



RACE RELATIONS & THE RESURRECTION

The resurrection of Jesus shines a piercing light on racism and signals its ultimate end. Will you join Jesus in this work?

By Josh Buck

There is pain in the body of America connected to an unhealed wound. This pain signals an abuse so great we struggle to find words to describe it. America's suffering can be traced back to the 1600s when the first known slave arrived to the New World. The pain we still feel today is the result of a sinful heart condition known as racism. America has not properly addressed this systematic ailment.

Our country is exhausted, angry, hurting, and indifferent over the constant barrage of articles, blogs, panel discussions, and momentum regarding race relations. Many Americans want to ignore this issue, claim we have moved beyond 250 years of personal and institutionalized racism, and ignore another part of the body impacted on a daily basis. The other side of America wants to see a doctor, have another counseling session, and try new medicine.

History tells us that the modern concept of race wasn't invented until the eighteenth century. Worse still, the earliest forms of racism came from a mixture of euro-colonial and Christian thought. Christianity served as one of the earliest justifications for racism in order to create, maintain, and expand the slave trade. Allow that to sink in. Even though the Bible doesn't recognize race as a valid category of personhood, race has nonetheless been created and enforced with such evil creativity we must work at exposing and undoing its creation. An evil device of its magnitude can only be overcome through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Alas, Easter is here!

Jesus took the sin of racism so seriously that He died to remove it from our heart and from the fruit it bears in our world systems.

The death of Jesus teaches us that every sin is devastating, demanding our total brokenness, our complete repentance, and our ongoing lament. Until Christians learn to properly lament and repent of racism's evil, we are consciously or unconsciously protecting an unhealed wound. May we cry out like Daniel did in exile and ask God to forgive us! We see Daniel repent over people he did not know and take credit for sins he did not commit. He was repenting for his country, his own ethnic group, and their corporate sins from the past. Daniel leaves us an example by saying, "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules...to you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame" (Daniel 9:4-5, 7a; ESV). As Christians, may we enter into the horror of our recent past and turn to our great healer for spiritual rehabilitation. Jesus awaits a hurting post-slavery America with resurrection power.

Jesus took the sin of racism so seriously that He rose again to make healing possible for our land, our individual hearts, and renewal within our broken systems.

Through Christ, race relations within our country have never looked more hopeful. It was the hope of the resurrected Christ that moved Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to say these words: “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality...I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.” The power of the resurrection gives us hope that Christ’s reconciling work will have the final word over racism. How can this be? The resurrection declares that Jesus has the power to overcome racism, ethnocentrism, and tribalism. This very power has been given to each and every person that places their trust in Jesus. The Apostle Paul teaches us that the power to bring Jesus back from the dead resides in His people (Romans 8:11)! The Holy Spirit actively moves among God’s people and grants us power to overcome prejudice, partiality, and tribalism.

The resurrected Christ declares our churches a safe haven for race conversations, healing, and ongoing dialogue.

It is overwhelmingly clear that this country has difficulty discussing race in a reasonable way. On one side of the pendulum, some would have us forget that race is still a major factor affecting our churches and society; simply deny the validity of race and it will disappear. This is naive and impossible. On the other side of the pendulum, some elevate ethnic and racial identity to make it more important than God intended.

Paul gives us a way forward. After he meets the resurrected Christ, he writes to the church, “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” (Galatians 3:28; ESV). This verse does not collapse the groups into one, thereby nullifying the important nuance of gender, ethnicity, culture, or place of power in society. Rather, Paul is lifting up and validating the fact we are different—after which Paul places an even higher value on the unity we find in Christ! Paul is calling out the historical injustice of slavery, Rome’s wrong understanding of gender, and the religious divide for Jews and Gentiles, and calls them all into mutual love and respect as image bearers of God. Paul proclaimed this gospel is the ultimate deconstructive statement regarding Gentile ethnocentrism. If Jesus constitutes a new space between Jew and Gentile existence, then in that space a common life must ensue that allows the formation of a new identity” (The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race, Willie James Jennings). The brown-skinned Jewish Jesus did not come to make us color blind, but that we might see each other for who we really are and see the deeper identity of bearing His image. This is our new identity. This is resurrection thinking. This is resurrection power.

May our churches open their hearts to this healing through the power of the risen Messiah. It is time for us to begin entering the dialogue in a constructive, Christ-like, and courageous way. Will you join Jesus in this work?

