

A sermon on dismantling structural racism

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The work of dismantling white supremacy is the central work of God's people because what is at stake is the gospel. We confront racism because racism perverts the gospel.

I have only 10 minutes. I have to get to the point.

Paul gets right to his point too in his letter to Galatians too because what is at stake with what is happening there is the gospel. He writes:

Galatians 1:6-9

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! ⁹As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

The more accurate translation of that last sentence is, “let that one be damned!” because who today talks like that “let that one be accursed!” Paul's speech was earthier and our translations kind of clean him up.

How would you like to get a letter that starts with such strong warnings: deserting the gospel, turning to a different gospel, perverting the gospel?

Paul gets to the point. He has more than 10 minutes, but the issue is urgent. He doesn't even have the compulsory “thank you” note in this letter.

Even the Corinthian congregation gets a thank you, and they were a mess! Whenever I had trouble in my congregation, I read the Corinthian letter and felt better. “Hey, at least we are not as bad as them!” But even there, he starts the letter with “I thank God for you.”

The Galatians don't even get a generic thank you!

So, what exactly are the Galatians doing that is perverting the gospel?

They want to be circumcised. The Gentile Christian wanted to be just like the Jewish Christian. And Jewish Christians were scaring Gentile Christians into wanting to become like the Jewish Christians.

Judaism was being used in a way that gives insight to how white supremacy works today. I am not saying Judaism is white supremacy. This is an analogy of how power works, how when power is legitimized by a cultural & color distinctive, we are talking about an ideology that perverts the gospel.

The “circumcision faction” believed in the ideology that to be a true child of God one had to become a Jew. In the debate of being “true child of God” we are not just talking about religious membership but a social membership for in those days ecclesial reality was social reality, spiritual reality was political reality. To say to one “God’s people” and to another “not God’s people,” was to say one was accepted in the society, and the other was rejected by the society, one was valued, the other was worthless.

Some clarification of concepts.

What do we mean by white supremacy and racism?

Racism is the social and political phenomena of the ideology of white supremacy, social phenomena — prejudice favoring white people over people of color, plus political phenomena — policies that support the prejudice.

White supremacy is the ideology, the worldview, that causes and justifies racism.

When we say white supremacy is an ideology, we are saying it is a worldview because it makes an ontological claim: how things are (ontology), white people are smarter, more beautiful, superior; and ethical claim: how we should act, thus white people enslaving black people and calling it divine order; taking land from Indians and calling it Manifest Destiny, taking a 5-year-old Indian boy from his parents, cutting his hair, giving him an English name and calling it Christian mission.

The gospel is a worldview. It is ontology. In Christ we all are broken but because of the grace of Christ all are valued (ontology). It is ethics. Because of Christ we are to love (ethics).

The book of Romans lays out this gospel worldview.

Ontology (Being – Who we are)

All have fallen short of the glory of God,

While we were enemies Christ died for us.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (8:1)

But you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God (8:15-16)

Ethics (Becoming – What we are to do)

But be transformed by the renewing of your mind, offering yourselves as living sacrifice

Accept one another as Christ has accepted you.

White supremacy as a worldview is the total opposite of the gospel worldview. This is why white supremacy perverts the gospel.

The three most egregious places of perversion of the gospel:

- 1- The curse of Ham, white supremacy worldview mangling scripture.
- 2- White Jesus. It's okay to have cultural interpretations. But its when we can't imagine a black Jesus or an Asian Jesus because white Jesus just feels purer that we know that our gospel has been perverted.
- 3- White churches because churches refused blacks, like the Birmingham church when MLK and his friends went to attend church, they refused him entrance with their hands on their gun. When MLK and his friends left, they went to worship Christ

We don't have to be card-carrying, mask-donning white supremacists to live by and perpetrate white supremacy world view.

White supremacy is an ideology that was our history and is still our story today.

Daniel Black who was being groomed by David Duke to be the next Klan Grand Wizard, but had a true conversion, says that the reason white supremacy is attractive to most Americans is because it is our American history. The constitution says that only white man can vote. It was embedded in our policies, is embedded in our policies, and it is our consciousness. It is the demonic power and principality that usurps Christ's supremacy in America.

Double-consciousness

This is why when 3-year olds, in a doll experiment, were shown a white doll and a black doll and asked which one is pretty and good, and which one was ugly and bad. Every kid said the white doll was good and the black doll was bad. What does this do to the white person? Even black kids said black dolls are bad, and as they say it, you can see tragic sadness setting in their eyes as they partially realize what they are doing. What does this do to a black person?

Non-whites have this double consciousness, coined by W.E.B. Dubois. Because of the standard of whiteness, whites don't see their whiteness, but just the way it is and the way it should be, and people of color see that they are not white.

I did not know I had slanty eyes until I was seven, when I came to America and I was made fun of for my slanty eyes. And I would spend time before the mirror trying to round my eyes.

I was proud of my Korean language. It was simple, symmetrical, and consistent. Consonants didn't suddenly become silent as it did in English. I was proud of my language until I came to America. Kids and teachers made fun of it when I spoke it saying, "ching, chong, chang," and so when I went to Macy's with my mother, and she spoke Korean, I hid behind the mannequins.

Even though I am 45, even though I know why the British accent is interpreted as intelligence and Korean accent is interpreted as stupidity, still whenever a Korean pastor is about to speak, I fidget.

Galatians

Paul is angry at Galatians only as a father is angry when he sees his child hurt himself, it is love expressing itself in anger. Why do you want to change the way you look? You are beautiful just as you are! Christ accepted you just as you are! Who told you, you are ugly? Who told you, you had to go under the knife and circumcise yourself, thin your nose, whiten your skin!

Paul is “angry” (angry out of love). Why when you started with gospel of grace are you suddenly following the perverted gospel of become more like them and get circumcised, especially when the Church already said you don’t have to be circumcised?

Remember the first Church Council in Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15. A long debate that concluded by saying you don’t have to be circumcised to be a Christian, to be a people of God, to be a full human person.

Well, the church did say that, but then added something to their decision.

The Jerusalem Council said you don’t have to be circumcised to be God’s people, just watch what you eat.

It was received as a liberating document. But it wasn’t. It enforced a culture. They were not to eat food sacrificed to idols, meaning they were not to eat food their mom got from the market.

Their policy was saying you don’t have to be circumcised, but you really, really should.

Yes, we don’t have to be circumcised, but you are telling us to eat like you, sing your hymns, preach like you, dress like you, organize like you, argue like you, so we get it, we have to become like you. That is the only way to be accepted by God and accepted by you!

In chapter 2 of Galatians, Paul tells how he had to confront Peter because Peter who perverted the gospel by his behavior that basically told the Gentiles you are not accepted by God because I can’t fully accept you.

I will let Paul tell it in his own words:

Galatians 2:11-14

¹¹But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; ¹²for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. ¹³And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to

live like Jews?”

Why did Peter suddenly separate himself? That policy, of not eating food sacrificed to idols.

Peter sold out the gospel to live by a policy that was racist.

And the Gentiles, seeing how they were treated by Peter and even Barnabas, connected the dots. The only way to be accepted doesn't really depend on faith — trusting Christ as Lord and Savior — but assimilation: to eat like them, to be circumcised like them, to be white like them.

Paul says if human value is determined by the cut or color of our skin, by what we eat then Christ died for nothing.

Cultural distinctives as standard of judgment is legalism. White supremacy is legalism.

White supremacy is a perversion of the gospel.

Which is also to say that the gospel has the power to dismantle white supremacy and its social and political phenomena called racism.

If white supremacy is the perversion of the gospel, then the gospel is the negation of white supremacy.

Paul says in Romans,

“I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God to rescue the Jews and Gentiles, the whites and people of color.”

Gospel has agency. This isn't rhetoric. This is reporting. For every time the gospel was preached, it always created a community where both Gentiles and Jews, masters and slaves, people raised to hate each other, experiences the love of God, accepts the other, and breaks bread as family.

If we were less afraid, less ashamed of the gospel, we would know the power of the gospel; we would let loose the power of God, which is to say the love of God;

The power of God is the love of God; for it is the love of God that makes us more than conquerors such that neither death nor life nor any other powers in all creation can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Not even the power of white supremacy and racism can separate us from the love of God.

Oh, if we the church were to ground ourselves on this gospel, who we are on the love of God, who we treat each other in the love of God.

The gospel empowers the people of color to love themselves as Christ loved them. That we do not need to be white. That we are God's people, beautiful and powerful.

This gospel is for white people, too! That you are loved as you are, that you don't need white supremacy to prop you up; dismantling white supremacy shouldn't make you defensive. It is about your liberation to the gospel of Christ!

James Baldwin writes this in middle of his long essay in New Yorker titled, "A Region in My Mind," where he shares his coming of age, specifically as a black person in a white world.

James Baldwin

"White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this — the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed."

James Baldwin wrote this as one no longer in the Church and one who knows the complexity of the race issue, and yet says that the fundamental problem is the inability to love, and in that way practically saying the answer is the gospel.

Rediscovering the gospel of God's love. Grounding our being on who we are to God and not on whiteness.

And love is not acceptance of way things are. Love is resistance. Love resists because it overcomes all powers and principalities.

Love like Paul who confronted the behavior of someone as powerful as Peter, even publicly.

Love like Paul who confronted not just an individual but confronted his own people group for their hypocrisy.

Love that confronts racist behavior from the fellowship hall to the city hall, from classrooms to courtrooms, from the preachers to the presidents.

Love like Paul who confront policies, like not eating food sacrificed to idols, and if the powers are unwilling to change them, just disregarding it.

If this generation is to be known for the 2nd reformation, of rediscovering the power of the gospel to change the world, it will have to be the story of how it reformed the church from being a religious arm of white supremacy to the gospel proclaiming people of God who confessed with their lips and life that Christ alone is Lord. Amen.

A more expansive study will be upcoming in the Thoughtful Christian Lenten Series for 2021.