

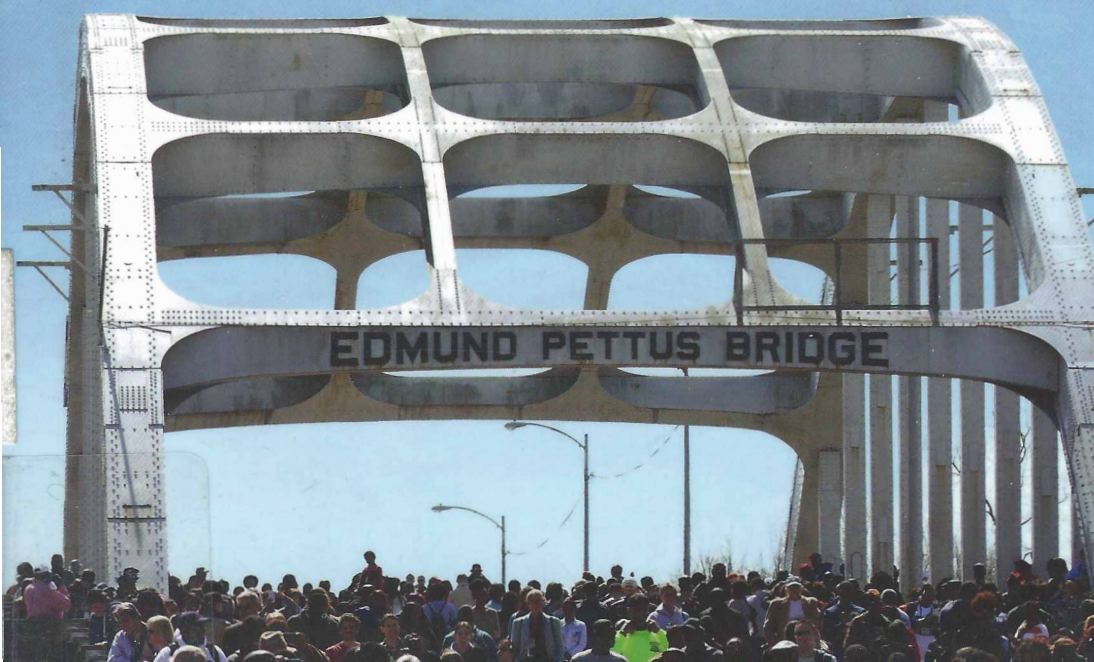
New York Times Bestselling Author

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Foreword by BRYAN STEVENSON

AMERICA'S
ORIGINAL
SIN

Racism, White Privilege,
and the
Bridge to a New America



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were rarer among Protestants than Catholics. The key factor to understanding the level of racial segregation across religious traditions, I have found, is quite simple. The more choices people have—for instance, a larger number of congregations within a religious tradition to consider—the more people choose to worship with people who are racially like themselves.¹³

Emerson's conclusion is perhaps the most disappointing of all: that, given a choice, people mostly choose to worship with their own race. For people in black churches, which became places of protection, survival, and sustenance for African Americans, who were never allowed to worship with whites, the choice to stay with one's black congregation was certainly understandable. However, the many black churches that I have visited have always been very warm and welcoming to white visitors. It's still a painful reality, even five decades after the great victories of the civil rights movement, that few white Christians choose to come to black churches and worship with black Christians.

But there seems to be some multiracial church movement since 1998. Emerson says:

Our latest data suggests the overall movement is having an impact. The 2010 Faith Communities Today Survey, which randomly sampled over 11,000 U.S. congregations across all faith traditions, found significant growth in multiracial congregations since our first nationally representative survey in 1998. . . . Whereas 7.4 percent of U.S. congregations were multiracial in 1998, in 2010 that figure had grown to 13.7 percent. Admittedly, this recent figure is still a tiny fraction of all congregations, but at the same time, it represents significant change in but a little over a decade.¹⁴

We will return later in this chapter to the things that scholars such as Emerson and pastors who are trying to lead new multiracial churches have been learning about *how* congregations can successfully become multiracial. But first, let's turn to the biblical narrative about race.

The Biblical Narrative: From Genesis to Revelation

There is a biblical pilgrimage on the questions of race that runs from Genesis, to the tower of Babel, to the identity of the children of Israel, to

13. Emerson, "New Day."

14. Ibid.

the Hebrew prophets, to the beginning of the church at Pentecost, to the establishment of the “body of Christ” and the early church in the world, and to the end of history as foretold in Revelation by John the apostle.

The movement toward inclusion starts at the beginning of biblical history. In the beginning, on issues we would later speak of as “race,” God addresses the most basic and root matter by creating human beings “in the image of God”—not some human beings, but all of them. In the last chapter we quoted Genesis 1, in which God created humankind “in the image of God,” both “male and female,” then “blessed” us all and gave us the human vocation to “be fruitful and multiply,” to “fill the earth and subdue it” with the task of having “dominion,” meaning care and stewardship, over the earth and all its creatures.

Most scholars believe that human civilization began in Africa or in the Middle East and that human migration moved out from there. Skin color would develop in different climates and cultures over the many years of human existence. But to suggest that differences in skin color would or should change the created reality of all human beings, made in the image of God, is both preposterous and profoundly evil. Together, humankind was to oversee the rest of creation—to have dominion or “stewardship” over the planet and all its creatures. But sin entered (in what the Christian tradition calls “the Fall”) when humans sought to have dominion—or domination—over one another, and even over creation itself. Choosing not to trust God, we decided to trust ourselves instead.

And *sin* is the right word to use for racism, as we’ve been suggesting, because it’s something that seeks to undermine the very creation of human beings as being equally valued, loved, and cared for in the eyes of God. Our worth as men and women comes from *all* of us being the children of God, and all other political affirmations of our equality derive not just from governments but directly from our identity as God’s equally valued children. Many conversations about racism and economic policies and criminal justice would benefit by going back to the beginning of the human story.

Then, in the stories of the garden of Eden and the tower of Babel, we see human dispersal—both geographically and linguistically. The cultural mandate given to God’s human creatures in Genesis 1:28 to go and “fill the earth” kept moving forward. In Genesis 12, God calls Abraham to enter into a covenant as a people that would be a “blessing” to others and to all nations, with their temple as a “house of prayer for all peoples” (Isa. 56:7).

The Old Testament Hebrew prophets were always calling the children and nation of Israel to, in particular, be *welcoming* of “the stranger.”

The recent campaign for comprehensive immigration reform in the United States has drawn many Christians and other people of faith. The presence and influence of people of faith in that struggle has altered the political landscape of the issue, but it has also taught many Christians more about the central role of “the stranger” in biblical history. The biblical word for stranger or immigrant is *ger*, which occurs ninety-two times in the Old Testament.

What has been most eye-opening for many of us in those Hebrew Scriptures is God calling the children of Israel to love *three things*: first, love the Lord your God; second, love your neighbor; and third, love *the stranger* (Lev. 19:18, 34; Deut. 6:5; 10:12, 19). This biblical command to love the stranger comes before even the love of our own families and children. That is the clear instruction. It comes after loving our God and loving our neighbor, and singles out the neighbor who is “a stranger,” an outsider—a person who is seen as a different kind of human being than those already in our in-groups. This is an unmistakable command to welcome the stranger and invite the outsider into the community, and, as such, it is an absolute repudiation of racism. Throughout the Old and the New Testaments, caring for the outsiders, the sojourners, is central to the call of the people of God.

The beginning of the church happened at the first Pentecost with a dramatic outpouring of the Holy Spirit, an exciting expression of many tongues and languages, and the call to spread this multicultural gospel throughout the world (Acts 2).

The origin of the church occasioned a glorious multicultural display of unity and evangelism with three thousand converts that first day—clearly including many ethnicities and races. All this made the early churches quite radical in their historical context, and the message of inclusion was extended to every cultural context that Christians entered going forward. The welcoming diversity of the early church attracted great attention and made the new community even *more* evangelistic.

Unity in Christ was meant to be one of the most important pillars of the church. The apostle Paul’s epistle to the Galatians perhaps says it best: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal.

3:28). This text powerfully asserts that the three most divisive barriers between human beings—race, class, and gender—are meant to be overcome in the new human community that had formed around Jesus. This was a declaration of the meaning of “the body of Christ,” and Galatians 3 was used as a baptismal formula for Christian converts to the early church.¹⁵

The Galatians passage became the baptismal text, telling both converts and the world about the new kind of community that people were joining. These divisive and oppressive factors were used to fuel human conflicts, but now there was a new human community that would deliberately and publically work to reconcile and unite human beings from different races, classes, and genders.

One of the ongoing missions and struggles of the early church was offering the salvation of Christ to both Jews and Gentiles, and the missionary journeys of the early Christians took the message out across the Middle East and to the far-flung corners of the known world. This breaking down of cultural and racial barriers became a prime characteristic of the early church, pulling a divided humanity together.

Many Christians today don't fully realize that racial and cultural integration was an original mission of the first disciples of Jesus. Galatians, and similar passages in the epistles of Ephesians and Colossians, were a culmination of earlier biblical commands about how the children of God should always be welcoming to “outsiders.”

The early church was making a public statement, because baptism was a public and not a private event: In this community we will overcome the divisions between Jews and Greeks, men and women, slaves and free. If you don't want to be part of the kind of community whose purpose is to bring people together, don't join this community! Imagine churches in America making that kind of strong statement today. We need to reimagine that reality into being again.

Other changes threaten when churches become conformed to their culture, as Paul would later warn the Christians in Rome. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). My favorite paraphrase of this Romans

15. Nicholas Taylor, “Liturgy and Identity: Conversion-Initiation in Galatians 3:26–29,” Academia.edu, http://www.academia.edu/4583251/Liturgy_and_Identity_Conversion-Initiation_in_Galatians_3_26-29TAYLOR.

text is from the English Bible translator and commentator J. B. Phillips: “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.” As the Scriptures make clear, racial exclusion and cultural uniformity are not “the will of God” and are not what “is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Back to Michael Emerson on this. “Whites typically lack a racial consciousness,” Emerson writes. “Most whites are unaware that they are ‘raced,’ and that their race has real consequences for their lives. Whites often believe they are cultureless.”¹⁶ But whites are not “cultureless” as we sometimes think. As I described in the last chapter, “Dying to Whiteness,” whites lost their European ethnicities and were very much “raced” when they came to America as “white people” with the assumption of white privilege.

Paul Alexander comments on Galatians 3:

When I reflect on Paul’s claim that there is “neither Jew nor Greek” in Christ Jesus, I think Paul was trying to protest the exclusion of Gentiles, women, and slaves in the people of God and testifying and arguing that they should be included. But perhaps Paul’s “neither Jew nor Greek” was like a person raced-as-White saying we should all be colorblind, which I occasionally hear from raced-as-White people. They’re saying: “Color shouldn’t matter; we should all just get along.” But color does matter. We are not supposed to be colorblind, because there are colors and shades and complexities within the shades, so we should see the colors, and injustices, and oppressions, and exploitation clearly and work for liberation. . . .

So rather than saying “there is neither Jew nor Greek” or calling for colorblindness, perhaps Paul could have written that “there are both Jews and Greeks . . . for you are all many in Christ Jesus.” This is a call for a recognition of diversity and particularity, a valuing of one’s own and the other’s bodily and culturally inscribed differences. Not blindedness, but seeing as clearly as possible and valuing highly the differences as well as the similarities. This does not essentialize race, which is a social construct, but recognizes that human beings are diverse.¹⁷

Contrary to the assumptions of white privilege and supremacy, scriptures reflecting the drive toward racial inclusion culminate in the book of Revelation, with John the apostle foretelling the future. There, at the end of time, all the peoples of the world are worshiping God together. The most compelling thing is how they do so in their native languages as different

16. Emerson, “Persistent Problem.”

17. Paul Alexander, “Raced as White,” *Prism Magazine*, July 1, 2013, <http://prismmagazine.org/raced-as-white/>.

racess, ethnicities, and nations—perhaps the most powerful biblical expression of diversity as a natural human gift and strength. As human history comes to an end, there is no homogenous language or single identity but rather the most magnificent gathering of all of God's multicultural children coming together to worship and praise the God who created them all in God's own image—with equal love and dignity in *unity*.

There is no otherworldly heavenly culture and certainly no superior human cultural identity in God's reign. Rather, we see the collective and common response of every ethnicity, race, and nation, giving praise to God in all their glorious human diversity. Human diversity is not abolished but rather celebrated and ultimately reconciled in praise of the Creator. Revelation 7:9–10 says,

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

A Microcosm of Society

In a sermon delivered on his last Christmas Eve, Dr. King expressed the vision in his heart and behind the movement that he led: "Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation." It was the inclusive biblical theology of the church King loved so much that formed a foundation for his commitment to racial integration in a pluralistic society. For King, the church was a "microcosm" of what the society was supposed to be. The campaigns of the movement were always around specific and concrete demands—such as civil rights and voting rights—but the spiritual and philosophical vision that inspired and drove King was that of "the beloved community." As King said in the mission statement for his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), "The ultimate aim . . . is to foster and create the 'beloved community' in America where brotherhood is a reality. . . . Our ultimate goal is genuine intergroup and interpersonal living—*integration*."¹⁸ As Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp

18. "This Is SCLC," National Humanities Center, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text2/thisissclc.pdf> (emphasis original).

put it in “Martin Luther King’s Vision of the Beloved Community,” “King’s was a vision of a completely integrated society, a community of love and justice wherein brotherhood would be an actuality in all of social life. In his mind, such a community would be the ideal corporate expression of the Christian faith.”¹⁹

Historian Charles Marsh shows how King’s theology changed his sociology. That is the opposite of what happens in many white American churches—their sociology changes their theology. The sociology of many white communities shapes the theology of their churches, making them “conformed to the world” and disobedient to the gospel. So white churches become sociologically predictable, based on their race and geography.

Although the theological commitments of black churches “radiated”²⁰ into the society during the civil rights movement, the sociology of white churches turned many of them against the movement for racial justice, against the black churches, and against Dr. King, putting them on the wrong side of history and, more important, on the wrong side of God’s purposes in the world.

King was, in fact, making a democratic argument that was based in the theological meaning of Galatians 3:28. The white pastors who opposed the civil rights movement, and even those who ignored it, were indeed disobeying Paul’s theological proclamation that, in Christ, there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female; but all are one in Christ Jesus. So the difference between most black and most white churches concerning civil rights was not just a political disagreement but a theological one. Therefore, theological obedience on the part of Dr. King and the black churches, and theological disobedience on the part of white churches who opposed them, was the real issue at play in that time and in ours—it went much deeper than politics.

“Letter from Birmingham Jail”

One of the most important letters in American history, and in the history of the church in America, was written in a jail cell in Birmingham,

19. Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp Jr., “Martin Luther King’s Vision of the Beloved Community,” <http://www.nathanielturner.com/belovedcommunity.htm>.

20. Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 50.