave labor, a demand supplied by the transatlantic slave trade. Slaves were treated under law as property, as chattel. Children of slave women were born into slavery, making it a perpetual system that was able to continue after the slave trade stopped.

Last week the nation celebrated Independence Day, commemorating 1776 when the colonies threw off the British oppressor, tore down the statue of King George, melting him down into bullets to kill his own men, and destroyed private property by throwing all that good tea into Boston Harbor.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

These words from the Declaration of Independence are widely admired around the world. But who are all these men that are created equal and endowed with these rights? The Naturalization Act of 1790 clarified who the new nation wanted to admit to citizenship: “free white persons of good character.”

The Founding Fathers threw off the tyranny of British rule, but they kept the doctrine of discovery, allowing the new country to “discover” new territory and expand till it stretched from shore to shore.

In 1857, in the Dred Scott case, the Supreme Court ruled on the status of blacks: black people “are not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word ‘citizens’ in the Constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides for and secures to citizens of the United States...a perpetual and impassable barrier was intended to be erected between the white race and the one which they had reduced to slavery.”

Both science and the Bible were used to justify this arrangement. Scientific racism, now discredited, claimed blacks were inferior and suited to slave labor. The Church used Genesis 9-10. Because of Ham’s behavior inside Noah’s tent, Noah pronounced a curse on Ham’s son Canaan, and a blessing on Japheth:

“Cursed be Canaan: a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers...
May God enlarge Japheth...and let Canaan be his servant.” (Gen 9:26-27)

Japheth was white Christian Europe. Ham was black heathen Africa. The curse on Canaan was applied to all of Ham. Thus the perpetual enslavement of black Africans to white Europeans is the divinely mandated state.

By 1860 the nature of America seemed to be settled. The land had been discovered by a white European power under the doctrine of discovery. America had used the same doctrine to discover new territory. And the Constitution intentionally and permanently subjugated blacks to whites. America was white and would always be white. Blacks were slaves and would always be slaves. This was legal, constitutional, scientific, biblical, Christian, intentional and perpetual.

Fortunately, the Dred Scott decision helped precipitate the Civil War (1861-65). The Southern states seceded and formed a confederacy. Yes, it was about states rights, but it was about the right of states to preserve this way of life, the perpetual enslavement of the black race to the white race, upon which their plantation economy depended.

After the Civil War the structure of racial slavery was dismantled in three amendments to the Constitution: 13 abolished slavery; 14 extended citizenship to all born in the US; and 15 prohibited efforts to prevent citizens voting. The Naturalization Act of 1870 extended the naturalization process to “aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent.” But it found a new target to treat as Other: it revoked citizenship of naturalized Chinese Americans.

We are blessed to have many Asians in our PBCC community. You yourselves are very diverse. You, too, have stories to share. There has been an uptick in anti-Asian sentiment. We want to expand our conversation on race to include you because you, too, matter. But today we are focused on the Black story.

These three amendments ended the subject status of blacks within the constitution. But here we are 150 years later and blacks have still not been fully admitted to the table. The Southern states were not ready to give up their way of life, sustained by black labor. They created many ways to prevent the blacks getting to the table. Even now, a half-century after the Civil Rights movement, the black community is not flourishing. Ways are still found to thwart the implementation of the three Reconstruction amendments.

Black men are suffering disproportionately from encounters with police; and from mass incarceration, which has been called “The New Jim Crow.” Black families are torn apart because a third of all black men cycle through the prison system, including private prisons run for profit. Hurdles are placed in the way of the black vote. The black community is hurting.

3. Our Response

So why should we care?

- *Justice*: we should care because of justice, both civil justice and biblical justice. This is a contentious point in the conservative evangelical American church: should the church engage in social justice.
- *Fruit of the Spirit*: we should care because as human beings and as Christians we should show love, kindness, goodness, gentleness—the fruit of the Spirit.
- *Compassion*: we should care because there is a deep wound in our society which should arouse our compassion. A member of our body politic is in deep pain. Many in the body of Christ are hurting.

So, yes, we *should* care. Four things hinder us from caring well.

- *Individualism*, which is deeply rooted in American society and in the American church.
- *Fear*: there is a tremendous amount of fear. People are afraid of black men whom they think are all violent. Blacks are afraid of the police because so many encounters end badly. Black parents are afraid for their sons; the “Talk” they have with their sons is very different from the Talk that white parents have. The police are afraid.
- *Power*: American politics is about power, gaining it and holding on to it. For the past forty years a segment of the American church has pursued power. The BLM movement also is about power; it wants to overthrow the oppressor and take power itself. It seeks a zero-sum solution: one side must lose for the other side to win.
- *Nostalgia*: the good old days are idealized and mythic, and they were not so good for many people.

I am optimistic and hopeful. The death of George Floyd has galvanized us into a national conversation about race and racial injustice. This topic accounts for eight of the top ten books on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list. There is a great groundswell of interest. But the nation needs to discuss both sides of white–black race relations: not only about the disadvantaging of the black community but also about white normativity. We need to do so to prepare for the future. The nation needs to have this conversation because by 2045 whites will be in the minority. The American church needs to have this conversation because the white church is declining while the non-white church is growing. We have to move beyond Christianity as “the white man’s religion.” PBCC needs to have this conversation because we are on our way to being a white minority church. Some of you no doubt find these three trends threatening, but all three delight me.

How can we lean in to this moment? What can we do? Many suggest a set of “L”s:

- *Listen*: to the blacks tell their stories, tell their pain. This is what we will do this evening.
- *Learn*: there are many resources: books to read, movies to watch. I’ve listed some on the handout.

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- *Lament*: weep for the pain of our black community; weep for the misuse of Scripture.

It will take a while to listen, learn and lament. Only then are we ready to *Leverage*, to engage in action. And all of this, *Listen, Learn, Lament*, must be done with hearts of *Love*.

It has been hard for all the Western nations to face up to their history. It is an ongoing process. It takes courage to confront the injustices of the past. Just two weeks ago, King Philippe of Belgium expressed “deepest regret” for the violence and brutality Belgium inflicted on the Congo. It’s not yet an apology, but is an important step in that direction. The King made this statement to the Democratic Republic of Congo on the 60th anniversary of its independence, and with the goal of strengthening the relationship between the two countries, not as master–slave, but as equals. The goal is reconciliation, and this starts with owning the truth.

When the apartheid regime in South Africa ended, the whites were deathly afraid that the blacks would release generations of anger upon them. But incoming President Nelson Mandela chose a different path: the path of restorative justice not retributive justice. He asked Archbishop Desmond Tutu to head a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In *retributive* justice truth-telling condemns; there is reluctance to admit the truth for fear of liability. But in *restorative* justice truth-telling liberates; it leads to forgiveness and reconciliation in a win-win solution of healed relationships. So, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions have been adopted in many other places.

It is hard to learn that founding narratives are not as glorious as we were taught. But Christians are best-placed to lead here, for our founding narrative is not of one who sought glory, riches, empire, power, but of one who “did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, . . .he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:6-8).

With our identity firmly centered in Christ, in this sort of Christ, I invite us to have the courage to lean into this moment, to lean into the future. We will make mistakes, we will say the wrong thing. But as an attempt to say the right thing, and as an act of compassion for and solidarity with a community that is in deep pain, can we say together: *Black Lives Matter*.