

Love and Happiness: Being the People of God in a Racialized Society

I do not imagine that the white and black race will ever live in any country upon an equal footing. But I believe the difficulty to be still greater in the United States than elsewhere. An isolated individual may surmount the prejudices of religion, of his country, or of his race, and if this individual is a king he may effect surprising changes in society; but a whole people cannot rise, as it were, above itself. A despot who should subject the Americans and their former slaves to the same yoke, might perhaps succeed in commingling their races; but as long as the American democracy remains at the head of affairs no one will undertake so difficult a task; and it may be foreseen that the freer the white population of the United States becomes, the more isolated will it remain.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835)

Alexis de Tocqueville, long ago observed a phenomenon of American culture that is neither unusual nor unique to America. It endures to this present day because it is a phenomenon that is not rooted in accidents of American culture. Racism is not limited to America's black white divide and to some extent it is a daily reality in every culture on earth because it is rooted in man's rebellion against God. The reality of racism is rooted in sin and the remedy of racism is rooted in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

For In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Gal. 3:26-29

At Soaring Oaks Presbyterian Church we are committed to living out the implications of our new identity in Christ. Therefore, ethnic and racial diversity is not something 'barely tolerated' but central to our understanding of Christianity! Does that shock you? Well, it is our hope that it doesn't. Why such passion for what some consider a secondary issue? It is because it is not a secondary issue at all. It is a primary issue in three vital ways.

1. It is essential to our understanding of the *gospel*. When Paul says that he isn't ashamed of the gospel the reason he gives is that it is the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who believes. We believe that the doctrine of Justification by faith, which we rightly hold as precious, was meant to produce a reconciled people from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages who would worship God *together*. Likewise, adoption melds us all into the family of God and a family that can not co-exist under the same roof because of personal preferences fails to rise above the level of dysfunctional. The glory of the gospel is that in a world tragically divided along racial and cultural lines, marred by racial genocide and ethnic cleansing the gospel alone creates real *observable* unity.
2. It is essential to our understanding of the *Church*. Some might say that the everyone *ness* of the gospel is adequately served by Churches that are racially monolithic as long as every race is permitted to have a place of worship. We deny this! We believe that one of the primary results of the gospel is the creation of a multicultural, multiethnic people that worship *together!* We who are members of the same *heavenly* household of God are meant to portray that now by transparently being members of the earthly *household* of God. This is the best response to the reality that, "in Him [we all] are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."
3. It is essential to our whole understanding of the *goal of redemption*. We believe that the core thrust of redemptive history is multicultural, multiracial and transnational at its nucleus. It is central to the Abrahamic Covenant. God said, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." It is central to the commission given the Church by the risen Lord Jesus, "Go

therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Finally, it is what lies at the very heart of the new heavens and the new earth. “And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will *the nations walk* and the Kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day- and their will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor *of the nations.*”

Needless to say that at Soaring Oaks Presbyterian Church diversity is not something we tolerate it is something we joyously celebrate! We are joyously laboring and hoping to one day look out on the congregation one Sunday morning and see every nation under God’s heaven represented. If God grants us this noble vision we will know in some dim measure the wonder John knew and felt when he glimpsed the glory of this in a vision.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from *every nation*, from *all tribes* and *peoples* and *languages*, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Then one of the Elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

“Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve Him day and night in His temple;
and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
The sun shall not strike them,
Nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
And He will guide them to springs of living water,
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Rev. 7:9-17

May John’s vision always be the passionate pursuit of Soaring Oaks Presbyterian Church.