

Response to Zenebe Abebe's "The Two Faces of Racism"

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"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free [person], nor is there masculine [thing] and feminine [thing]; for you all are one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28

"Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and foreskin, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free [person], but all things and in all is Christ." Colossians 3:11¹

How many people these days think of themselves as a "foreskin"? Probably very few. And nowadays there aren't many people, whether Christian or not, expressing pride in their Scythian roots, either. Ways of categorizing people in the West have definitely changed in the last two thousand years. There are, however, many today who identify with the other categories Paul delineates in his exhortations to unity within the burgeoning Christian communities of the mid-first century. As his letters attest, Paul was passionate about stamping out divisiveness.

In Paul's vision of a church of the new creation (Galatians 6:15), there simply cannot exist distinctions based on ethnicity, physical and gender characteristics, or political status. In fact, for him the unity of the church as one body in Christ absolutely depends upon this rejection of superficial differences. It's not that Paul is trying to deny the physicality of his fellow believers; instead, he is pressing them to look beyond these banal categorizations of their physical existence and to embrace what makes them ultimately special: their spiritual belief in Jesus as the Christ. Despite the clarity of Paul's message on this point, institutionalized Christian churches and their related organizations, such as universities, have found ways to marginalize or exclude people based on the very distinctions that Paul sought to downplay for the sake of unity.

Zenebe Abebe has clearly shown how the construction of race by skin color as a categorical definition of humanity since the seventeenth century has had an insidious effect upon the lives of people who have not fallen into the "white" category. None of us can deny the horrible impact of slavery, segregation, economic deprivation, lost opportunities, and other social ills upon those who have fallen into the "Negro," "black," "Indian," or any other dreamt up non-white category. Christian churches, even when consciously

attempting to help others and to spread the Gospel, have not been immune to this tendency to categorize and thus are complicit in this degradation of fellow human beings, including other Christians. How strange it is that Christians have not wholeheartedly embraced the example of the apostle Philip, who had no problem sitting next to, conversing with, and then baptizing the eunuch of the queen of the Ethiopians (Acts 8:26-40).

The racism that lingers in American churches hardly exists in a vacuum. It is shocking to think that anyone living in the United States over fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (and over 135 years after the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution²) still fosters racially based exclusionism, but old habits and outlooks die hard. CNN.com reported on April 23, 2007, from Ashburn, Georgia:

Students of Turner County High School started what they hope will become a new tradition: **Black and white students attended the prom together for the first time on Saturday.**

In previous years, parents had organized private, segregated dances for students of the school in rural Ashburn, Georgia, 160 miles south of Atlanta.

“Whites always come to this one and blacks always go to this one,” said Lacey Adkinson, a 14-year-old freshman at the school of 455 students—55 percent black, 43 percent white.

“It’s always been a tradition since my daddy was in school to have the segregated ones, and this year we’re finally getting to try **something new**,” she said.³

I could end here with a happy story of integration, but in fact, life is just not that easy:

But not everyone in the town of 4,400, famous for its peanuts and Fire Ant Festival, was breaking with the past.

The “white prom” still went on last week.

“We did everything like a regular prom just because we had already booked it,” said, Cheryl Nichols, 18, who attended the dance.

Nichole Royal, 18, said black students could have gone to the prom, but didn’t.

"I guess they feel like they're not welcome," she said.

Nichols said while **her parents** were in support of the integrated prom, some of her friends weren't allowed to go.⁴ [emphasis mine]

This prom may seem frivolous in the big scheme of things, but it points to something more important. Notice that Cheryl Nichols' parents see a different future, "something new" as Lacey Adkinson puts it, but other parents do not; many of the latter probably consider themselves good, church-going Christians. I suspect that it will take another three generations for these segregationist tendencies to die off, when everyone who can remember *Plessy v. Ferguson's* "separate but equal"—and their children—are dead and gone. What Paul said almost two thousand years ago still pertains: people have to see themselves as part of a new creation if they are going to enjoy unity as a church in Christ, but when they cling to the old ways and definitions out of tradition, malice, or ignorance, they not only harm themselves but also others.

Abebe has argued vigorously for race as a socially and historically constructed category,⁵ and he has rightly called upon Christian churches to reject this artificial divide between people. Paul argued essentially the same thing when he denied the importance of identifying people as Greeks, Jews, or Scythians, which is the closet thing Greco-Roman antiquity had to the early modern category of "races." Paul as a Jew had been raised to think of everyone who was not a Jew as belonging to *ta ethne*, the [foreign] nations, and in Galatians he even refers to non-Jewish Galatian Christians with this terminology, while calling the Jewish Christians who were promoting circumcision "*hoi Ioudaioi*," the Judeans/Jews (Gal. 2:12-13).⁶ Paul may not have had "race" as a skin-color category, but he and his society certainly had various ideas about ethnic categories and their characteristics.

Paul and his contemporaries could also see differences between the Jews and the rest of the nations, because besides abstaining from pork and observing the Sabbath, the Jews practiced full male circumcision.⁷ So, when the Roman state was hunting down people evading the *fiscus Iudaicus* tax on Jews towards the end of the first century A.D., the authorities used visual evidence for determining a man's Jewishness, as the biographer Suetonius (*Domitian XII. 2*) reports: "I remember as a young man being there when a ninety-year-old man was inspected by a procurator and a very crowded court to see whether he had been circumcised." Thus, ethnic identity as a Jew did, in fact, have a physical, observable manifestation, though usually kept covered unless at the public baths or latrines. If only modern Christians

could heed Paul's call for spiritual unity and ignore *all* physical markers that set people apart—including physical disabilities—and concentrate instead on what really matters.

Abebe has wisely chosen a passage, Acts 17:26, as a paradigmatic statement of Paul's position on "the idea of 'one humanity.'"⁸ What is fascinating is to see in this chapter of Acts how Paul tries to reach out to his overeducated Athenian audience by quoting soon after this verse directly from one of the recognized classics of Greek didactic poetry, Aratus' *Phaenomena*: "For we are indeed his offspring." Aratus in this poem on constellations and weather is talking about humans descending from Zeus, but Paul (or the author of Acts narrating this scene) shows his cleverness and cultural sensitivity by trying to bridge the gap between the two ethnic groups, Greek and Jewish, and their respective teachings in order to prove that they share common roots.

Paul, however, in his sweeping drive for universalism, stepped beyond just the boundary of ethnicity when building his new Christian communities around the Mediterranean. He also exhorted his newly minted fellow Christians to disregard the other categories that divide people. In his day, legal status and gender were two other very obvious ones besides ethnicity/national heritage.⁹

People became slaves through warfare, debt, and birth, and under Roman law they were literally "things"—property to be bought and sold. Paul tells the recipients of his letters in Galatia and at Colossae¹⁰ to transcend their labels of "slave" or "free" and to concentrate on what matters most: their faith. In another letter, he asks Philemon to think of his slave Onesimus as a "beloved brother" (Philemon 16), yet Paul never denounces slavery as an institution, to the dismay of anyone who cherishes a society where everyone is free.

Furthermore, in Galatians Paul rejects gender as a defining element of a person in a Christian community. He refers to the genders in the neuter form (*arsen kai thelu*), which has the effect of distancing these biological categories from the male and female-identifying people to whom he is talking. It's as if he is pushing them towards gender neutrality with his very word choice, or least downgrading the importance of gender distinction. Imagine all modern Christian churches doing the same, not just in their words but in their actions, too!

Abebe has demonstrated that "Christianity must be about equality, healing, and hope." What, then, can we do with twenty-first century individuals,

churches, and institutions that continue to cling to categorizing people in a variety of ways, a practice that Paul himself dismissed so long ago?

As Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke's Gospel (15:11-32) so vividly shows, forgiveness and unconditional love are the key to being one with God.¹¹ This applies not only to individuals but also to Christian organizations, as Paul (or his imitator) explains:

Put on, therefore, as chosen ones of God, holy and loved, compassion, kindness, . . . ; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so also you [should forgive]. And above all these, [put on] love, which is a bond of perfection. (Colossians 3:12-14)

Hopefully, those who have found themselves discriminated against for a variety of reasons within their own Christian churches and institutions can forgive those who have perpetrated this injustice and separation, and communities as a whole can start to "put on love"—a daringly simple solution to all of society's ills.

NOTES

¹ Translations are my own, based on the Greek text of the *Nestle-Aland* 26th edition.

² Notice that the Fifteenth Amendment specifies both race and color in order to eradicate any gray areas of categorization when granting suffrage: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

³ <http://www.cnn.com/2007/us/04/23/turner.prom/index.html>.

⁴ I thank my son, William Chapman, for alerting me to this story.

⁵ This constructionist viewpoint is within the mainstream of current academic scholarship. See, for instance, the review article by Nancy Appelbaum, "Post-Revisionist Scholarship on Race," *Latin American Research Review* 40.3 (2005) 206-217; the books she discusses might further enhance Abebe's argument by extending its scope to the other Americas, where the construction of race has played different roles than in the United States.

⁶ Furthermore, for his ethnically Greek readers, Paul is tapping into the Greek view of the rest of the world by using in his list of categories the term "barbarian," i.e., all the rest of the world's population who babble in a non-Greek language.

⁷ On types of circumcision in antiquity and Paul's strong rejection of forcing it upon men who wished to become Christian, see H. Chapman, "Paul, Josephus, and the Judean Nationalistic and Imperialistic Policy of Forced Circumcision," *Ilu, Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones* 11 (2006), 131-155. On Jewish nationalism in this period, see D. Goodblatt, *Elements of Ancient Jewish Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁸ Interestingly, the Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon* entry for "genos," the word Aratus uses for "offspring," gives many English equivalents, of which "race" is the first, but this term in Greek does not connote color; to use "race" in a translation would, as Abebe has shown, lead one possibly to think in terms of skin color.

⁹ Notice, however, that Paul does not mention the rich/poor dichotomy in Galatians 3:28, which would have been very apparent in society as a whole; does this indicate that Paul's Christian communities were not economically diverse enough to make this an issue?

¹⁰ This letter might not have been written by Paul; see S. Mason and T. Robinson, *Early Christian Reader* (Peabody: Hendrikson, 2004), 151-166.

¹¹ St. Augustine uses this parable as a running theme in his *Confessions* to describe his journey towards God. A recent movie, *The Second Chance* (2006), does the same while dramatizing the interaction between two Christian pastors—one black, the other white.