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4-30-2015

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Recommended Citation

DeRoo, Neal, "Baltimore's Problem" (2015). *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List*. Paper 202.

http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/202

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Baltimore's Problem

Abstract

"What if the problem of racism is not primarily a problem between different groups of people? What if it isn't primarily about white people and black people? What if racism is not about one group versus another, but rather about all people versus the effects of sin?"

Posting about racism, sin, and reconciliation from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/baltimores-problem/>

Keywords

In All Things, Baltimore, diversity, Ferguson, Mark Charles, racism, sin

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Baltimore's Problem

 allthings.org/baltimores-problem/

Neal DeRoo

We might like to think we've overcome racism, because we no longer watch the KKK burn crosses on our televisions, or hear about lynchings on the evening news; we might like to think we've overcome racism because we no longer say certain words, and we feel uncomfortable when we hear other people say those words; we might even tell them not to talk that way. But the issue of racism is still a problem in American society.

For anyone with a television or a Facebook feed, this is not news. In fact, it might be so familiar that we're tired of hearing it. Maybe we think "Yes, obviously!" or "Not another person complaining about racism!"

But what if the problem of racism is not primarily a problem between different groups of people? What if it isn't primarily about white people and black people (or Hispanic people, First Nations people, Asian people, etc.)? What if the problem of racism is not primarily a problem taking place between two groups of people, one of whom is the 'good guy' and one the 'bad guy'? What if racism is not about one group versus another, but rather about all people versus the effects of sin?

As Christians, we see that the problem of racism is another manifestation of the problem of sin. And we know that if sin is the problem, Jesus is the solution.

This is not to say that if those rioters would just put down their torches and pick up their Bibles, we could all go back to normal. Because sin is a much bigger problem than just the choices I make or the things I do. Sin is anything that happens contrary to the will of God.

As Christians, we believe that we, and everything we touch, are full of sin. We are called to accept that God alone can fix that, and that God has already fixed that. All we have to do is accept the gift of grace, and help spread the gospel message—that God has defeated sin in all of its manifestations—throughout the world.

But this message is hard to believe when one sees that sin seems to be winning in the world today. It is hard to think that God has won when I feel hopeless because my school hasn't produced a student who was accepted into college in over a decade. It is hard to think sin has been defeated when most of the friends I started high school with are either dead or in prison before my 30th birthday. It is hard to think the Gospel is anything more than a fairy tale when I see, everyday, that my skin color does more to determine what people think of me than does my character, my integrity, or my religious beliefs. It is hard to think that Jesus' resurrection signals that God is still alive and at work in the world today if one lives in certain parts of Baltimore. Or Ferguson. Or Chicago. Or whatever city is on the wrong side of the tracks from where you live.

But it should also be hard to think that God is alive and at work in the world today if you live in Beverly Hills or Chestnut Hill or Charm City. Sin and its problems are not confined to the wrong side of the tracks. It certainly manifests itself in different ways, and its effects are perhaps more suffocating in some places than others—but its effects are at work in all places.

My worry is that it becomes too easy to think of what is happening in Baltimore (and in Ferguson, and New York, and on down the line) as a problem caused by 'unjust systems' that 'someone' needs to do something about. It's too easy to think "That is awful—but what can I really do about it?" It's too easy to

think “No one will ever go for the kind of big changes that we’d need to solve the problem of racism.” It’s too easy to let ourselves off the hook from having to do anything ourselves, because, after all, the problem is in Baltimore (and I don’t live in Baltimore). Or the problem is with the police force or the judicial system (and I don’t work in the police force or the judicial system). Or the problem is with ‘The System’ (and I am not ‘The System’).

By making the problem something that happens somewhere else to someone else, we let ourselves off the hook from having to own and acknowledge our place in everything that happens. It lets us be smug, superior and self-congratulatory (because “I would never do something like that,” or at least “I would totally fix it—if I could”).

But if we acknowledge that the biggest problem is sin, and we acknowledge that sin is everywhere (including inside us), then we have to recognize, not “there but for the grace of God go I” but rather: “Here we are—thank God for grace!” We are not lifted above the fray of sin, left to live our perfect idyllic lives in our perfect idyllic homes. We are—all of us—in the throes of sin. If we haven’t truly embraced that fact—if we have never experienced firsthand the hopelessness that comes from realizing there is nothing I can do to fix what ails me—then we don’t really understand grace, or God, or the gospel. Or the protestors in Baltimore.

And that is why Christians need to march arm-in-arm with those protestors. People have lost hope. And we should know, better than anyone, what that feels like. And we should know, better than anyone, what a gift it is to be given hope when we are hopeless. We know the true source of hope, and we can never stop spreading that hope wherever it is most needed.

But hope can’t be spread from the outside, by talking at people and telling them everything is going to be ok if they just believe. That is not hope—that is delusion. That is not the Gospel—that is a fairy tale. The Gospel is a story of changed lives and a changed world. A world changed by a God who lives and breathes and moves in the world, from its first day until its last. A God who not only lived here 2000 years ago, but abides here still in the Spirit freely given to the church on Pentecost. Our message is not that things will be better someday, that hope will arrive someday. Our message is that hope has arrived, has lived, and died—and been brought back to life, never to die again.

And this message of hope requires acknowledging the hopelessness we all sometimes feel—between the joy of Easter Sunday and the events of Good Friday, we cannot forget [the pain of Saturday](#).

So let’s not fake like we’re ok and they are in trouble. Let’s acknowledge that we’re all broken—and this means not only that we all feel bad, but that we all act out of our brokenness in ways that break other people as well. That the pain and brokenness in the world is the result of sin—of sin that is ours and part of us, not just ‘out there’ somewhere. Let’s be willing to hear other people tell us of ways we’ve hurt them, of ways they’ve been broken by us, even if that’s not what we intended. Let’s listen, not as if someone is trying to cast us as the bad guy in their story, but as if we are all on the same side, fighting an enemy that has infiltrated our ranks—and we have to be on our guard to spot him wherever he shows up.

Collectively, let’s confess (and listen to) the hurt, pain, and hopelessness we have felt and continue to feel. Let’s confess (and listen to) the ways we have hurt each other perhaps as much as we’ve helped each other. Let’s confess (and listen to) the fact that none of our lives are that good, frankly. Perhaps it is only in truly acknowledging our pains, fears, and angers that we can be opened to the possibility of real reconciliation.

Don’t get me wrong—we need to change how we treat each other in this country. We need to rethink our justice system, our mutually exploitative consumerism, our isolating urban designs, our segregated churches. We need to do things very differently—we can’t just wait for change to drop down from the sky,

or for some magician to come along and fix everything. Racism is a problem and we need to do something about it.

But none of that change makes a difference without reconciliation. As long as we think we are fighting against each other, there can be no real reconciliation. And if we don't recognize that we are sometimes hurting each other and working at cross-purposes, there can be no real reconciliation either. We need confession and assurance, truth and reconciliation. Without these there is no hope at all.

About this article

Many of my thoughts here are in response to some of the talks I heard at the [Q conference](#) last week in Boston. On the issue of race and the need for reconciliation, [Mark Charles'](#) words were especially poignant. Recasting the story with sin as the antagonist, rather than a group of people, is something [Lecrae](#) first mentioned. Many thanks to those speakers, and to the organizers of [Q](#), for their words.