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## **The Answer to Racial Discrimination**

by Stephen F. Olford

(From Rick Warren's Ministry Toolbox, 2-6-02)

(Acts 17:16-34; James 2:1-12; Romans 10:1-12)

In 1959, I accepted the call of God to be senior minister of the Calvary Baptist Church in New York City. It never occurred to me to raise the question of racism in a church in metropolitan New York - with all its mix of nationalities!

In fact, the issue was never mentioned in the negotiations that were transacted between New York and London, where I was pastor of the Duke Street Baptist Church in Richmond, Surrey. Perhaps I assumed too much when making inquiries about the new pastoral charge. But to say the least, I was more than dismayed to discover that Calvary Baptist Church had a segregated membership.

One thing was clear. The situation had to change if I was to continue as pastor of that congregation. I prayed much about the matter and then began an in-depth study of the problem. I discovered that 85 percent of the church members were against integration.

What made matters worse was the outside pressure that was brought to bear upon me to act at once - or else! A black federal judge came to see me, convinced I was a racist. He argued that, since I had not fought the issue to the point of splitting the church, I had proved myself to be a segregationist.

I pleaded with him for patience and explained that the answer to the problem would come through prayer, the preaching of the Word of reconciliation, and the reviving work of the Holy Spirit. Some time later, the judge changed his mind when my secretary made him read one of my sermons on race relations, while he waited for an interview!

The interview never took place. The judge studied the manuscript, returned it to my secretary, and said, "I am satisfied!" I never saw him again.

As time passed I began to sense a change in the spiritual climate of the church as the message of reconciliation was proclaimed in human weakness, but with the divine authority of God's Word. In fact, such was the moving of the Holy Spirit that the provisional dateline I had set for a church meeting on the race issue was advanced by six months.

I shall never forget that eventful night! "Everybody" was there, including many who should never have been present! I felt it my duty, at this church meeting, to take a personal stand and not involve my officers, except as they spoke for themselves.

The sermon I preached was bathed in prayer, and delivered with God-anointed passion. After expounding the Scriptures, I fielded questions.

It is true that vitriolic language was used by some, and that tense moments were experienced by all. But when it came to a vote, the tally was practically unanimous. Only eleven people raised their hands in opposition. Of these, seven assured me that while they did not agree with me on this matter, they were prepared to support the ministry and reconsider their "views" on race relations.

The remaining four were sovereignly removed from our midst in a manner that brought "great fear ... upon all the church" (Acts 5:11). One man died that very week!

I have often been asked how things worked out thereafter in the church. My answer is short and simple: God blessed us beyond all our asking or thinking.

Even though we had the problems that are common to any inner-city church, the question of integration was not one of them. We found that the people who sought the right hand of fellowship at Calvary were those who were prepared to submit themselves to the disciplined training of our membership classes, accept the standard of ministry, the mode of worship, and the opportunities for service as structured within our church.

In this connection, we had African-American and other minority groups elected to our boards, committees, choir, and similar organizations, all working together for the glory of God.

Sometimes I felt that Calvary Baptist Church was a little Pentecost; for every Sunday there were people from many nations under heaven! At our visitors reception we always had a roll call, and it was noted that an average of forty different countries across the world were represented in any given worship service.

Praise the Lord, we learned that integration comes through reconciliation; and that reconciliation takes place at the foot of the cross when "red, yellow, black, and white" are prepared to be broken and mastered by the constraining love of Christ.

That was over forty years ago, and tragically, racial discrimination in the church is still one of the burning issues of our times. The build-up of these racial tensions seriously affects every aspect of life. To ignore this problem is to fail in our witness, and to imply the impracticality and impotence of the gospel of Christ.

We do well, therefore, to examine what the Bible has to say about the subject. We shall limit ourselves to a threefold answer:

### **1. The Sociological Answer to Racial Discrimination**

"God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (Acts 10:34-35 NKJV).

The apostle Peter uttered these words after his dramatic deliverance from racism (Acts 9:9-16; 10:9-33). Such language was momentous in sweeping away centuries of racial prejudice.

What Peter discovered, Jesus displayed in all his dealings with people of diverse backgrounds, such as the woman of Samaria (John 4:7); the Syro-phenician (Mark

7:26); and the Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5–13). There appeared to be no place for racial distinctions in his experience and ministry.

Indeed, he clearly stated: "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock with one shepherd" (John 10:16 NASB). In attitude and action, Jesus corroborated the consistent witness of the Scriptures that God is the Creator and Redeemer of all mankind and is, therefore, "no respect[er] of persons" (Rom. 2:11).

From this line of teaching we may deduce two main considerations:

### **A. The Unity of the Human Family**

Speaking to the Athenians who boasted of their racial superiority, Paul declared, "[God] has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings" (Acts 17:26 NKJV).

Few words in Paul's theology are more pregnant with significance as they relate to racial discrimination. He states here that the one common origin of humanity is inseparably bound up with the unity of the Godhead.

Dr. Richard N. Longenecker reminds us "the substance of the Athenian address concerns the nature of God and the responsibility of man." Therefore, "contrary to all pantheistic and polytheistic notions, God is the one, as Paul says, who created the world and everything in it. He is the Lord of heaven and earth (cf. Gen. 14:19, 22). Paul further affirms the oneness of all humans in their creation by the one God and their descent from a common ancestor"<sup>1</sup> [emphasis mine].

We have no more right to discriminate between nations or races than we have to discriminate between the persons of the Godhead.

In his inscrutable wisdom, God has so determined seasons and appointed habitations that there is a variety and, therefore, a beauty about the different characteristics of the races of the world.

The Hebrew concept of God and righteousness, the Greek sense of beauty and wisdom, the Roman idea of law and power, the Teutonic view of truthfulness and discipline, the Celtic way of impulsiveness and courage, and the African trait of patience and service have their particular contribution to make to the mosaic of human life.

All local circumstances of soil and climate that influence human characteristics come under the heading of the "boundaries of [man's] dwellings." Thus, even though races can be divided into Caucasian, Mongolian, and Negroid, they are, in fact, united under one supreme Creator and sustainer of the universe. No one can hold this biblical doctrine of our common ancestry and be a racist.

It is not without significance that the principles of the United Nations embody this concept of the unity of the human family. Under the purposes of membership, the charter of the United Nations states that "the primary objective of the United Nations is the maintenance of international peace and security . . . and is dedicated to the

development of friendly relations among nations, based on the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples; to the achievement of international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character; and to serve as a central forum for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends."

But with the unity of the human family, there is:

### **B. The Unity of the Heavenly Family**

*"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26 NKJV).*

Dr. Griffith Thomas reminds us that as the family of God we are "a society of saved sinners." Thus, discrimination is incompatible with what the gospel of Christ teaches. With this in mind, Paul declares: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27-28 NKJV).

This means that international, cultural, and sociological barriers are swept away when we are baptized into Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). From that moment onwards, we accept one another not as Europeans, Africans, Orientals and so on, but as Christians.

This glorious fact reminds me of the charming African-American who requested membership at a certain church some while ago. When refused, he stood aghast and exclaimed, "I wasn't applying as a Negro. I was coming as a Christian."

So there is a sociological answer to this problem of racial discrimination. But there is also:

### **2. The Nomological Answer to Racial Discrimination**

"If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:8-10 NKJV).

Nomology is the study of the law; and since the law, in the highest meaning of that term, has a biblical foundation, we need to examine what the Scriptures have to say.

For our limited purpose, we shall examine one of the most explicit passages on this subject found in the Word of God, James 2:1-12. The apostle James tells us in these verses that racial or social discrimination constitutes a serious violation of the "royal law" that reads, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 8).

The royal law involves spiritual, social, and civil behavior; therefore, discrimination is:

### **A. The Violation of a Spiritual Law**

"Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts?" (James 2:5-6 NKJV).

The situation that occasioned the instruction we find in these verses was undoubtedly an incident that James himself had witnessed. A group of people had assembled for public worship, and two strangers had come in.

One was richly dressed, for his clothes are described as "fine apparel" (James 2:2 NKJV). On his finger was an ornate gold ring. Indeed, he seemed to be a man of wealth and social position.

The second man was poorly dressed. Evidently he was a laboring man, for his clothes were worn and soiled. As they entered the Christian assembly, the rich man was ushered to the best seat and was told to sit "in a good place" (v. 3). The poor man was told to stand, or sit on the floor in some inconspicuous corner.

This, then, was the kind of situation that drew from James the words, "Have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts?" (James 2:4-6 NKJV).

James makes it quite clear that this action violated a spiritual law. By their behavior the leaders of this church had implied that the soul of the rich man was more valuable than that of the poor man.

Needless to say, such an evaluation is not only totally false but an outrage on heaven itself. People whom God chooses are not those who are rich in wealth, but rather "rich in faith." It is both interesting and instructive to recall that historically speaking it is the poor, and not the rich, who generally respond to the call of the gospel (Luke 1:52; 1 Cor. 1:26-28).

Ultimately, however, the kingdom of God is "promised to those who love Him" (James 2:5 NKJV).

But observe further that discrimination of persons is:

### **B. The Violation of a Social Law**

"But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?" (James 2:6-7 NKJV).

James shows that discrimination is unsociable if it makes dress, wealth, and power more important than souls, sinners, and saints. Indeed, in the original there is great indignation expressed in the words, "But you have dishonored the poor" (James 2:6 NKJV).

The unreasonableness of such social discrimination is illustrated by the fact that so often it is the rich people who oppress the rest of society and draw men before the judgment seat and speak blasphemously of the worthy name of Jesus.

As John Calvin comments, "It is an odd thing to honor one's executioners and in the meantime to injure one's friends." We cannot read through the Acts of the Apostles

without seeing this principle demonstrated again and again (Acts 4:1–3; 13:50; 19:23–41); and church history confirms the same thing.

As we have seen already, God “has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26 NKJV), and it is wholly unsociable and unconscionable to reject any member of the family of nations because of the lack of wealth, education, or influence.

Such behavior demonstrates a failure to recognize the intrinsic worth of the human soul: “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Mark 8:36 NKJV).

Once again, discrimination is:

#### C. The Violation of a Moral Law

“If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:8–10 NKJV).

James here quotes Leviticus 19:18 and describes God’s law as “the royal law” because it is “the king of all laws,” summing up man’s relationship to man.

If anyone were to quibble as to who is a neighbor, the answer our Lord gave to a certain lawyer is absolutely clear. In his parable of the Good Samaritan, he showed that there is no distinction (Luke 10:25–37); all men are neighbors, and we are to be concerned about our neighbors as we are concerned about ourselves. To act in this fashion is to “do well” (James 2:8 NKJV).

On the other hand, to violate this royal law is to “commit sin” and to be “convicted by the law” (James 2:9 NKJV). Indeed, the author James goes on to liken this type of sin to adultery, murder, or the violation of any other aspect of the moral law.

Then to press home the seriousness of breaking God’s law, he says, “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10 NKJV).

At first glance this may appear to be unfair and impracticable, but this is not so on closer examination.

D. L. Moody used to illustrate the reasonableness of God’s demands by describing a man suspended over a cliff by a chain of ten links. “What happens,” he would ask, “if all the links are broken? The answer, of course, is that the man falls to his doom.” Then he would further press his point with this question: What happens if just one link is broken? The answer, of course, is the same - the man falls to his doom.” Just as it takes one lie to make a liar, one theft to make a thief, one murder to make a murderer, so it takes just one act of discrimination to make a discriminator.

Some argue that those who belong to Christ are not under the law but under grace. The biblical answer to this piece of rationalization is that Jesus died and rose again to

save us from the curse of the law, but not from the claims of the law (Rom. 8:3–4; 13:8–10).

Christians should not be lawless; on the contrary, James implores: “So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:12–13 NKJV).

So we see that “the answer to racial discrimination” is to keep the spiritual law, the social law, and the moral law. The spiritual law is based upon a common life shared in Jesus Christ by virtue of the new birth; the social law is based upon the intrinsic worth of man by reason of the fact that he is a member of the human family; the moral law is based upon God’s command to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:39).

One more consideration must engage our attention:

### **3. The Theological Answer to Racial Discrimination**

“The Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him” (Rom. 10:11–12 NKJV).

The body of divinity [theology] reveals without equivocation or even elucidation that God the Father loves all people, God the Son saves all people, and God the Holy Spirit claims all people without racial discrimination. With that as an opening preamble, let us proceed to examine each of the propositions a little more closely:

#### **A. God the Father Loves All People Without Discrimination**

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16 NKJV).

When John gave expression to these words, he once and forever demolished the idea that God’s love was discriminatory. This divine love includes the world of mankind. God acted in love to prove this. He came to this earth in the person of his Son and moved among men.

On three occasions the Gospel writers tell us that Jesus loved people. The first instance is that of the rich young ruler who came to him seeking to earn eternal life, and we are told, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him” (Mark 10:21 NKJV). Despite the fact that Christ’s love was spurned, it is still true that Jesus loved him.

Later on in the Savior’s ministry we find him at the grave of Lazarus, where we see him weeping in sympathy with Mary and Martha because of the loss of their brother. The Jews who were looking on had to exclaim, “See how He loved him!” (John 11:36 NKJV).

Then there is that great statement at the conclusion of his ministry, when we are told that “Jesus . . . having loved His own [disciples] who were in the world, He loved them to the end” (John 13:1 NKJV).

But more than this, Jesus demonstrated God's love for the world of womankind. All throughout human history the woman, for the most part, has been relegated to the place of inferiority and unimportance.

This was never the purpose of God. From her very creation she has been regarded as of equal standing with man, and indeed, as his helpmate. Jesus came to restore this image both by his words and actions. It is written, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister" (John 11:5 NKJV).

What Christianity has done to elevate womankind to a place that God has assigned for her is one of the splendid chapters of missionary endeavor.

But once again, Jesus came to demonstrate God's love for the world of childkind. Jesus could say, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14 NKJV).

These words were addressed to his beloved disciples when they attempted to shield the Master from the little ones who eagerly pressed toward him to receive his welcome and blessing. So it is that children throughout the world have been welcomed by the Savior, without respect for their class or color. Only the Christian gospel knows God as Father, and, therefore, as indiscriminating Love.

### **B. God the Son Saves All People Without Discrimination**

Christ "Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:2 NKJV, emphasis mine).

The glory of the gospel is that Jesus Christ, God's Son, saves all people without discrimination. He saves people wherever they are. He told his disciples to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."

And then he added, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16 NKJV, emphasis mine). Thank God, there are men, women, and children in every part of the world who have heard that gospel and have been saved and baptized.

God the Son saves people whoever they are. "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For 'whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved'" (Rom. 10:12-13 NKJV).

How wonderful to read those words:

"The same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him"—

"Red and yellow, black and white,

All are precious in His sight."

—Reverend C. H. Woolston.

The only condition Jesus makes is that they must repent of their sins and call upon him in simple faith.

But once again, Jesus saves people whatever they are. Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians that "not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called" (1 Cor. 1:26 NKJV).

You will notice that this verse does not say "not any," but rather "not many." This means that the basis of Christ's saving work is not conditioned by intellectual attainment, influential achievement, or even indigenous advancement, but simply on the grounds of the grace of God and the response of man.

Yes, God the Son saves all people without racial discrimination. With God the Father and God the Son:

### **C. God the Spirit Claims All People Without Discrimination**

On the day of Pentecost Peter told his audience that the Holy Spirit was poured out upon "all flesh" (Acts 2:17 NKJV), and subsequent events reveal this to be true.

God the Spirit claimed the Jews. The greatest example of the regenerating power of the Spirit among Jews was the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, recorded for us in Acts 9. If ever there were a bigoted intellectual, it was this young Jewish zealot who hated the name of Jesus and harassed the church of God in every city.

Then came that moment in history when the Spirit of God laid claim to Saul of Tarsus. In a flash of blinding light he was translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, from the service of Satan to the service of Jesus Christ.

Of all people in New Testament times, Paul was one of the greatest witnesses to the saving grace of God. In his own words he tells us:

"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life" (1 Tim. 1:12-16 NKJV).

God the Spirit claimed the Greeks. In Acts 16 we read of the occasion when Paul came to Derbe and Lystra and "behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek" (v. 1 NKJV).

That boy responded to the message of the gospel and became Paul's son in the faith and, in many senses, his successor in the ministry. Here, then, was a Greek who was claimed by God the Holy Spirit. Dr. Luke was also a Greek. He was a native of Antioch, a physician, and a faithful companion and assistant to the apostle Paul. Like Timothy, he was also claimed by God the Holy Spirit.

God the Spirit claimed the Romans. Among the stories we could cite is the example of Cornelius of Caesarea, a centurion of the band called the Italian Band. We read that he was a devout man, one who feared God with his entire house, and a man who gave much alms to the people and prayed always; and yet he was unregenerate (Acts 10:1-48).

God had to rid Peter of racial prejudice in order that he might send him to the house of Cornelius to lead this centurion to a saving knowledge of Christ. And we read that "Peter opened his mouth and said: 'In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality'" (Acts 10:34 NKJV), and as he preached Christ, the Holy Spirit fell on all them who heard the word, and a notable Roman was gloriously saved.

God the Spirit claimed the Ethiopians. This story is told graphically and dramatically in Acts 8:26–40. The man in question was known as a eunuch of great authority under Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.

As Chancellor of the Exchequer, he had charge of all her treasure and was a man of obvious brilliance and intelligence. Dissatisfied in his soul, he came to Jerusalem to worship and find solace; but disillusioned and disappointed, he started on his way home.

Dr. Luke records how God chose his servant, Philip, the evangelist, and compelled him by the urging of the Spirit to leave a revival in Samaria to seek out this lonely Ethiopian in the desert of Gaza. The encounter led to his conversion.

Claimed by the Spirit and baptized into Christ, the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing - and taking with him a transforming gospel for his fellow Ethiopians in North Africa.

If you have followed this illustrative treatment of our subject, you have observed that no one can accept the Bible as the Word of God and be a respecter of persons.

Clearly, racial discrimination is sociologically untenable, nomologically unethical, and theologically unbiblical. Let us then demonstrate true Christian discipleship by having love one for another (John 13:35).

And in demonstrating such love, remember Christ's high priestly prayer as he anticipated his reconciling death on the cross of Calvary: Father, he cried, "as We are one . . . may [they, and those of us living today] be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me" (John 17:22–23 NKJV).

How awesome it is to realize that the answer to that prayer, humanly speaking, depends on you and me! Let us ponder solemnly these words before we sing again:

"We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord,  
We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord,  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored:  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,  
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love."  
—Peter Scholtes (2)

1. Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1981), 476.
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This article originally appeared in, "A Mighty Long Journey: Reflections on Racial Reconciliation," edited by Timothy George and Robert Smith, Jr., (B&H, 2000). Used by permission.

Article by Stephen F. Olford

Olford Center for Biblical Preaching

Stephen F. Olford is founder and senior lecturer of the Stephen Olford Center for Biblical Preaching. He served as minister of Duke Street Baptist Church in Richmond, Surrey, England (1953–1959) and the famed Calvary Baptist Church in New York City (1959–1973). Olford now lives in Memphis, Tennessee with his son, David Olford, he promotes biblical preaching and practical ministry for the Christian ministry. He is the author of many books, including "The Way of Christ," "The Way of Holiness," and "Anointed Expository Preaching."

[A Mighty Long Journey \(B&H, 2001\)](#) Timothy George and Robert Smith (eds)

This is a collection of essays, sermons, and speeches chronicling the journey to racial reconciliation in the American church. Writers and pastors from various backgrounds reflect on the state of affairs of race relations in the church, the sins of the past, repentance in the present, and redemption for the future.