



## **Racism and Our Definitional Challenge: Is Sin Only an Individual Act?**

In Galatians 3:28, Paul writes: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (NIV). The implication for Christ-followers is that racialized distinctions dividing humanity are anathema to the kind of unity to which we are called. Despite this directive, we continue to experience divisions in our nation and the church along racial lines. I suspect this is not because we do not adhere to Paul’s teaching and thus wish to propose that the problem may not be willful disobedience but rather a definitional challenge.

Diangelo (2018) delineates two challenges to the exploration of Western cultural understandings of race: individualism and objectivity. She writes: “Individualism holds that we are each unique and stand apart from others, even those within our social groups” and “objectivity tells us that it is possible to be free of all bias” (p. 9). Bonilla-Silva (2010) expands on this idea: “I contend that whites have developed powerful explanations—which have ultimately become justifications—for contemporary racial inequality that exculpates them from any responsibility for the status of people of color” (p. 2), something he terms colorblind racism.

Thus, one might understand racism as a personal bias issue: “I am not a racist, I am blind to color.”

Billings (2016) challenges the twin notions of individualistic and objectivistic racism and calls for a more systemic view, where racism is defined as “Internalized Racial Superiority” (p. 76). From his perspective, race is deeply embedded in the American ethos, codified initially by law and currently maintained by lifelong attitudes instilled in us at an early age. In this view, whites have blind spots that they continue to enact because of their individualism and objectivism. This systemic view offers another, competing perspective that absolves white Americans of racialized attitudes, suggesting that participating in the systematized project of white superiority is as problematic as engaging in individual acts of racial bias.

Feagin (2013) terms this systemic racialization “the white racial frame,” which he defines as a “dominant frame...an overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate” (p. 3). In other words, racism is more than an individual’s actions but rather a project complete with a set of tools used to maintain it (Omi and Winant, 2014). Denials of individual racialization do not change the fact that race is a deeply embedded, systemic evil that has outlasted our attempts to eradicate it from our personal lives and institutions.

Perhaps the problem lies within our definitions of sin. The Christian language of spirituality mirrors the individualistic notions of racism. We think in terms of a *personal* savior, a *personal* relationship with Jesus Christ, *personal* devotions, *personal* quiet time, etc. Maybe we think of sin the same way, as a personal affront to our Lord, something we do individually, like lying, or lusting, or gluttony.

Scripture, however, encompasses a broader perspective. Recognizing our propensity to enact evil against others, the Book of Leviticus codifies the way Israel was to live, and this perspective was both individual and structural. When Israel was called to repentance, it was not simply a call for individuals to repent but also for the nation to engage in corporate penance. The nation of Israel was also called to periodically recalibrate their economic system and declare a Year of Jubilee. Entire cities were set aside as refuges for those seeking redress from punishments for wrongs. In the Book of Acts we observe the early church sharing their wealth and setting up feeding programs to address systemic bias against the Greek widows. The Bible teaches about individual sin and structural sin and calls us to repentance in both arenas.

Each year, at our seminary’s annual campus-wide revival, someone mentions 2 Chronicles 7:14, which reads: “if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (NIV). Inevitably this is followed with a call for attendees to confess their sins so that revival can take root on the campus. The emphasis is always upon confession of personal sins; never have I heard a call for us to repent of our corporate sins. This illustrates the definitional challenge of modern, western Christianity: the emphasis is upon

individualistic notions of evil exclusively while we are never called to repent for the ways our denomination, city, and nation have sinned.

Perhaps it is time for us to enlarge our definition of sin. I may not have told a racist joke or used the “N” word, but I have participated in a system that is inherently biased against others. This is a type of sinfulness that is not reflected in the pantheon of much of modern Christianity, with its emphasis upon personal and individual holiness. Scripture teaches that sin is a condition which, once rooted, can blossom and grow beyond a single individual’s lifespan, being passed from one generation to the next (Numbers 14:18).

There is another challenge as well. While white Americans tend to define sin in individualistic terms - especially the sin of racialization - people of color clearly see its structural nature. Thus, while many whites believe that the scourge of racism ended with President Obama’s election, people of color continue to live the daily trauma of systemic racism. Thus, when we attempt to have significant conversations about the issue, we begin at different places, with different definitions of sin.

Wise (2011) writes: “It is surely not my fault that I was born, as with so many others, into a social status over which I had little control. But this is hardly the point, and regardless of our own direct culpability for the system, or lack thereof, the simple and incontestable fact is that we all have to deal with the residue of past actions” (p. 24). The corporate and structural sins of our fathers and mothers have indeed been visited upon succeeding generations. Until we begin to broaden the definition of such sin, our nation will not come to a place of corporate repentance, and our land will not be healed.

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