

Editorial: The Gospel and Racial Reconciliation

Stephen J. Wellum

Stephen J. Wellum is Associate Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

Francis Schaeffer often summarized the implications of Genesis 3 in terms of a fourfold alienation: first, a vertical alienation between God and human beings; second, a cosmic alienation in that the whole universe now lives under the effects of the curse; third, an inward alienation in that we as human beings are schizophrenic at heart; and fourth, a horizontal alienation in that sin has brought about serious divisions in the human race. Viewing the effects of sin in this way certainly underscores the awful distortion it has brought to every aspect of our lives.

Thankfully, in Christ, the glorious news of the gospel is that this fourfold alienation has been dealt with in the cross work of our Lord, who has already won the victory and who will, in the end, consummate all things when he comes again in glory and power. In the meantime, between the comings of our Lord, we, as Christians, are to begin to live out the reality of sin's defeat: justification before our great God; efforts to fulfill the creation mandate in the midst of this fallen world; substantial healing in our own personal lives as we grow in grace; and reconciliation with one another, both personally and corporately. In this edition of *SBJT*, we are particularly interested in exploring this last relationship, especially in regard to the issue of race, even though it is impossible to divorce it from everything else Scripture says about salvation in Christ.

Racism, from a biblical view, is always

wrong. Genesis 1:26-27 is absolutely clear at this point. Because all human beings are created in the image of God, no one race is superior either in terms of value or significance. Sadly, sin has distorted and twisted God's good creation, including racial relations, and it is only the power of the gospel which can bring true healing and transformation. Unfortunately, however, the church has not always lived up to the truth of God's Word. That is one of the reasons why the issue of racial reconciliation needs to be addressed afresh. What is true of every era is especially true of our own: the church needs to proclaim and live out the beauty and power of the gospel so that we will clearly witness to the truth that reconciliation is not found in mere social movements but only in the gospel.

Russell Moore begins our issue with a very helpful reflection on the civil rights movement. Often we are told that the success of this important movement in American history was due to the triumph of a secularist viewpoint centered in the ideal of progress and equality. However, as Moore rightly argues, this is not correct. The truth of the matter is that the movement was successful due to its appeal to the consciences of people, both Christians and non-Christians alike, who were living, either directly or indirectly, under the benefits of the borrowed capital of the Christian worldview, which emphasized the dignity and value of every individual. Moore acknowledges that, although there were many Christians who wrongly dis-

torted the gospel by their endorsement of racial bigotry, the civil rights movement would not have won the day if its leaders had not appealed to the truth of the Scriptures, namely, that human beings, created in God's image, are all creatures of dignity. Racism, therefore, must be rejected in both theory and practice.

John Piper and Sherard Burns, both pastors at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, continue our discussion by stressing that what is needed most in racial reconciliation is not merely a new social agenda, but a direct appropriation and application of the gospel to our lives, centered in the glory of God. In order for true racial harmony to be achieved it must have a higher end than reconciliation for reconciliation's sake. Instead, it must be rooted in the glorious vision of our sovereign God and Savior. Timothy George and Robert Smith Jr., both from Beeson Divinity School, in an interview-style format, wisely and carefully continue to investigate the subject of racial reconciliation from a number of important fronts. For example, they discuss a precise understanding of racial reconciliation, the Scriptural basis for it, as well as the important question of how the church should mirror and live out the reality of reconciliation in our local churches. Significantly, George and Smith have co-taught a course at Beeson and co-written on the subject matter they discuss.

Finally, in our concluding article, T. Vaughn Walker reflects on the history of cooperative ministries both within the Southern Baptist Convention and among National Baptists. His article not only gives us a sense of what has been done in the past to live out some of the entailments of the gospel, but he also lays out

a six-fold challenge for us as we think of what still needs to be done. As always, our Forum contributions grapple with a number of critical issues that help us think as Christians about racial reconciliation. Thus, for instance, there are important reflections on matters of racism, a biblical understanding of interracial marriage, and lessons from the ancient church for us today, as well as an introduction to the new Intercultural Studies program inaugurated at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary under the leadership of Ken Fentress.

In such a racially divided world, it is imperative for the church to *be* the church. Before a watching world and for the glory of God, we must live out the gospel as a testimony to all people of the truth of who we are, regardless of our race, by virtue of our creation; and, by God's grace, what we may become by repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, namely, a company of God's people, the redeemed, from every tribe, language, people, and nation.