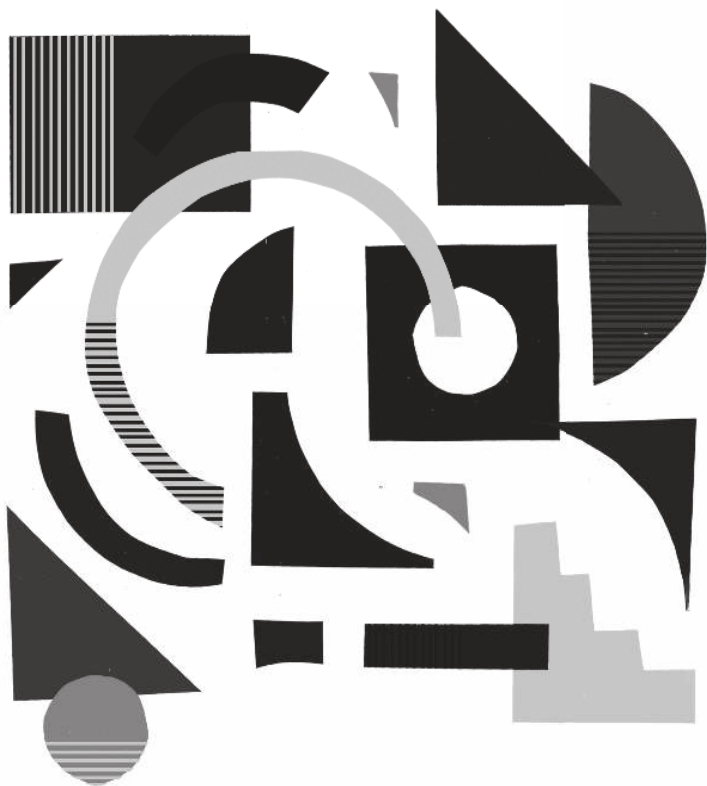


# Ministers of Reconciliation

Preaching on Race and the Gospel



Daniel Darling, Editor



LEXHAM PRESS



*Ministers of Reconciliation: Preaching on Race and the Gospel*

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## Preaching on Race in View of the Image of God

Genesis 1:27

**R**ace and ethnicity are taboo subjects in many pulpits across the United States. Knowing that some of their congregation will see it as “liberal” talk, a social gospel incongruous with the true gospel, or a ploy of the political left’s agenda, many pastors shy away from teaching and preaching on the issues of race and racism—regardless of their rationale for such avoidance. Two camps emerge out of this salient concern. The first camp wonders why we are still needing to talk about race, while the second camp is exhausted by having to explain to the other why discussions on race and racism are essential.

The current climate of anxiety, suspicion, hostility, and even angst makes race and racism particularly ripe topics for conversation in the church. In the spring and summer of 2020, after the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, books on race were flying off the shelves as many congregations in our country and around the globe tried to make sense of the heinous debacle that we found ourselves in.<sup>1</sup> As a pastor,

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1. See, for example, Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon, 2018); Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019); Eric Mason, *Woke Church: An Urgent Call for Christians in America to Confront Racism and Injustice* (Chicago: Moody, 2018);

you may be wondering, “Where do we begin?” and “How can my church’s leadership equip and encourage our congregants to act in this turbulent season?” I would suggest that you begin these conversations with a Scripture text that is found in a very early part of the story of God. In order to move forward in our personal and corporate understanding of race and racism, and to clarify the actions we should take, we must properly exegete the concept of the image of God.

### PERSONS MADE IN GOD’S IMAGE

While Genesis 1:26 is where the concept of the image of God is introduced, the focus of this chapter will be on 1:27. In his commentary on Genesis, Kenneth A. Mathews explains that this verse is a poem that consists of three lines. The first two lines are arranged in a chiasm (inverted repetition), and the last line explicates the first two:

a **So God created man** *in his own image*  
 b *in the image of God* **he created him**  
 c male and female he created them<sup>2</sup>

The Hebrew prepositional phrase translated “in his own image” in 1:27a, *betsalmo*, is used in the third person, indicating that God is speaking about himself. The second prepositional phrase, *betselem* (1:27b), is general and thus translated “in the image of God.” Verse 27c adds that God is the creator not just of males in his image, but of both males and females. When God had spoken the universe into existence—with its galaxies, solar

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Sarah Shin, *Beyond Colorblind: Redeeming Our Ethnic Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017); and Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

2. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 172.

systems, planets, land, sea, sky, and all living creatures—he still wanted something more to inhabit this world. For this reason, humankind constitutes the pinnacle of creation. The *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* explains the creation of humankind in these verses as the “last act of God’s creative work,” which “is the climax.”<sup>3</sup> Mathews adds: “The crown of God’s handiwork is human life.”<sup>4</sup> As beautiful as all the wonders of the world are, God’s greatest delight is in the creation of human beings. But what does it mean for men and women to be created “in his own image” or “in the image of God”?

Many scholars have grappled with this mystery. Old Testament scholar M. Daniel Carroll R. has helpfully put these into three different categories, which have to do with “what [humans] inherently are, their potential relationship with the Creator, and their capacity and privilege as rulers.”<sup>5</sup> What these categories have in common is that they underscore “the particular value of all persons.”<sup>6</sup> This value is accompanied by the role of stewards. God delegated responsibility to Adam to cultivate and take care of the garden of Eden (2:15), even tasking him to name all of the living creatures (2:19–20). Stated another way, Michael S. Heiser observes: “Humanity is tasked with stewarding God’s creation as though God were physically present to undertake the duty himself.”<sup>7</sup>

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3. See note on Genesis 1:26–27 in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 27.

4. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 160.

5. M. Daniel Carroll R., *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 67. See also Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear Our Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 104, 109.

6. Carroll R., *Christians at the Border*, 67.

7. Michael S. Heiser, “Image of God,” in *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).



In New Testament terms, the image of God refers specifically to the incarnate Jesus Christ, to whom Paul refers in 2 Corinthians 4:4 (“Christ, who is the image of God”) and Colossians 1:15 (“The Son is the image of the invisible God”).<sup>8</sup> The example of Jesus shows the rest of us what it truly means to image God. As Heiser continues,

Paul writes that believers are destined to be conformed to the image of God’s son, Jesus Christ (Rom 8:29). This language is a call to act as Jesus would—to live like him. Acting like Jesus points to the functional idea of the image of God; it suggests we think of the image of God as a verbal idea. By “imaging God,” we work, serve, and behave the way God would if He were physically present in the world. In Jesus, God was physically present. Thus, we are to imitate—or, image—Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Through active participation, New Testament Christians are to imitate Christ as God’s representation, and thereby become more fully the image bearers of God we were created to be.

### **DISORDERED DOMINION**

Before looking at how to apply Genesis 1:27 in preaching, let us explore what has happened to the image of God in light of the fall in Genesis 3. Mathews points out the popularity of the view that the damaging of the image has affected our ability to rule over creation: “During this latter half of [the twentieth] century the dominant interpretation [of the image], though not new (e.g., Chrysostom), has become the ‘functional’ one, that the ‘image’ is humanity’s divinely ordained role to rule over the

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8. Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New International Version.

9. Heiser, “Image of God.”

lower orders (1:26, 28).”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the fall has made us inclined to misunderstand/misapply/misuse our God-given ability to rule and have dominion over creation.

After the fall in Genesis 3, human beings have attempted in their sinful state to continue to rule and to even have dominion over fellow human beings. That is, after Adam and Eve sinned, our sinful nature corrupted the mandate to rule over the creation by usurping God’s power in an attempt to control other people. The evidence of seeking control, power, rule, and dominion enters the picture in Genesis 4 as Cain and Abel interact with each other. In an act of rage stemming from jealousy, Cain plots and leads his brother to the field where he murders him. Why? Because God favored Abel’s offering more than his.

Cain’s responsibility in Genesis 4:2 is to “work the soil,” or to cultivate the ground and thereby produce crops. That is his job description. Abel’s job is to keep the flocks and raise the animals. When they both give offerings to God, God is less pleased with Cain’s because he fails to give God his best work. The problem is not the gift, but the giver. Seeing God appreciate Abel’s offering more, Cain becomes angry at his brother. In 4:7 God, already knowing Cain’s heart, warns him: “But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”

Unable to contain his desires, Cain succumbs to sin in murdering Abel. In doing so, he loses sight of the image of God in his own brother. Now, Cain did not understand the full scope of the image of God that we do after the coming of Jesus, but he must have known at the least that Abel was like him, a valuable person in every way. Cain thus wrongly exercised dominion

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10. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 164–66.

and rule over his brother by taking his very life. He put himself in the place of God—the very thing that his parents did by eating the forbidden fruit of the garden of Eden. Sin begets sin. It’s a downward spiral. God knew one sinful thought “crouching at the door” would engulf Cain to the point where he could kill a fellow human being—even his own brother. Marred by sin, Cain no longer saw the image of God in Abel. For him, Abel’s life had no inherent value. His envy and anger led to his determination to jettison even basic human dignity, human worth, and respect for life itself.

Cain’s killing of Abel in Genesis 4 can be seen as an undermining of the concept of the image of God in Genesis 1:27 in terms of humanity’s ability to rightly rule over creation. If that is the case, how does the misuse of God’s dominion and rule express itself in society and in the church? And how can we preach and teach on the healing of the image of God today? This leads to our final conversation point on race/racism and the image of God in terms of our current circumstances.

### **THE IMAGE AND RACISM**

There are many sins that arise from disregarding the image of God, but the particular sin that we are considering in this chapter is racism.<sup>11</sup> Racism is an aberration from God’s desire for all human beings to “reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). It is an attempt by one ethnic group to have dominion over another. While there are legitimate positions of authority in human society, such as elected government officials or church leaders, God never

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11. While there is not space to consider them all, related to racism are the concepts of ethnocentrism, xenophobia, bigotry, and more.

intended for people to have dominion over others. Only God is in the position to have dominion over us all. Racial prejudice has been defined by Scott B. Rae as “negative stereotyping on the basis of race and/or belief that particular races/ethnicities are inferior to others. Racism is the combination of racial prejudice and the institutions of power in any given culture that enable a group to perpetuate patterns of discrimination. ... However, no one’s race exempts them from holding immoral racial prejudices.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in *The Color of Compromise*, Jemar Tisby writes, “Racism can operate through impersonal systems and not simply through the malicious words and actions of individuals. Another definition explains racism as *prejudice plus power*. It is not only personal bigotry toward someone of a different race that constitutes racism; rather, racism includes the imposition of bigoted ideas on groups of people.”<sup>13</sup>

Rae and Tisby show us that racism and racial prejudice occur at both the individual and systemic levels. On a systemic level, “*prejudice plus power*” involves the concept of “white privilege [which] often refers to the advantage that comes with being in the majority. It refers to not having to be conscious of one’s ethnicity and to the majority culture being seen as the norm. It brings advantage because the majority tends to be respected and trusted in ways that minorities often are not.”<sup>14</sup> We should view racism and racial prejudice not just as seeing others as inferior, but also as seeking to preserve a system in which the dominant culture holds power and sets the norms.

Since many who will be reading this book will no doubt come from the dominant culture, I want to state clearly that I

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12. Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 441–42.

13. Tisby, *Color of Compromise*, 16.

14. Rae, *Moral Choices*, 435.

am not finger pointing here. As Rae notes, all human beings are susceptible to the sin of racism. In my worst moments, I confess that I have exhibited racism and racial prejudice toward others.<sup>15</sup> We all have, even if we don't care to admit it.

Let me conclude with two practical ways by which you can celebrate the image of God in every person and fight the sin of racism.

### **CELEBRATE THE IMAGE OF GOD IN EVERY PERSON**

The doctrine of the image of God teaches us that all people have inherent value, worth, and dignity in God's eyes. No person is worth more or worth less. Regardless of color, race, ethnicity, gender, and other possible human distinctions, every person deserves respect and equal treatment by virtue of being made in God's image. How we celebrate the image of God will look differently in each ecclesial context, but one practical way to celebrate the image of God in every culture is, as you preach and lead worship, not to draw attention to a person's race/ethnicity in the first or even subsequent visits. Oftentimes, if our churches are homogeneous, we may be overly excited to have visible minority visitors. From the pulpit, we may unknowingly put them on the spot. Years ago, a well-meaning pastor had my wife and I stand up in the middle of the sermon and had everyone clap for us because we were Asian Americans and different from everyone else. It was so awkward. It was a moment of shame and not celebration.

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15. Read about some of my struggles with racism and racial prejudice in Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence*, 95–125; and my article, "Preaching in the Period of Pandemic and Prejudice," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 20.2 (Sept 2020): 15–23.

Instead, welcome visitors as human beings made in the image of God, not just as visible/racial minorities. There is a marked difference. When we accentuate differences such as being a visible minority from the outset, we draw unnecessary attention to that difference. Most visible minorities in America live with a daily sense of shame.<sup>16</sup> This is a shame derived from always being reminded that they are not one of “us” (a member of the dominant culture). Most of the world lives according to this honor-shame worldview.<sup>17</sup> As soon as you mention your visitors/listeners being a visible minority or speak to them in a language other than English, they are likely to shut down emotionally. Now, they are internalizing feelings of shame for who they are rather than experiencing the joy of worshiping God in community. There will, hopefully, be a time and place to preach about racial/ethnic differences and engage in racial reconciliation, but their initial visits are not the most opportune time.

### **FIGHT AGAINST RACISM IN YOUR CHURCH**

In order to fight the sin of racism in our congregations, we must be willing to get uncomfortable by naming and acknowledging sin. It is easy to speak against racism theoretically. Most of your church members will say that they are not racists, but you must go deeper and get practical. I think, for example, of the numerous hate crimes against Asian Americans as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. On July 2, 2020, CBS News documented over twenty-one hundred reported cases of such crimes since the pandemic struck.<sup>18</sup> If we are content in saying, “I wasn’t

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16. See Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

17. Georges and Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, 19.

18. Erin Donaghue, “2,120 Hate Incidents against Asian Americans Reported during Coronavirus Pandemic,” CBS News, July 2, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/anti-asian-american-hate-incidents-up-racism/>.

directly involved in any of these incidents,” or, “Well, at least Asian Americans are considered ‘model minorities’ and they don’t have to worry about being killed like black and brown people do,” we are only exacerbating the problem. We have to recognize that racism is racism, and when we minimize it or fail to address it head-on, we are prolonging its success.

### **CONCLUSION**

As pastors and preachers, we must not ourselves, and we must not let our congregations, be content to pat our backs because we are not actively part of the problem. We must be proactive in fighting the sin of racism against all people of all skin colors and races, thereby celebrating the image of God in all people. Prayerfully consider preaching on Genesis 1:27 and the image of God to confront the sin of racism as we ask ourselves and our listeners what our attitudes are toward those who are different from us. Challenge your listeners to confess the sin of racism particularly when we view others as being made less than in the full image of God.

Therefore, preach on the image of God, racism, ethnocentrism, and prejudice when the text calls for it. For instance, when preaching and teaching on Acts 15 and the Council of Jerusalem narrative, not addressing ethnocentrism would mean failing to address the crux of the passage. Tackle ethnocentrism and/or racism straight on. As you preach and teach regularly on racism and on the image of God, include moments in the worship service where the sin of racism/prejudice is confessed publicly and regularly. Have prayer meetings with racism as a central concern. Ask for forgiveness as the Spirit of God convicts you, and confess that sin to others directly. Provide spaces for members of visible minority cultures to lament and mourn. Empathize with the pain of your minority listeners. Encourage

your listeners to join nonviolent, public gatherings in support of racially marginalized groups. Preach on how Christians should oppose policies that promote racial injustice and inequality. Use more illustrations that celebrate people of color and their contributions to society and to the kingdom of God. Express to your listeners regularly from the pulpit how much you love them and care for them, and so much more. As we engage and lead our congregations to fight against racism in our preaching, teaching, and ministry service, we celebrate the image of God in all persons—to the glory of God.



*Race is one of the most pressing issues of our time. How should pastors tackle it from the pulpit?*

## **MINISTERS OF RECONCILIATION**

**PREACHING ON RACE AND THE GOSPEL**

*Ed. Daniel Darling*

*Foreword by Russell Moore*

In this collection of essays, issues of race and ethnicity are explored from a variety of perspectives, offering guidance to pastors on how to address these topics in their own contexts. Each essay builds on a foundational passage of Scripture. With contributions from Bryan Loritts, Ray Ortlund, J.D. Greear, and more, *Ministers of Reconciliation* offers practical and biblically faithful approaches to the subject of race.

### **EDITOR**

Daniel Darling is senior vice president of communications for the National Religious Broadcasters and author of several books, including *The Dignity Revolution: Reclaiming God's Rich Vision for Humanity* and *A Way with Words: Using Our Online Conversations for Good*.

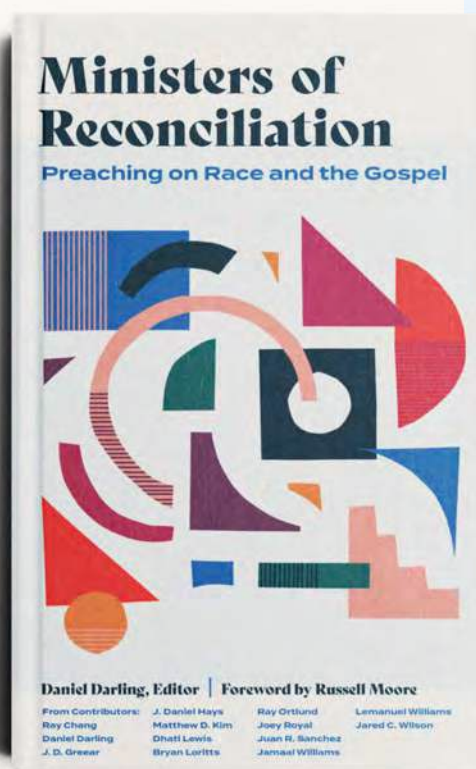
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