

## *Race: A Theological Account*

### **Introduction**

In *Race: A Theological Account*, J. Kameron Carter presents two theological mistakes that led to the error of racial divisions. One, the Jews were made into a distinct racial people instead of being a covenant people chosen by God. Two, once made a racial people, the Jews could be made an inferior racial group replaced by the Christian Church. These core theological movements gave the theological basis for today's racial divisions in which Whites are superior to people of color.

### **Summary**

Carter uncovers the theological underpinnings of White superiority in the Gnostic errors of the early church. Using the works of Irenaeus, he corrects the faulty theology of the Gnostics. Then, he looks at the modern work of Cornel West and Michel Foucault, highlighting their flaw of identifying the causes of White superiority from within structures of White superiority. Carter discovers in Immanuel Kant the origin of the modern-day racial construct in the US.

Carter harkens back to the Gnostic errors of early Christianity that separated the human Jesus from the Christ of faith. Known as Docetism, the Gnostics gave more importance to the spirit of Jesus as the Son of God. By diminishing the reality of the human flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, his Jewishness could be discarded. Taking this separation of spirit and flesh to a social level, the Gnostics replaced the physical people of Israel with the spiritual Church, a heresy known as supersessionism. In both cases, they diminished the concrete expression of Jesus in the flesh and Israel as the people of God.

Carter points out that Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in the late-second century, reveals and corrects the Gnostic errors that over-spiritualized Christian theology. Irenaeus promotes the full humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. The early church theologian upholds the biblical genealogies of Jesus as significant, concrete expressions of Jesus' humanity. He also points out that the Lukan genealogy reaches back to Adam, thereby including all humanity in Jesus' flesh.

Carter finds a core doctrine in Irenaeus, called "recapitulation," that corrects the Gnostic supersessionism. Irenaeus finds in Romans 13:9,10 and Ephesians 1:10 that all of creation and all of Israel are recapitulated in the risen Christ. The eschatological reality of the recapitulation is anchored in the material reality of Jesus the Jew as the end for all of creation and Israel. The New Covenant does not negate the Old Covenant, and the Church does not replace Israel. All are joined together, completed, and fulfilled in the apocalyptic, recapitulation in Jesus Christ. Irenaeus corrects the over-spiritualized and under-materialized theology of the Gnostics, which gives a theological basis for the racial state today.

Both West and Foucault, seek to address White superiority, not on a racial basis, but a power basis. Carter appreciates their attempt to move out of the White constructed understanding of race but does not believe either of the scholars satisfactorily distance themselves from the constructs of White superiority. West, according to Carter, explains well how White superiority is possible but does not address how and why White superiority became the ruling system. Foucault has relegated theology to a lower stratum of consideration and, in so doing, presents a one-dimensional solution to a multi-dimensional reality.

Carter locates the origin of White superiority in the rational theology of Kant. In an 18th century version of Gnosticism, Kant rationalizes Christianity to be a system of ideas and leaves behind both the material reality of Jesus being a human with Jewish flesh and Israel being the

people of God. According to Kant, Jesus has come to educate humans to attain our highest level of existence. Kant gives the “inner architecture for modern racial reasoning” by coupling Christianity with the furthering of Western civilization. Carter holds that Kant makes possible the further development of White superiority in the US by moving the mantle of human progress from the Roman Catholic Church of Southern Europe to the Protestant Church of Western Europe.

### **Afro-Christianity**

In the second part of *Race*, Carter presents a theological understanding of Afro-Christianity. He presents a theology of Black faith freed from the boundaries of racial hierarchy and White defined racial constructs. Carter builds positively on the work of Albert J. Raboteau, who separates African-American theology from the confines of Whiteness. Carter finds positive elements in the writings of James Cone and Charles Long but points out that both look at race from within the system beholden to White superiority instead of outside of it.

Raboteau tells the story of how Christianity is not a White man’s religion, but the story of an enslaved people joining with Israel in their slavery to Egypt to be redeemed and freed as a covenant people through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This union of enslaved people, Black and Jewish, moves well beyond Kant’s and the Gnostic supersessionism. The White-eyes of the US see themselves as the new Israel, but the Black slaves see themselves as joining with Israel through Jesus to be redeemed from slavery in the new Egypt, which is the US. Raboteau lifts Afro-Christianity out of the boundaries of being the victim, which is the character given to Blacks in the White plotline of US history.

Cone and Long develop Black theology from within the constraints of White superiority. Carter points out that Cone maintains an understanding of modern racial constructs that have been formed out of White superiority. Similarly, Long attempts to bring Black theology out of an epistemology founded upon Whiteness. In so doing, Black theology is not an interdependent theological system, but a theology from within a White system. Carter states that Black theology in this form is a theology of opposition or accusation. It must have an opponent, and therefore, is not given the freedom to be one theology among equals who are together summed up, recapitulated in Jesus’ flesh together with all of creation.

As a long-time, affluent White congregation, CHPC has a great challenge to move outside of the White system inherent in its history. Carter’s critique of Cone and Long demonstrates just how difficult this journey will be. Raboteau gives some excellent guidance in presenting a theology that corrects the notion of the Church replacing Israel, but instead, the Church joins with Israel. Christians together link with Israel as slaves being freed from bondage through Jesus. From this vantage point, all come together in God as equals.

### **Tackling White Superiority**

The last section of *Race* addresses the theological response to White superiority. Initially, Carter considers Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth-century theologian, as an example of one who, like Raboteau, develops a theology from outside of the social order of his day. Gregory is the first known Christian abolitionist. In a period of history that had a large system of human hierarchy, Gregory defied all social order by calling all people equal before God, not only spiritually but also socially. He gave the highest value to every human being because God created all in God’s image. Like Irenaeus, he also recognized all people were recapitulated in Christ’s resurrected flesh and, therefore, physically equal and valuable before God. From creation to consummation,

Gregory saw the fleshly reality of all being summed up in Christ. He promoted the abolition of all slaves and the equality of all, thereby destroying any form of human superiority over another.

Referencing modern theologians, Carter considers the writings of Briton Hammon and Frederick Douglass. They each address the problem of White superiority through a theological narrative instead of a theological epistemology. Carter promotes spiritual autobiography as a helpful means to avoid the constraints of a White theological system. Hammon destabilizes the foundation of Whiteness but does not entirely escape the culture of White superiority. Douglass, likewise, repeats similar mistakes by succumbing to supersessionism and fighting a power struggle created by the modern racial construct.

Carter lauds Jarena Lee's spiritual autobiography as escaping the boundaries of White superiority. She avoids the previous errors of supersessionism and Docetism by upholding Jesus as the one who fulfills the promises to Israel in his flesh. She presents a new racial imagination not based upon Whiteness or Blackness or the power struggle Whiteness created but based upon Christians being the body of Christ.

In contrast to Douglass and in step with Lee, Carter points out that Jesus relinquished power for a new way of life that brings meaning and passion. Building on Lee, Carter calls the church to a Pentecostal way of living. In the power of the Holy Spirit, the Christian Church invites all languages and peoples to a new identity in Christ. Nationalism and ethnocentrism are destroyed in the power of the Spirit.

Ultimately, any multicultural church needs the dominant culture to relinquish or share power with others from different backgrounds to be a multicultural church.

### **Concrete Expressions of Love**

Carter concludes his theological account of race by exploring the theology of Maximus the Confessor, who points to a new way of unity in Jesus through the way of love. He calls this "difficult orthodoxy" in which the way of love trumps the cultural mores of the day. By moving beyond spiritualized application, love shows itself in real human relationships.

The essence of *Race* gives a core theological basis for the Church being multicultural in concrete, physical ways not in a spiritualized union that can avoid person-to-person unity. The Church is united in the flesh of Jesus. From his mixed genealogy reaching back to Adam through the recapitulation of the Church with Israel in the resurrected flesh of Christ, the Church's diversity is made physical and material.

For churches transitioning to a multicultural congregation, Carter demonstrates the need to keep things real and concrete. The proposed ministry project will move the participants to real-life application. When theology is over-spiritualized without tangible experiences to practice, then the dominant theology remains in power, and material issues of justice can be avoided. Building on the work of Lee and Maximus, real-life Christian unity that corrects White superiority requires power-releasing humility and the active pursuit of love.