

A BIBLICALLY INFORMED RESPONSE TO THE SIN OF RACISM

POSITION PAPER

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Introduction

The Assemblies of God affirms racism is a sin and calls for repentance for those who participate in it and those who fail to address it. In 1989, at the 43rd General Council, the church adopted a resolution on racism that reaffirmed a long-standing position of the church. “The Assemblies of God oppose the sin of racism in any form” and calls “any and all to repentance who have participated in the sin of racism through personal thought or action, or through church and social structures, or through inactivity in addressing racism as individuals or as a church.”¹

Racism is a supporting combination of assumptions, beliefs, and practices that categorizes groups of people along a spectrum, from superior to inferior, based on physical characteristics (such as color of skin and eyes, and type of hair), ancestry, language, and region of origin. This categorization justifies disdain, hatred, and inequitable treatment against those deemed inferior and social advantages for those deemed superior. All forms of racism, as well as all the various means of justification and rationalization offered by its proponents, fall short and run counter to the biblical teaching regarding human equality before God. Consequently, a biblically informed response recognizes that all expressions of racism are sinful because they demean God’s good creation, undermine human dignity, and violate biblical standards of justice.

Biblical Perspective on Racism

The Bible, the Word of God, is the final arbiter of faith and practice for followers of Jesus. It reveals God’s will and purposes for humans, indeed for all creation. It is completely authoritative, does not fail, and cannot be defeated. The biblical teaching and message, rather than cultural or ideological perspectives, must be determinative of what the Church believes and how it lives out its beliefs in the world. The Bible presents the unity and diversity of the plan of God for humans, calls for equal standing before Him for all humans, and demands that His justice be conducted within the human realm.

¹ 43rd General Council of the Assemblies of God, “Resolution 20: Racism,” August 8–13, 1989. <https://news.ag.org/en/News/Resolution-on-Racism>. The opposition of the Assemblies of God to racism was reaffirmed by, Executive Presbytery, “Statement on George Floyd, Racism, and Racial Reconciliation,” June 3, 2020.

Unity and Diversity in God's Plan

The theology surrounding the creation of the universe and humanity is important in considering the plan of God for both unity and diversity. The Triune God created the first human pair in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26–27) as male and female with the responsibilities to populate the earth and to steward other created life forms.

After the Fall into sin, recorded in Genesis 3, the text explains that Adam's wife "would become the mother of all the living"² (Genesis 3:20). This intentional comment links all human beings together as one family. The judgment on human sin by the Flood (Genesis 6–9) did not deter God from His plan for unity and diversity. Genesis 10 reveals the great diversity among humans that descended from the sons of Noah.

Similar themes emerge in the New Testament. For example, in his speech in Athens (Acts 17:16–31), Paul announced the one God who made the world and everything in it. In that creation event, "from one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth" (Acts 17:26). Additionally, in Romans 5:12–21, Paul taught that the creation of the one man unites the entirety of humankind and directs them to the one God who is reaching out redemptively to them.

Equal Standing before God

The opposition of the Assemblies of God to racism is based on various biblical teachings, beginning with God's creation of all humans in His image (Genesis 1:27; 5:1–2). Therefore, all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, biological sex, other biological differences, or cultural distinctions that are used to devalue and diminish the status of humans are sinful at their core.

Unfortunately, because of the reality of the fallen condition, the perspective is not held universally. Many, including some within the Church, reject such equal valuation of all humans, tending to judgments that lead to diminishing the personhood of some individuals and groups. Yet, the Bible clearly teaches, directly and indirectly, the equality of all human beings.

First, Israel, created by the Lord as the people of promise and witness to the world, received from Him the message that they would be a blessing to all (Genesis 12:2–3; 18:16–19). Throughout the Old Testament, God blessed peoples outside of Israel (Hagar in Genesis 16; Egypt in Genesis 41; Rahab in Joshua 6; Ruth in Ruth 4; the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17; Naaman in 2 Kings 5, etc.) due to their connection to Israelites. God offered promises of blessing to other nations in relationship to God's self (Isaiah 19:25; Jeremiah 48:47).

Second, the Law God gave to Israel was to be applied to everyone, native-born and foreigners. God displayed His acceptance of all humans equally by having the Law applied to everyone, in the same manner (Exodus 12:17–19; Leviticus 17:10–15; Numbers 15:27–31). The ultimate

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standard by which to measure equal treatment and love was the expression of God's character, one "who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing" (Deuteronomy 10:14–22; see also Leviticus 19:33–34; Isaiah 56:6–8). The example of God, coupled with the reality that Israel knew what it was to be considered a foreigner—they had been born as slaves in Egypt—was used to evoke Israel's love for all people groups.

Third, justice was not to be perverted based on racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic status. God forcefully warned that everyone should be treated equally and fairly when brought for judgment (Exodus 23:3–9; Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 1:15–18; 24:17–18; 27:19). Provision was made during harvests for the sustenance of every person. The landowners were expected to allow all people—including foreigners—to benefit generously from the harvest so that their needs could be met (Deuteronomy 24:19–22).

The message of the New Testament about the equal standing of every person builds upon the themes we see in the Old Testament. This is especially evident in the life and ministry of Christ. Jesus, in His ministry to Israel, recognized people in their own ethnic and cultural groups as recipients of God's blessing (Matthew 8:10–11; Mark 7:24–30; Luke 4:25–27). Jesus affirmed that the house of God "will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Mark 11:15–17; Isaiah 56:3–7), and His sacrificial death for the whole world was universal in its provision of salvation. The universality of this provision eliminates any excuse for making negative judgments or neglecting the value of others (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 4:25–27; John 4:1–42). And, at the close of His earthly ministry, Jesus challenged His disciples to carry the gospel witness to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:8). His inclusive commands that give no room given for making value distinctions between people and affirms the equality of human standing before God.

Other writings in the New Testament also affirm the equality of human beings. On the Day of Pentecost, the day we celebrate as the founding of the Church, in a miraculous act, people from multiple geographic regions marveled as they heard God's word in their own languages from those who had not known their language (Acts 2:3–12). That same day, Peter preached, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21). Later, at the house of Cornelius in Caesarea, Peter declared, "God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right" (Acts 10:34–35).

The apostle Paul declared that the common need for salvation by all renders distinctions between humans of no service in evaluating the worth and value of persons (Galatians 3:23–29; Colossians 3:11). The artificial and real divisions among humans introduced by sin that led to racism have been rendered powerless by the cross (Ephesians 2:11–22). Paul also used the analogy of the human body to the body of Christ to identify the equality and importance of all its members (1 Corinthians 12:12–27).

In a quintessential moment in the Book of Revelation, as the Spirit carried John to scenes in the heavenlies, he observed great multitudes "from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (7:9). Their worship, ascribing glory to God for His great salvation, resounded through the heavenly realm. What a picture of God's plan for the equality of all people. The gates of the New Jerusalem remain open for the nations who will bring their own "glory and honor" into it (Revelation 21:26), with all human beings united in equal standing before God without sacrificing their unique diversity.

Elements of Biblical Justice

A significant consideration in the Assemblies of God's opposition to racism is that racism violates the concept of biblical justice. Justice is a biblical theme that is developed from an understanding of the nature of God, who himself is just and righteous (Deuteronomy 10:18; 32:4; Job 37:23; Psalm 9:7; 10:17–18; 33:4–5; Isaiah 5:16; 30:18; Hosea 12:6). As the holy and just Sovereign of the creation, God expects justice (Micah 6:8). Consequently, when we act unjustly, whether with respect to race or any other personal characteristic, we go against the divine nature and order.

A foundational element of biblical justice is the understanding that God intended for human beings to be a community from the beginning (Genesis 1:27). Human beings are bound together by far more commonalities than what may distinguish them from one another. Every member of the community shares the threats and injuries against other members. In the same way, the successes are shared. This demands that each person in the community assume care and responsibilities for all others in the community. It is far too easy to lose the sense of community as populations grow, but biblical justice begins with this understanding.

In biblical justice, there is a place for identifying with the sins of the larger community and calling out in confession for forgiveness (Nehemiah 1:1–11; Daniel 9:1–19). For both Nehemiah and Daniel, there was a release of God's intervention when they prayed, confessing the sins of the people. They wanted God to express His forgiveness to the community.

Additionally, biblical justice recognizes that people have individual responsibility before God. For example, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel warned Israel explicitly that they could not merely blame their sin on the larger community (Jeremiah 31:29–30; Ezekiel 18:1–4). The community at large needs to repent, asking for the forgiveness of God for all forms of injustice and the failure to speak against it. However, individuals cannot escape their personal need to do the same.

The Scriptures are clear that racism must not only be addressed on an individual basis, but also corporately, whether in the church or the world. For example, the institutional understanding of the relationship between lender and borrower would allow the lender to charge interest and to receive a pledge for the loan. However, this system could be oppressive, so the Lord provided relief for those who would be harmed by the institution (Exodus 22:25–27). The prophet Jeremiah warns against those who use the system to harm others: "Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his own people work for nothing, not paying them for their labor" (Jeremiah 22:13). In the New Testament, James similarly warns those he identifies as rich for failing to honor laborers for their labor (James 5:1–6).

The moral and ethical principles behind these Scriptural commands necessitate equal opportunity not only in lending institutions or compensation but should also apply to other practices and processes. As individuals and as a church we should oppose any practice or process that results in unfair or harmful treatment of individuals because of race.

Biblical justice calls for people to be concerned for those who are oppressed. Isaiah's message noted the sinful condition of Israel and urged them to repent. As part of the change that repentance would bring them, he noted they should "defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). The Psalmist pronounced a blessing on those who "have regard for the weak" (Psalm 41:1). The writer of Proverbs offered an additional challenge for readers to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8–9).

The description of biblical justice provided in the foregoing provides the basis of a thorough critique of racism, a critique so penetrating that the only label fitting for such beliefs and actions is sin. Racism goes against God's nature and order. Racism violates community. Racism is both an individual and corporate attack on justice that Christians must seriously address. Racism undermines the deeply Christian virtue of concern for those who are oppressed.

Summary

Racism, acknowledged or ignored, is part of the present world situation. As believers, we have an opportunity to be salt and light as Spirit-empowered witnesses. The following are suggestions for ministers and members.

First, as noted in the 1989 resolution on racism, "we call any and all to repentance who have participated in the sin of racism through personal thought or action, or through church and social structures, or through inactivity in addressing racism as individuals or as a church."³ The Church, collectively and individually, must repent of the sin of racism expressed, in both attitudes and behavior. Racism harms others who bear the image of God. Where the members or churches in the AG community are guilty of racism, repentance and turning away from such is a needful first step.

Second, the Church must acknowledge the image of God in all people and live out teachings about the equality of people in the Bible. God created humanity with diversity and affirming that diversity goes hand in hand with affirming human equality. Furthermore, the cross of Jesus testifies to and provides for ultimate reconciliation, not only of people with God but also of human to human. Barriers, hatreds, suspicions, unequal treatment, and the like have been healed by the shedding of His blood (Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:14). We are new creatures, showing the world what God's love looks like and evidencing that love in every circumstance with all people. The Church must live out in actuality what Christ provided for in His atonement and must demonstrate this truth in a fallen and divided world.

Third, the Church needs to model the inclusiveness of the body of Christ. The eradication of racism demands including others in the circles of ministry and leadership.⁴ To exclude fellow believers from leadership because of race is incompatible with seeing all humans as God's creations in whom He has placed great value and for whom Christ died. A broad diversity, in all the ways that we are legitimately diverse, must become a part of our thinking and planning for the full expression and plan of God to be revealed.

Finally, the Church must recognize and decry racism in all of its forms. Not every human system is, by definition, racist. However, any human system can limit opportunities for others based on race and prevent them from advancing in society. When those are noted, the Church should not be silent; it should demand change with humility and grace.

³ Minutes of the 43rd General Council of the Assemblies of God, "Resolution 20: Racism," August 8–13, 1989, 118.

⁴ This was affirmed in the 1995 General Council Resolution "Use of Black Ministries" in which the Council encouraged "full participation of black persons within the Assemblies of God fellowship and leadership." Resolution 25, Minutes of the 46th General Council, August 8–13, 1995, 72–74.

Conclusion

In John 17, Jesus prayed for His current and future followers that they would be brought to “complete unity” (John 17:20–23). The Bible begins with God creating humans as one family. Tragically, the Fall has meant that disunity has dominated human interactions. Jesus Christ, through His Church living out the biblical message of unity and empowered by the Holy Spirit, offers the answer for dealing with racism by providing hope for reconciliation and a return to the unity God intends for all people. In 2020, the Executive Presbytery of the General Council of the Assemblies of God issued a statement on racism, writing, “We resolve to participate with the Holy Spirit in actively working against racism at home and abroad, and we seek the reconciliation of people to God and to one another,” This remains the heart of the Assemblies of God.