

Present Perspectives on the Racism, the Gospel, and the Church

Thank you for letting Andrew and I share our hearts about where we are as leaders right now. Growing up in Christian homes, we were both taught that racism is wrong. We were taught not to worry about the color of someone's skin. Though we lived a mostly white world, we felt comfortable around the few black friends or coworkers that we knew. We were also taught about the abolition of slavery during the Civil War and the great gains made during the Civil Rights movement of the 20th Century. We even heard about apartheid in South Africa and it seemed so very foreign because, well, our nation had ended segregation decades ago... and when you're a kid, decades seem like centuries.

Fast forward many years and here we sit, products of great parents and graduates of major universities. We hear that racism still exists in America—and we can't believe it because, after all, we're not racist, have no desire to be, and would never wish harm upon someone else because of the color of their skin. Well, the events of the past few years—and the past few weeks—have opened our eyes to some alarming realities. It turns out that our hopes that everyone in this nation has the same opportunities and experiences may have been a little naïve. While it is true that our culture has made huge strides in many areas, the truth is, racism is actually still alive and well—and because we were not fully aware of the reality of all of this, while we've been “not racists,” we also haven't been active allies in the gospel fight to see racism completely eradicated. And yes, this is a gospel issue—let's push pause on the race conversation and let us tell you what we mean.

As fully devoted followers of Christ, the gospel—this message of God's common thread of redemption throughout all of history and all of creation to redeem and completely restore us into a full relationship with God—this gospel is the centerpiece of our existence. And Jesus himself is the personification of the gospel, which is why John calls Jesus “the Word made flesh who dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Jesus is God and also the embodiment of everything God wants to say. He is God's Word. So then, wherever he was sent and whatever he has said is of supreme importance—where He is present in a situation, God is speaking into that situation because He is God's Word.

Jesus was sent into our suffering. God saw the torment of humanity and didn't stay at a distance. Instead, he became human so He could bear it *with us*, and in his case, bear it *for us* in ways we never could on our own. This is the very essence of the gospel. This incarnation meant that he loved us so much that he refused to just observe our grief from a distance, and it wasn't enough for him to see us and feel sorrow for us. Instead, he actively came into our situation. He showed up right where we were and intentionally took our grief upon himself. He joined us in our march through our dusty humanity, bearing our weaknesses and our pains.

The very action of being present in our situation as God's Word meant that He was the living message that God was speaking to the world. It was a message of love, but it

wasn't cheap. He felt what we were feeling, lived where we were living, and died of what was killing us.

He didn't just do all this *for us*, though. For those of us who are now His followers, He also requires us to do this *for one another*, establishing this attitude-that-leads-to-action as the unequivocal centerpiece of the new covenant of his kingdom. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34 ESV). A new commandment? Another way to say this would be—a new law, or as the Apostle Paul called it, "the law of Christ." To be clear, the law of Christ doesn't mean what many believers think it means. It is not based upon good behavior, church involvement, personal devotions, good intentions, or never making mistakes. The law of Christ requires a constant belief and focus upon two key things: how much Christ loves you, and then how much you love others to the same degree.

The law of Christ is not something we can just "do" without constantly returning and reflecting upon these two things, which means we will constantly be listening and changing as we grow in our relationship with Christ and in our understanding of how to love others well. This means that as we follow Him, we will keep taking in new information and new perspectives about truth—in fact, Jesus said this would happen when He said that His Spirit would "teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you," (John 14:26) and "... guide you into all truth..." (John 16:13). The essence of being a disciple is continuing to take in truth as Christ continues to reveal it—to admit there may be perspectives, situations, or knowledge that we haven't fully grasped before. So we listen. We evaluate. We weigh these things in community. We take hard looks in the mirror. And if it is right, then we begin to adapt our perspectives to align with the truth of what we're learning. This is really what it means to be disciple—to keep following while the One you are following keeps teaching you new things, and you keep changing your perspectives to look more like the truth. In fact, disciple means follower, and if we want to be Christ-followers, we have to keep listening and changing what we think to better align with what He thinks. Otherwise, we're less like followers and more like fans in the grandstands of faith.

For us, there has been new information over the past several years that has come to light—truths about being authentic, living a life of confession, resting in grace, and refusing to be isolated. It was hard at first, but we were able to learn that we all have patterns of sin from which we are powerless gain freedom by our own strength. We like to think of ourselves as doing okay, but the gospel has shown us that what Jesus said in John 15 is true: Apart from Him, we can do nothing. (John 15). But we don't have to ever be apart from Him. We are learning to live under the shelter of His ways, and so we are also becoming more and more free from life-controlling sinful patterns like pride and self-righteousness and lust and anger and control and pornography and anxiety and many more. Instead of hiding, we've learned that there is safety in the light of community with His people, so we choose to live there instead of living in the shadows of good intention

and self-help isolation. All this has been radical truth that for years we thought we already fully knew. However, we have confessed to you many times since that we mostly only endured the most important parts of the gospel, especially living humbly together in honest community. It has been in this context that we truly learned how to fulfill this new law of Christ—again, not through disciplines or spiritual accomplishments, but through the one another's of scripture. This is what Jesus did—where God's Word resided with others, His friends and disciples. So this is where we are choosing to dwell too, so that we may: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2 ESV).

As leaders, we have been seeing some truths more clearly, so we are trying to adapt our thinking and perspectives to better align what we think with what Jesus thinks. It turns out, the feeling that race is no longer a pressing issue in America—the feeling that we hoped was true when we were children and adults—is not accurate for many people. It is actually many people from the black Christian community whom God is using to teach us new things and open our eyes to things that, quite honestly, we were never willing to look at before, even though they've been asking us to for years. The result is that we now are beginning to more clearly see the just and imminent need to acknowledge and stand firmly in opposition to the systemic racism that has plagued our nation for centuries—that this is a part of better fulfilling the law of Christ towards those around us, including people of color.

In light of the recent and tragic events involving the deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, along with many other senseless acts of violence and injustice, we are now beginning to see that the right gospel posture should have always been to stand alongside and bear the burdens of our black brothers and sisters in Christ and in the black community as a whole. Why? Because scripture is so very clear that racism and prejudice are antithetical to the message of the gospel. In fact, Jesus Christ himself constantly crossed racial lines as He walked this earth—from Samaritan women to Gentile enemy soldiers to everyone in between. In fact, because He was Jewish in an occupied Roman world, He himself was often not welcomed and was certainly not included in the power structure of their society. And when he established his Church, its very inception was often plagued with the same uncomfortable issues of race that we've often failed to recognize or address in the Church today—for them, it was often about Jews and Gentiles struggling to accept their common redemption and citizenship together in a kingdom higher than their own histories, perceptions, or prejudgments.

We recognize that, hopefully, none of us have ever intended to support racism. We know that this can be uncomfortable because, none of us wishes harm upon anyone because of the color of their skin. Being "not racist" is most certainly a good thing. However, we are being taught that much more should have been expected of us that simply being "not racist"—there is so much more that we can and should be doing to actually help to eradicate racism. Maybe that seems impossible to us, which reveals that perhaps our expectations of God are a bar set far too low. After all, Christ came to destroy the works of the evil one (I John 3:8), so it should also be our work as His body to do the same.

For us, we are no longer content to just “not be racist.” Instead, we believe that the gospel calls us to be anti-racist, allies with brothers and sisters of color as an accurate reflection of the ally Jesus was for people of other races when He walked the earth. It is easy to think like we thought for so many years—that this is a heart issue and not a race issue. It most certainly is a heart issue, but we believe that for far too long we have used this as an excuse to not engage. After all, if it is an issue like abortion, gun control, hunger, homelessness, foster care systems, and many other social issues, we would never just sit back and say, “Everyone in these situations just needs Jesus in their hearts.” Of course they do need Jesus and this is our primary goal for all people; however, while we seek heart change, we also seek policies and reforms that would reflect our beliefs—we do it every day. No doubt, there are many of these areas where we should be taking a more active role not just in seeking heart change, but in allowing our heart change to lead us to take action. Likewise, wanting the hearts of people to change shouldn’t stop us from seeking changes to any policies or power structures that discriminate or endanger people of color. And this is not our attempt to meander into politics. Truly, this is not a political issue, but rather a gospel issue of justice. The gospel always begins with a change in the heart, but it always continues into action that results from that heart change. We know that belief without action is a dead belief (James 2:14). Our inaction as the pastors of a white church, though not meant to do any harm here, have very little good in this matter. Inaction inadvertently helps to maintain the status quo, which has been comfortable for us as white leaders, but not so much for our black friends and neighbors. We can admit this without calling ourselves “racists” or bearing the guilt of the entire system of racism. We were all born into this, but those of us who have been born again into something better have access to a divine power that can actually change things. As Martin Luther King said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” As pastors, we are choosing to instead of be a part of God’s process to heal the wounds that hundreds of years of racism have inflicted.

So as leaders, we repent to you and we repent to the black community—above all, for not trying to listen, learn, and be active in this issue. We have learned that confession and admittance of wrong doesn’t lead to destruction and condemnation, but rather to transformation—the gospel repeatedly shows us this and any change we have experienced has been from this. So we are committing to grow in our faith and our leadership through very specific steps, which include laying aside our need to be technical, hair-splitting, and argumentative in moments when people we should be loving are mourning over such great loss and injustice. We may not fully understand what they are feeling, but we are intent on listening and being there just as Christ did for us—for that is the law of Christ at work. We want to listen and learn with humility, acknowledging that our own theories and observations cannot cancel out others’ perspectives and experiences, especially when those experiences are different than our own. We hear the invitation of our fellow believers who are people of color to at least begin by sitting in lament in this uncomfortable pain with them and, like Christ, “dwell

among them” in their grief, righteous anger, and in the outcry for justice and righteousness, so that we may truly fulfill the law of Christ. We are not waiting for the news cycle to pass—we are ready to be present and to follow Christ in this endeavor indefinitely.

We know that there are a lot of conflicting opinions and issues swirling about with all of this. In gentleness, let’s address a few as we are learning about them at present. First, we recognize that all lives *should* matter, but for some people in this nation, this has simply not been their experience as it has been for most of us. For this reason, we are ready to begin echoing the gospel in proclaiming that black lives matter to Christ, to the church, and to us as individuals. Now, let’s be clear, saying this phrase does not mean that we align ourselves with all of the political ideologies of the Black Lives Matter organization. There is a difference between the expression and the organization. We simply mean that along with white, black, and brown church leaders and members around the world, we see that all Christians should easily decry all discrimination, violence, and unfair treatment of our fellow citizens and believers due to the color of their skin, as this is anathema to the law of Christ.

Also, we openly support and are grateful for the vast majority of law enforcement officers, white, black, and brown, who serve and protect our communities with honor. Speaking with many of them, most of them are also outraged at these racially motivated abuses of power, some even crossing riot lines to join in the protests. There is no need to sum up the character of all police because of the negative actions of a very few. We also do not condone the destruction of cities or property, but once again, we do recognize that the negative actions of a few should not distract or cancel out the needs and requests of literally millions who are asking us as Christ’s church to please listen to what they are saying with compassion and take action in standing for biblical righteousness and justice. No matter what the media, social media, or the pundits say, it need not be either/or... we are free by the gospel to live in the wisdom of both/and, and thus we do not have to become contentious, militant, or tribally divisive. As leaders, we are learning to not oversimplify these complex issues or vilify various elements so we don’t have to understand the whole of the matter, but rather to justify remaining emotionally unengaged or inactive in what is an uncomfortable situation. Proverbs 17:17 (ESV) says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” There is a lot of uncomfortable adversity, but we were made for this—to stand with our brothers and sisters in Christ and to fulfill the law of Christ by loving at all times, especially difficult times.

Moving forward, as leaders, Andrew and I pledge to strive to become more educated on the issues of systemic racism in our nation and in the Church. We also pledge to be more present with our black brothers and sisters, building relationships, engaging in their lives, and welcoming them to engage in ours. We also pledge to better express the gospel and the elements therein that acknowledge the evils of racism, seeing that this issue can often hide in the seams of our society in ways we have been privileged to ignore. But now, we consider it our privilege to pay attention, respond with empathy, take action to help, and

keep our hearts open to the gospel we proclaim so that it reaches all of us, regardless of the color of our skin.

Colossians 5:8-14 (ESV) reminds us: “ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. ¹²Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

To be clear, sharing our hearts today is not our sole or full response to the crisis at hand. This is not our one-time addressing of this issue. Rather, this is the beginning—the preamble to our commitment to continual growth in our conversations, community groups, and actions overall. We will be inviting more leaders and people of color into these conversations. Yes, we know that there are many social issues and ills in this world to be addressed, and we are not saying those are not important, only that in the past, we may have allowed the overwhelming presence of *too many problems* to keep us from acknowledging the presence of *any one problem*. We pray and commit to act to see God’s healing come to a thousand different problems in this world! God help us here! But right now in this moment, this issue is before us, so we commit to hearing, changing, and growing as we lock arms with the church universal of all colors, nationalities, and languages. May we be found speaking the gospel truth in love so that it may heal and transform ourselves, our fellow men and women, and our world.

It is our hope that you will join us—we are not incriminating or labeling anyone. We are inviting you and hoping that you will suspend the temptation to spend the coming weeks producing a hundred “buts” or “what abouts.” We know that everyone has valid opinions and there is a time and a place to express them, but we remind you of the words of Proverbs 18:13 (ESV) reminds us: “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.” For Andrew and I, we have both spent too much of our lives giving answers without really intending to first hear. The gospel is simple; not easy, but simple. Just as we are learning to follow Christ into the areas of grace, community, and authenticity that we had not clearly seen before, we are ready to also follow Jesus into His active work of seeing the wounds of racism healed. He is the message being sent into their suffering, and we are being sent with Him.