

## **Black History Month**

February is Black History month. Because of recent events highlighting racial tensions and racism in our country, and because of recent efforts to learn more about anti-racism in our church, we recognize the importance of promoting racial reconciliation and anti-racist efforts in our own church and the church at large.

Over the past several months, there have been several elders and staff who participated in *Be the Bridge*—a study bringing awareness of “racial brokenness and systemic injustice in our world” ([bethebridge.com/](http://bethebridge.com/)). Additionally, several elders and staff attended the Absurd conference, which focused on addressing racism. There have been several First Friends sanctioned Bible studies focusing on racism, and two are currently in session now (*White Awake* for men, and *The Color of Compromise*—see Connect Group listing for more information). There are ongoing conversations among the elders and staff on how to embrace and promote anti-racist efforts in our church – in alignment with the gospel command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39) and to call all peoples to be reconciled to God and one another (Ephesians 2: 11-14).

This month, we begin with some educational efforts designed to help us see and understand more clearly the need for racial reconciliation not only in America, but also in the church. The purpose is to foster conversations that help educate us about the realities of racism. Engaging with Black History Month gives us a starting point to begin learning about the gaps existing between certain American ideals and historical presentations of America and some of the harsh and painful realities relating to America’s treatment of blacks historically.

### **Why is This Important to Christians? What Does This Have to do with The Gospel?**

The message of the gospel is the message of reconciliation—first to God and then to one another. Because of Adam and Eve’s sin, we are all born with a sinful nature. The Gospel message begins with the truth that “no one is righteous. . . all have turned away. . .no one does good. . .there is no fear of God before their eyes. . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:10-23). The root problem of all humanity is sin, which separates us from intimate relationship with God, a relationship which leads to life and life eternal. This makes us all equally in need of a savior from sin. Christ, by His substitutionary life, death, burial, and resurrection, offers redemption from sin and eternal life to all who will receive it by faith. He alone is our common Savior, which entitles us to a common heritage and destination.

At the cross, we are all equal. In the Christian church, we are all equal; we are all called; we are all gifted; we are all empowered by the life of the Holy Spirit to be light bearers and witnesses of the goodness of our Father. Our Father in heaven is the Father of us all—making all who receive Him equal heirs; sons and daughters of the same family with the same shared rights and privileges; the same shared destiny; the same shared dignity, value, and worth. In our Father’s house, there is a valued place for all His sons and daughters.

Righteousness is not something we achieve by good works but something done for us that we must respond to. By grace alone do we become all God intended us to become—with Him, by Him, through Him. This is true for all people, in all times, in all places. We are united in our common human condition—sinners in need of a Savior, rescued from sin and death to become sons and daughters of His Kingdom, sharing in His inheritance and called to rule and reign on the earth with Him by preaching the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

The Gospel calls all humans to be reconciled to God; the Gospel also needs practical expression and articulation. Martin Luther said, “we are saved by faith alone but not by faith that remains alone” (Keller, 2016, p. 30). True Gospel belief will always lead to good works—not as a pre-requisite to salvation but as a response to the outpouring of salvation by grace. The scriptures are clear the gospel must be preached to all

because all are in need of the Gospel remedy. Isaiah 61:1-3 articulates the work of preaching the Gospel beautifully:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,<sup>[a]</sup>  
<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor  
and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,  
<sup>3</sup> and provide for those who grieve in Zion—  
to bestow on them a crown of beauty  
instead of ashes,  
the oil of joy  
instead of mourning,  
and a garment of praise  
instead of a spirit of despair.

This is the good news we are called to proclaim as Christians.

## **Race Relations**

What does this have to do with race relations? The Gospel calls us to the good work of being reconciled to one another; the Gospel commands us to the good work of loving others as He has loved us. Jesus told us that Christian relationships with each other would be the criterion by which the world judges whether the Christian message is true. The love we have for one another is the evidence of the work of the Gospel that unbelievers can see in real, practical terms. If there are those among us who are hurting, who are in trouble, who are in need, are we not obligated to come along side and assist? We are.

Many are familiar with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership in bringing the scourge of racism to national attention and bringing about judicial change to protect his black brothers and sisters. While some progress has been made, it does not excuse us from looking truthfully at the pain and trouble many of our black brothers and sisters currently experience as a result of racist structures still in place in America. The past several years have provided much evidence that America is still in need of racial reconciliation. We have all watched with horror videos of police brutality; we have listened to our black brothers explain the common occurrence of racial profiling by police that leads to mistrust and indignity. We understand the injustice of redlining. We hear the anger, frustration, and cry for justice. Many of our black brothers and sisters are hurting and in need of being heard and understood in this time. This is a time for the white church to lean in with humility and listen and learn from the pain of our black brothers and sisters and the stories they have to tell. We need to understand black history in America.

This education effort is not an effort to be political or politically correct. Jesus was not politically correct, and He did challenge the political systems of His day. The Gospel is not politically correct and it will challenge power structures of our day as well. The problem with discussing race is that, all too often, discussions become politically charged. Often, defending political stances become more important than real conversations; arguments about policy and politician's hijack real understanding and the hearing and valuing of one another. The media seeks to divide us politically through deceptive soundbites meant to

enflame passions because that creates good ratings and keeps current power structures in place. It is not in the interest of the church or the Kingdom of God for us to be divided with anger and vitriol toward others who do not think or vote as we do. It is in the interest of Satan and his kingdom to keep us divided.

In truth, the church is as divided politically as the world is. All you have to do is look at Facebook and see mean, degrading comments and discussions occurring between Christians who disagree. Christians, this ought not to be. God is not a republican nor a democrat. God's Kingdom is to be established by His church; the church should shape the government. The government does not have the answer to the dire social issues of our day. The answer to the social issues of our time is the Gospel. God has the answer; His church should have the answers. If we are so busy fighting one another, we will never demonstrate the kind of love needed to win over a lost and dying world.

To hear another, to empathize, to understand takes humility and listening. To learn another's story requires the suspension of one's own story for a moment. It means looking through an unfamiliar lens. It means expanding the frame from which you see and seeing beyond your own current worldview. That is not easy, but it is necessary for growth and development intellectually and spiritually. In that vein, as we work toward becoming more anti-racist, we want to do the humble work of learning, hearing, listening, and empathizing with the voices and experiences of our black brothers and sisters. We will offer and suggest resources for you to assist you in your own learning journey. We will communicate about the ongoing efforts of FFC to do the work needed to become more loving, inclusive, and welcoming to all peoples and especially people of color.

Keller, T. (2016). *Shaped by the gospel*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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