

Race, Cross, and the Christian

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[0 : 00] It was November 2005, and I was in Alice Springs on the invitation of the Bible Society speaking event to raise awareness for its ministry to remote areas of Australia and the importance of all people having the Bible, the Word of God, in their own language.

And so I was to speak at this event on the Friday night in an aircraft hangar with a Bible Society plane behind me and then at a local church on the Sunday morning.

And so a friend of mine came along for the trip. We'd spent the Saturday after the Friday night exploring different parts around Alice Springs. And in the evening, we walked down from a hotel into town and then had some dinner or whatever, and then decided to walk back.

And it was dark as we were walking back, and they were walking along this pathway on the edge of a dry riverbank, which most of them are, I assume, around there.

And to our left, as we were walking along in the moonlight, we could make out there was a group of Aboriginals sitting in the riverbank drinking. And up ahead of us, along the path to the right, we could hear in this sort of slummy kind of area a lot of yelling and stuff going on up there.

[1 : 38] Let me just pause there for a moment in terms of that picture. I think it's fair to say that we were kind of nervous at that point.

We were in an area that we'd never been in before. We weren't sure exactly where we were walking. We knew where the hotel was, and we knew we were heading towards the hotel, but we didn't know what was here between here and there. And I suspect we would have been nervous regardless of who was there, and if it was a bunch of teenagers or something like that, drinking in there, a big group of them and a big group over there.

But as I said last week, I grew up with a fair amount of prejudice towards Aboriginals. It came from the rhetoric of my white, rural Australian culture.

It came from my own experiences in both school and at work. You could say that my friend's experience, the guy who was with me, was more acute than mine.

He spent a good part of his childhood years in Walgett, a fairly troubled place in terms of race relationships. And so in this moment, on that Saturday night in Alice Springs, both of our prejudices, which were lying down fairly deep, I suspect, came to the surface.

[3 : 01] We'd both been in similar situations in the past. And so as we walked on this pathway, I said quietly to him, do you see the group down there on the left of the riverbank?

He said he did. And at that moment, over to the right where the noise was coming from, a group of about 20 Aboriginals came out from that area and it would appear that they were heading straight towards the group that were down there in the riverbank.

And he said to me, do you see the group up there to the right? I said I do. And it was becoming obvious to us that our trajectory would mean that we were going to basically run straight into this group as it walked over to the group down here in the riverbank.

We were both silent as we walked. You could say our hearts were racing with nerves and our minds were thinking about an escape plan.

In fact, we talked about an escape plan. If something goes wrong, what are we going to do? Which way are we going to go? And where are we going to head? We were hoping not to run into this middle of these 20 Aboriginals heading across on this dark path.

[4 : 22] And we were hoping that they weren't going to notice the two white guys, the only two white guys around walking down this pathway. And it was probably about that moment that our fears were in fact realized.

They in fact did notice us. And as we approached and literally as we thought we were going to have to stop as the Aboriginal group came across in front of us, the leader of that group of Aboriginals, an

elderly lady, put her hands up like this as she got to the edge of the path. And I wasn't sure what she was doing, but what I realized what she was doing at that moment was she was stopping the group from walking over the top of us. And they all obliged. They all stopped. And as we walked past, she said, good evening, gentlemen. We turned and said good evening and kept walking. And we kept walking in silence for another 20, 30 paces or something like that. And my friend said to me, how bad do I feel? And I said, yep.

[5 : 39] Let me tell you a really simple moment. Back in 2005, God used that moment to expose something of the sinner racial prejudice that was in my heart.

It didn't escape me at all that I was speaking about the necessity of the Word of God going to all people, even to remote Aboriginal communities. That's why they flew me there in the first place. And I had a prejudice in my heart towards the people that were meant to be receiving that ministry. There was a disconnect between what I knew to be right and good and part of God's purposes and my heart.

I was treated in that moment, in the darkness, on that path, with more dignity than I treated them with my head and my heart. It should not have been.

There was an article in the Australian newspaper on Friday that blames current racism in Australia on our former Prime Minister, John Howard.

[6 : 46] Apart from that, the article did say some interesting things about our culture. It says, the situation with Indigenous Australians is a particular one because they were here long before the rest of us.

Many countries, including some Asian neighbours, have similar dynamics at play with Indigenous minorities. A mixture of guilt, impatience at an apparent unwillingness to assimilate, and prejudice. But we occupy the extreme end in Australia. All those gaping statistical discrepancies in health outcomes, life expectancy, suicide, incarceration rates, general indicators of misery, and corresponding mainstream attitudes.

It's more complex, a lot more complex, than simply believing that if mainstream Australia would stop being racist, then everything would be fine.

But, there is a lot of racism embedded in the Australian psyche. Racism lurks in communities around the planet, but it's true what the visitors say.

[7 : 54] Australia is relatively comfortable expressing it. Visitors of this country sometimes report a jarring preponderance of casual, everyday racism.

For instance, British American comedian John Oliver found Australia a sensational place, albeit one of the most comfortably racist places I've ever been to.

They've really settled into their intolerance like an old resentful slipper. And so, my point in this series is that the Christian faith has got something very significant to contribute to seeing the end of racism and ethnocentricity in our culture.

Although, as I said last week, because of the failure of the institutional church in the past, we may not be heard. That's one thing. The other reason that this series is for us is because this church is a diverse church.

And racism, while it might not be explicit, would most certainly be implicit. I think we're bought into some of the culture that we have been marinating in.

[9 : 28] In Australia. But I do believe that because of the gospel, that we could be an example and pace setter for our community.

Now, the significant contribution of the Christian faith begins with what I started with last week, Genesis 1.27. God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created them. Male and female, he created them.

And the point is, as I said last week, all human beings are of one origin by divine design. And the implication is the extreme dignity of your human beings.

We are one blood. And it's interesting, genetics agrees with that. Genetics says that it doesn't matter where you come from in the world, in terms of the human race, even with all, you know, we might look different, sound different, all that sort of stuff.

Genetically, we are almost identical. There's a few differences, but the differences are so minor. Which is why, if I ever need a new kidney or a liver, I could just get one from my family, or I could get one from the other side of the world.

[10:35] I could get one from out of Mongolia, get one from Africa. I mean, there's any number of places. I mean, one of you could give me one. So if I ever need one, I'll, you know, line up and we'll see whose kidney I'll grab, you know.

The Christian view of creation does, however, stand in contrast to the atheistic evolutionary theory that is broadly accepted as fact in our secular society.

Charles Darwin's origin of species gave rise to the separation and classification of plant and animal species. Really helpful stuff, classifying plant and animal species.

So great contribution. However, this flowed over into the categorizing of the human race into a hierarchy arranged according to evolutionary advancement.

That's where it became unhelpful. Stephen Jay Gould, who died in 2002, he was no friend of Christianity whatsoever. In fact, as an evolutionary biologist himself, he significantly opposed creationism in a very popular way.

[11:47] And so it's really interesting that he himself wrote biologically, sorry, biological arguments for racism may have been common before 1850.

Note that. He's saying that, you know, they probably existed, a biological argument existed before Darwin wrote his origin of species, but they increased by orders of magnitude following the acceptance of evolutionary theory.

He's saying evolutionary theory has made a significant contribution to racism. racism. And that's where I think the problem is.

It's difficult to deliver on an equality of all people such as the secular society wants when you explain the difference in terms of, well, that group there is just not as advanced as that other group over there.

They're just not evolved yet. Now, the Bible knows nothing of a hierarchy of races as evolutionary theory does.

[12:57] And yet, having said that, the institutional church, which is meant to be built on the Bible, has a terrible track record of racism in such a way that you wouldn't think that Christianity has got an answer or a contribution to make to this issue.

The prominent atheist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins writes in his book in *The God Delusion*, The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction, jealous and proud of it, a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak, a vindictive, bloodthirsty, ethnic cleanser, a misogynist, homophobic, racist, genocidal, pestilential, capriciously malevolent bully. Now, the interesting thing is Dawkins doesn't believe in that God. He's got no problem. He doesn't care. He doesn't believe in that God. His problem is people like you and me who say that we believe in the God of this Bible.

And he says that there have been awful atrocities committed by those who believe in the God of this Bible and so therefore reject the whole thing. Now, I want to say he's right on one level.

There have been awful atrocities committed by people who say that they believe in the God of this Bible. There's some terrible racism that's occurred because some people over history have thought that the Bible endorses it.

[14:28] And one of the most serious and damaging interpretations of the Bible in this whole issue of race is in Genesis 9. It's verses 18 to 27. It's the end of Genesis 9.

Noah and his family have settled down after the flood. Noah plants a vineyard, discovers wine, drinks too much of it, and ends up lying naked in his tent after a big night on the booze.

Something like a university border kind of Friday night out kind of thing. And his son Ham sees his father's nakedness, goes, runs off to his two brothers, tells them, you know, makes his father look like an idiot.

The two brothers instead grab a cloth, they walk backwards into the tent and they lay it over their dad without even looking at him. And when Noah wakes up and finds what his youngest son has done, he pronounces a curse on Canaan who was Ham's youngest son.

Genesis 9. Cursed be Canaan, the lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers. He also said, blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem. May Canaan be the slave of Shem.

[15:40] May God extend the territory of Japheth. May Japheth live in the tents of Shem and may Canaan be his slave. Now, throughout the last 20 centuries or so, numerous Christian and Jewish and Muslim writers have connected that passage, the curse of Ham, with black Africans.

the text became the standard text in defense of slavery in England, in the southern states of America and for apartheid in South Africa.

That is, what they did was they translated through a bit of dodgy footwork that Ham means black or burnt.

and therefore, they made the conclusion that this curse was applicable for all black people and especially black Africans because there's some connection there, lineage, line.

they also concluded that Japheth represented because somehow he kind of went elsewhere, like probably closer to Europe and he represented white people and therefore, God commands the slavery of black people by white people and that explains nearly 20 centuries of history of that.

[17:11] Now, I'm not going to go into the details except to say you've got to do some pretty fancy footwork with the text to come to that conclusion but I want to humbly say some really good people have come to that conclusion.

Generally, not for the last 50 or 60 years. I want to suggest it's wrong. There's all sorts of articles you can read about it but I want to suggest it's wrong.

I'm glad in the end that we've got the Bible, we've got God's perspective on the history of humanity.

The Bible does not relate all of our racial and ethnic differences in terms of lower life forms.

It doesn't blame the fact that God has got personal favourites. He's a God of favouritism. It doesn't blame racism on John Howard.

It puts it squarely in sin. That's our rejection of God is where the Bible puts it. So on that night in Alice Springs in 2005 when John Howard actually happened to be our Prime Minister at that time, he was not the reason that I acted the way I did or thought the way I did.

[18:27] My prejudice, my sinful heart was the problem. My proud sinful heart was the problem. But the Bible doesn't just identify sin as the core problem, the great thing is that it also reveals the solution to racial pride and ethnocentrism.

So the Bible sees the fracturing of all relationships due to the rejection of God in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve are creating God's image to display his majesty and when they reject God all relationships are smashed.

We see that right from there in Genesis 3. Relationship with God is smashed, between man and woman is smashed, between people and the rest of the created order is smashed, everything is inverted. And before sin, Adam and Eve were naked, they felt no shame, there was intimacy, there was acceptance, there was no barrier between them at all.

As soon as they reject God, they had to be clothed, a barrier went up. For the moment they rejected God, the unity of the human race in the image of God became mirrored by the unity of the human race, in sin.

Romans 1 is Paul's version of the fall of humanity and he makes it clear there that the whole of humankind, every one of us, is contaminated by sin.

[19:52] And it's an ugly picture of sinful behavior. They became filled with, this is all of us, they became filled with every kind of wickedness and evil and greed and depravity. They are full of envy and murder and strife and deceit and malice.

They are gossips and slanderers and God haters and insular and arrogant and boastful. They invent ways of doing evil. They disobey their parents. They are senseless and faithless and heartless and ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decrees that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do those very things, but also approve of those who practice them.

sin. And our unity in sin is explicit in Romans 3.23, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

So we're made for the majesty of God and yet because of sin we all fall short of the majesty of God.

Now some of us might lean towards thinking that we become a sinner when we first sin. But the Bible's picture is that we first sin because we are already sinners.

One of the Bible's most important passages on this issue is Romans 5 verses 12 to 19. It explains there that Adam's sin right at the beginning brought the entire human race that flows from him both sinful natures and God's judgment and condemnation.

[21:21] everyone who comes from Adam is connected to his sin. We are born into this world with sinful natures that are traced right back to Adam's sin.

And so Romans 5 verse 12 sin came into the world through one man and death through sin and so death spread to all men because all sin.

sin. So we are born with inner lives that are directed towards ourselves and what we want and not directed towards God and certainly not directed towards anyone else.

sin. Because we have inner lives bent away from God in sin when we are old enough and we know the difference between right and wrong we act in sinful ways.

sin. We sin because we are already sinners. Now possibly and I say possibly a helpful way to look at it might be to ask the question of whether a tree produces apples because it is an apple tree or does the tree become an apple tree when it first produces an apple?

[22 : 40] Given the look on your face I am not sure that is particularly helpful. You see the reality is an apple tree can grow for many many years before it produces any fruit at all and when it does finally produce an apple you would say that it is producing fruit in accordance to its nature and if the apple tree that you bought when it finally produced a lemon you would say I have got a lemon tree.

I bought an apple tree but I have been sold a lemon tree. That is what you would say. It is producing fruit in accordance to its nature.

Psalms 51 verse 5 says surely I was sinful at birth sinful from the time my mother conceived me. We are sinners by nature who show themselves to be sinners by choice.

Everyone who is a parent knows this to be true by experience as well. I do not I have never had to teach my children bad behaviour.

Never had to do that. I didn't teach my children to say no. I didn't teach them to disobey me. I didn't teach them to throw their food on the floor. I didn't teach them to pinch one another or to poke one another or to take their tongue out of one another or spit at one another.

[24 : 06] I didn't teach them to throw themselves on the floor and scream and kick in a supermarket. No parent teaches their child to do that. Never wants to teach their child to do that. I didn't teach them those things.

But they got it from me. In the same way I got those things from my parents. I like my parents before me have spent my time trying to correct those things which come naturally.

There is solidarity in being created in the image of God for the glory of God and solidarity in all of us who fall short of God's glory through sin. And we see this solidarity in sin and its consequences played out in racial terms in Genesis 10 and 11.

So if you've got your Bibles go to there. Genesis 10 11. The so-called table of nations in Genesis 10 reveals one central point.

It stresses the common origins of all people. That's its main point. Common origins of all people. And the relationship between Genesis 10 and 11 is also quite significant.

[25 : 28] The generational account which begins at chapter 10 verse 1 continues right through until chapter 11 verse 9. which means the Tower of Babel account in 11 and the Table of Nations in chapter 10 go together as one unit.

The Tower of Babel story explains how and why people have been spread out and filled the earth with different languages. It reveals that the division into different groups, different people groups, different languages is a consequence of human sin.

verse 4 says, come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens. That's where God is, reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the whole face of the earth.

So humanity comes together to try and overturn God's judgment in Genesis 3, try to overturn God's decision at that point.

They work here to try and depose God and God's judgment on them was to forever hinder them working together. He scatters them and confuses their language as an act of judgment.

[27 : 02] And so taken together, Genesis 10-11 reveals both our unity as one blood under God's blessing, but also our diversity into many languages of groups under God's judgment.

The problem is the human heart that wants to reject God. And it seems that we won't work together on anything unless it is to reject God. God's sin.

The good news is that God comes up with a remedy for our sin and our division and our confusion. The Bible doesn't just tell us why we have racism and ethnic pride, it gives us the solution to it as well.

Genesis 10 and 11 sets the stage for Genesis 12. And this is the turning point in the whole Bible. Genesis 12 is the hinge, it's a turning point.

This is where the good news comes. The promise to Abraham. The Lord said to Abraham, this is verse 1, leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

[28 : 10] I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you and I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

So God judges in chapter 11, scatters, confuses and then in chapter 12, the beginning of the plan of redemption.

God's call to Abraham here in chapter 12 is a direct response to the disastrous situation we have of human beings in Genesis 3 to 11. This is the introduction to God's spectacular redemptive plan, a plan that ultimately culminates in the person of Jesus.

It starts with Abraham, it culminates in Jesus and God focuses on Abraham here not to be exclusive, it's not because he's kind of thought, well, you know, Abraham's the best of the bad bunch, I'll pick Abraham and I'll just shower favoritism upon him.

but he wants to use this individual and his descendants to bless and to deliver and to redeem the entire world. That means God's solution to our sin reaches its goal only, only when it includes all the families of the earth.

[29 : 44] That in itself is a reason for mission. the purpose of God choosing Israel was to witness to the universal power and love of God for all people.

And that's against Richard Dawkins' view that the God of the Old Testament is racist. You see, even in the Old Testament, God's plan was for all the nations.

Psalms 67, the nations will benefit from the Abrahamic blessing to Israel. the nations will come to worship the living God. In Psalms 22, 86, 102, 138, 145, Isaiah 2, 12, 42, 45, the nations will be included within Israel as the extended people of God.

And as such, they'll be registered in God's city in Psalm 86. They'll be blessed with God's salvation in Isaiah 19. They'll be accepted into God's house in Isaiah 56.

They'll be called by God's name in Amos 9. And they'll be joined with God's people in Zechariah 2. And a heap of other passages smattered right through. The God of the Old Testament is not a racist.

[30 : 59] He doesn't have his favorites. The choosing of Israel was not for ethnocentric purposes, but for universal redemption.

But Israel grabbed hold of it and thought, we'll just hang on to that for ourselves.

They failed consistently for living out God's purpose in calling them. They took the role of being racially and morally superior to the nations about.

They consistently forgot the reason why God chose them, and it was the case right through until Jesus' time. But with the coming of Jesus, a radically new way of defining the people of God arrived, namely, by faith in him.

You see, faith in Jesus trumps ethnocentricity, which is why, as a church, our mission statement is to treasure Jesus.

[32 : 08] above everything else. Jesus, faith in Jesus trumps ethnocentricity. Over and over again in the gospel, you see this happening. The story of the Good Samaritan, the foreigner is the hero of faith.

He's the hero of compassion. The healing of the ten lepers, and only one of the lepers returns in Luke 17, and what is he? He's a Samaritan.

The foreigner shines with humble gratitude. The healing of the Syrophenician daughter in Mark 7. The worshipping of the wise men for the east at the birth of Jesus, most likely from Persia or Arabia or something like that in Matthew 2.

And finally, in Luke 4, there's a heap of other passages you go to, but Luke 4, in this passage, Jesus tells the story, two stories. One story is taken from 1 Kings 17.

Now, remember the reading, as Jimmy read it out to us a moment ago. Jesus stands up in the temple. He reads out a text from the scroll of Isaiah 61 and says to the crowd that's gathered there in the temple, guys, this is fulfilled in your hearing.

[33 : 17] So Jesus, in that moment, declares, I am the long awaited Messiah. Newsline, headline, local boy, declares himself to Messiah. Woohoo! And that is blasphemous.

And the whole crowd in the temple are going, he's a good guy. He's a great speaker. Great, he's popped in. Yeah, local boy, we're quite proud of him. And they all spoke well of him. And Jesus comes back and said, yeah, but prophets have no honor in their hometown. They're like, this one does. Well, I just want to tell you two more stories. He tells a story taken from 1 Kings 17. It's a story about God passing over the ethnic Jews to bring a miraculous blessing to a foreign Gentile from the land of Phoenicia. And the second story is for 2 Kings 5. Again, the point is, of all the people that God might have chosen to heal of leprosy, he chooses a foreign king from Syria. And then they didn't speak so well of Jesus.

[34 : 26] It was at that point, it says, that they were furious with him. And they attempted to kill him.

Ethnic pride runs deep. And the point that Jesus was making is that the kingdom that he's bringing is ethnically different than what they were thinking.

Jesus is the end of ethnocentrism and racial pride. He says he has come to redeem a people from every ethnic group, not just from one or a few.

God's plan of redemption, which started with a promise to Abraham, finds its fulfillment in the person of Jesus and especially in the death of Jesus. Galatians 3 says this, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

For it is written, cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. That is, he redeemed us by his death on the cross. And then it says, he redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus.

[35 : 39] with Abraham, God set in motion a plan of redemption that overturns every curse for everyone who receives the blessing of Abraham.

And that blessing, according to Galatians 3, is the forgiveness of sins and acceptance of God that comes through Jesus Christ, the descendant of Abraham. You see, God's redemptive plan has always been to save and bless people from all the peoples of the earth.

All of us who are united in sin might be united in Christ as his people. So, friends, racial prejudice runs deep in a sinful heart.

And I discovered that night in Alice Springs that I was just like the residents of Nazareth. God's love. My chosen place as a child of God by grace had not produced humility and compassion for all people. And ironically, it meant that I was not aligned with God's purpose for all people, even though that's what I was there to preach about.

[36 : 59] I needed Jesus to change my heart. You see, my problem is not biology, my problem is not evolution, it's not other people's interpretation of the Bible, and it's certainly not John Howard.

It is the sin and the prejudice in my heart. That's the problem. I need a new heart to see all people made in the image of God, all people united in sin, and all people in need of God's great plan of redemption through Jesus Christ.

That was the Saturday night. Significant steps went forward the next morning when I preached at a local church in Alice.

As I stood in the pulpit, I saw something that I had never noticed in a church before. It's not because it wasn't evident in any other church, it's because my own prejudice was just so clear and focused in my mind.

I saw all the white people sitting in the front. I saw all the white people taking the rolls up the front. I saw the aboriginal people sitting at the back scattered on the floor and on a few chairs at the back.

[38 : 21] I noticed for the first time that the greeting and the passing of the peace and meeting as we did just a moment ago, you could virtually divide the room in two. There was a little bit of crossover but you could virtually divide the room in two.

And as the white clergyman, I had a bunch of white people who wanted to come and speak to me and I literally had to push my way past them. And let me tell you, it broke my heart when I approached an elderly aboriginal man.

As I approached him, he bowed his head, he put out his hand because he knew that's what I was going to do, I was going to shake his hand, he put out his hand and he wouldn't even look me in the eye.

I was told later that's because he saw me as superior. Not just because I was clergy, it was partly due to that, but because I was white.

He has learned all of his life that I am better than he is. Let me tell you that racial division in the church frustrates God's plan of redemption for all people.

[39 : 35] racial segregation amongst the people of God is a movement away from the following God's redemptive plan. And so I want to encourage you to use this series to check your heart.

You know, I had a couple of people speak to me this morning and said, I don't have your problem. I don't have racism towards aboriginal people.

That's great. Who is it though? Who is your problem? Does your heart beat with the heart, the Jesus heart beats for all people?

And if we're going to be a church that is aligned with Jesus' mission, then racial pride and ethnocentricity has to end. It's got to end. It's got to end in this congregation.

It's got to end in our Chinese congregation. 930 congregation. Jesus and the gospel is the end of racial pride and ethnocentricity.

[40 : 41] And that's why we as a church seek to treasure Jesus above everything and to seek to treasure him together above everything. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.