Abstract
The first part of the paper lays out our understanding of ethnicity and race in light of current research from sociology and anthropology. The paper then turns to the New Testament material, and it examines “the Jews” as one ethnic group in the first century. This material is used to demonstrate that Christians also took on the language of ethnicity. The paper raises the question, “is there a Christian identity that both supersedes and subsumes ethnic identity?” It proposes that the answer to that question is, “Yes, there is a Christian identity and ethos that supersedes ethnic identity.” And, this paper will also argue that not all ethnic or cultural markers must be given up in order to be Christian. In the early Church, there were those who argued that a new Christian must take on the marks of Jewish ethnic identity; however, Paul successfully argued that Christians formed their own ethnic identity without having to give up all the former markers of their previous ethnic identity, whether Jew or Gentile.

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When Barak Obama was elected as our first African American president last November, many Americans took this as a sign that the United States had entered into a post-racial era. Indeed, the argument goes, how else could one account for such an unprecedented outcome? There is little doubt that the United States has made great strides since the 1950s and 1960s when it comes to civil rights, but what belies the post-racial notion are the racial incidences that continue to take place which demonstrate that these issues are just behind the surface of our post-racial façade. One such incident that recently occurred was the infamous arrest of the famous African American Harvard professor, Henry Louis Gates. And not long ago the presumed anti-American sermons of the Rev. Wright, Obama’s former pastor, caught national (and international) attention, though most of the indignation and analysis did not attempt to address why an African American Christian minister might harbor such feelings toward his own country. The reactions to both cases showed that there are still deep divisions when it comes to race in America.

The problem is that we tend to view these racial incidences, and race/ethnicity in general, through the lens of our own experiences and cultural identities. The first trial of O.J. Simpson for the murder of his ex-wife and her friend is a good case in point. Polls at the time showed that a majority of whites believed he was guilty while a majority of blacks believed he was innocent. After the not guilty verdict a Gallup poll revealed that 49 percent of the whites polled felt that the verdict was wrong, compared to only 10 percent of blacks, whereas 78 percent of the blacks polled believed the not guilty verdict was correct, compared to 42 percent of whites. When I (Steve) would ask my students why they felt there was such a discrepancy in this case, most would attribute it simply to the person’s race; that is, those who were black supported Simpson because he was black, and those who were white did not. However, this simplistic answer misses a key point—many of those who are from a minority population in the United States have experienced first-hand prejudice and discrimination from the very people who are meant to uphold the laws of the land, the police. The main argument from the Simpson defense was that the blood evidence found in Simpson’s vehicle, as well as the bloody glove found near his home, were planted there by the police. Perhaps for most white Americans this seemed preposterous, but for many African Americans (as well as other minorities) this was not only plausible but probable based on their experiences with law enforcement.
The Henry Louis Gates affair also highlighted the importance of experience and perspective when it comes to interpreting the same event. A reporter for the Associated Press summed up nicely how Dr. Gates and the white police officer, Sgt. Crowley, experienced the same event differently:

Henry Louis Gates Jr. felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up as he looked across the threshold of his home at Sgt. James Crowley. Looking back at Gates, Crowley worried about making it home safely to his wife and three children. Fear was the only thing the white police officer and black scholar had in common. Soon their many differences would collide, exploding into a colossal misunderstanding.\(^3\)

Given this state of affairs it is not surprising that our first African American president has asked the Justice Department to “recharge” the civil rights division, which was sorely diminished under the previous administration.

In this paper we will focus on race, ethnicity, and identity in the scriptures and in the United States, incorporating both theological and social scientific perspectives in our analysis. From the social scientific approach we will explore terminological issues, the development of the United States’ ideology of race, the different social ideologies used to interpret social reality and prescribe policy, and how the church has been affected by the broader American culture with regard to these issues. From the theological approach we will examine the issue of ethnicity/race in the New Testament, and explore evidence related to whether scripture mandates the eradication of ethnic and other cultural identities in light of our new identity in Christ.

- **Terminology**

Ethnicity and race are rather slippery terms that are often defined in different ways by scholars and lay people alike. The most commonly used distinction between the two is that ethnic groups are distinguished by cultural differences while races are distinguished by physical differences (e.g., skin color). However, what they have in common is a way of creating us/Them social distinctions based on presumed ancestry. Hicks (1977) argues that there are three key elements to ethnicity: 1) reference to common origins, 2) a conception of distinctiveness, and 3) that ethnicity is relevant only where two or more groups of people are involved in the same social system. This last point gets at the fact that it is in social interaction with the ethnic/racial “Other” that ethnicity becomes relevant. Eriksen concurs with Hicks’ basic definition, stating,

Ethnicity is an aspect of social relationship between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have a minimum of regular interaction. It can thus also be defined as a social identity . . . characterised by metaphoric or fictive kinship (2002:12, 13).
The “sense of distinctiveness” in Hicks’ definition gets at the boundary process of ethnicity and race—i.e., the symbolic elements that are used to distinguish “us” from “them.” These symbolic elements can vary greatly from one context to another, and may include such things as territory, language, religion, clothing, food, physical features, or any combination of these and other elements.

Using this definition, then, we see that “race” is something that can be subsumed under the rubric of ethnicity—it is one of the possible boundary markers to distinguish one group from another. But what can also be seen is that some of these markers are more pronounced, or less changeable, than others. For example, we can learn another language, adopt a different dress, and even change our religion, but it is much more difficult to change our physical features. Thus, Horowitz (2000: 46) discusses a “continuum of cues” from the visible to the nonvisible. These include along the continuum physical features we are born with (e.g., skin color, hair texture, nose shape), postnatal physical markings (often associated with rites of passage), posture, language, dress, and religion. As we’ll see, in the context of the United States some of these markers have historically been more “meltable” than others.

Although race may be conceptually subsumed under ethnicity, for analytical purposes it is helpful to distinguish between groups and categories. A group can be understood as a population that has some level of interaction and common identity with one another. A category, on the other hand, involves taking certain characteristics (e.g., skin color) and lumping together all of those who share those characteristics, whether or not they have any contact with others from the category or identify with it. In this way we can speak of ethnic groups and racial categories, with the latter containing a large number of the former. Turning again to the United States, we have just a handful of racial categories—whites, blacks (or African Americans), Hispanics/Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans (or First Nations)—but it is clear that each of these is constituted by a wide variety of ethnic groups. In some contexts, members of different ethnic groups within a racial category might join forces to attain a common goal (e.g., access to scarce resources, fighting prejudice and discrimination), while in other contexts they would not.

Ethnicity, Race, And the New Testament

As indicated above, race has generally been an identity marker placed on others by outside observers and is usually based on an ideology of “difference” that is presumed to be biological in nature. Often, the main marker for identifying “race” in the West has been skin color and other physiological markers. While authors from the first century noted the skin color of some people groups, these observations seem not to have formed the same types of boundaries and barriers that they do today. Thus, to read “race” into the
New Testament is an anachronistic practice. Ethnicity, however, is generally understood as a set of identity markers that are both internal and external to a specific group and which would be affirmed by that particular group. While the two most basic ethnic markers have been descent from a common ancestor and shared location or homeland, as we indicate above other boundary markers can also form and shape cultural groupings. Although there are basic identity markers that can indicate ethnicity, it is, as discussed above, a complex concept. Sometimes a group of people may not be markedly different from those around it, but there is still a recognition of ethnic difference (Barth 1969). Everett Hughes writes that

it is an ethnic group. . because the people in it and the people out of it know that it is one; because both the ins and the outs talk, feel, and act as if it were a separate group. This is possible only if there are ways of telling who belongs to the group and who does not, and if a person learns early, deeply, and usually irrevocably to what group he belongs. If it is easy to resign from the group, it is not truly an ethnic group (quoted in Esler 2003:42).

Ethnicity was known and recognized in the ancient world of the first century. In the New Testament, there is reference to Jews, Greeks, Romans, Cyprians, Samaritans, Syrians, Scythians, and Ethiopians among others. And in the first century world there was an awareness that different groups of people associated together based on common ancestry and geographical location. The Roman empire was a collection of ethnic groups ruled by a dominant group. In the context of a multi-ethnic situation, one of the tasks of any ethnic minority is to differentiate itself from the surrounding culture(s). At the same time, adding to the complexity of ethnic identity, individuals can be part of multiple ethnic groups. As a contemporary example, we can identify Steve as both Basque and American. Both of these are ethnic identities that he self-identifies with, but he operates out of one or the other (or a combination) differently depending on the context in which he finds himself.

We can look at the Jews of the first century as one example of ethnic identity. On the one hand, Jews were an ethnic group that was scattered throughout the Roman Empire; while, on the other hand, there was also a population of Jews in Israel itself. Within Israel, Jews could have multiple identities. We find some who identify themselves as Galileans (e.g., from the region of Galilee) while others are from Jerusalem. This is an example of a “nested identity.” A person can be a member of both the larger group of Jews inhabiting Israel and a smaller group belonging to a particular city or region. When we look at the diaspora reality of the Jewish people, we can consider how outsiders recognized Jews in distinction from themselves: 1) by their observance of Torah (including circumcision, Sabbath observance, and dietary laws); and 2) by their gathering together in groups or associations
(e.g., synagogues). This describes how Jews might be recognized by those who were outside of their group. But how would they have described themselves? Jews trace their lineage back to a common set of ancestors (Abraham, Moses, and David) who were called by and walked with the only true God, the Creator and Master of the universe. And, Jews recognized a common ancestral homeland given to them by the one true God who kept covenant with them. In response, Jews lived out their obedience to Torah (e.g., the markers observable by outsiders) even when residing outside of their ancestral homeland (Buell and Hodge 2004:244-45). In addition, they identified themselves by use of a proper name (Hansen 2007:47). As a group, Jews tended to identify themselves in distinction to all others who were often lumped together under the broad term “Gentiles” (e;ŋnh). While Jews understood that Gentiles were composed of a variety of different ethnic groups, and thus resembled a racial category, the purpose of ethnic self-identification is to solidify the identity of one’s own group. In this matter, the Jews reflected common practice in the ancient world—the practice of locating one’s own group as distinctive against a larger grouping of “all the rest” and assuming that one’s own group was superior to others (Cosgrove 2006:273).

This one brief example from the first century demonstrates two of the key markers used in contemporary sociological and anthropological theory to identify ethnicity: namely, identification with a common ancestor and a common homeland as well as the additional marker of a group name (Jews). At the same time, those who study ethnicity recognize that the boundaries that determine the identity of the group are porous (Hansen 2007:70). In other words, to continue our example, one can become a Jew even if one is not born into the Jewish ethnicity. In this example, one would need to take on the markers of Jewish identity in order to begin to be accepted into the Jewish “family” or ethnicity, and one would need to be accepted into the inside of the group by those who already belong to the group.

Just as Jews identified themselves as a group descended from a common ancestor, and thus as in many ways the largest unit of a kinship group, so too Christians take up the language of ethnicity and kinship in the New Testament. It becomes clear that the good news of God’s faithfulness and his saving work in the person of Jesus Christ is good news for all nations (e;ŋnh). This theme is revealed in a variety of ways. For example, the Gospels show that Jesus’ message is not only for the Jews but for all the nations (e.g., Mark 11:17; Luke 2:32, et al.). In the Acts of the Apostles there is a deliberate inclusion of those from other cultures and ethnicities in the new Christian mission and reality. The message is for both Greek and Aramaic speaking Jews (Acts 6). The good news is for both Jews and Samaritans (ch 8). The new understanding of the word of God through Jesus Christ is for both
Jews and Ethiopians, even for eunuchs (chs 7 and 8). The gift of the Holy Spirit is for Jews and Samaritans and the whole household of a Roman centurion (ch 10). And Paul’s mission of spreading the good news is for Asia Minor and Greece and Rome itself. But the question is, when these people from all over the known world are baptized into life in Christ, do they leave behind or give up their previous ethnic identity? To put it more baldly, is their previous ethnic identity eradicated and replaced with a new identity?

It seems clear that there was at least one group in the early church that insisted that all those who became followers of Jesus and who identified themselves with the new movement of God through the gift of the Holy Spirit should become Jews by receiving circumcision and observing the dietary restrictions and laws of the Torah (implied from Gal 2:12 et al.). This position was adamantly argued against by the apostle Paul who insisted that the new identity that Gentiles received in Christ did not involve becoming Jewish. In fact, he argues that even though he himself as well as Peter are both Jewish they have come to believe that they are justified because of their relationship with Jesus Christ (Gal 2:16) rather than because of their relationship to the law. It is clear from Galatians in particular and other parts of the New Testament that non-Jews are not required to become Jewish in order to be Christian. But this still leaves open the question of whether people are required to give up their previous ethnic identity as part of their conversion.

In other words, is there a Christian identity that both supersedes and subsumes ethnic identity? This paper will argue that the answer to that question is, “Yes, there is a Christian identity and ethos that supersedes ethnic identity.” And, this paper will also argue that not all ethnic or cultural markers must be given up in order to be Christian.

If the primary markers of ethnic identity are common ancestry and common locale, we may suggest, along with others, that Christians are given a new ethnic identity upon their entry into faith (Hansen 2007:53). Christians are identified as the “children of God” (e.g., John 1:12; Rom 8:12) and find their location and home in Christ (e.g., Rom 6:11). These are ethnic markers that can be used to identify themselves with one another. But what sets them apart in a recognizable way for outsiders? Jesus identifies this as the ethic of love that Christians have towards one another (e.g., John 13:34-35). This other-oriented way of life—a way of life that bears the burdens of others, that gives up one’s rights for the sake of the other, that recognizes the value and necessity of the body (i.e., the Christian group)—is one of the external marks of Christian faith. It is worth reminding ourselves, as well, that care for the other was not a “natural” outcome of the first century culture. Rather, this was a culture in which family groups were engaged in a great deal of competition to claim and retain as much available honor as possible for themselves (DeSilva 2000). In such a context, “Paul’s directions to show
mercy, care for the weak, place the honor of others ahead of your own, maintain unity and peace, all reflect an ethos that in antiquity would be appropriate only within the family or clan" (Hansen 2007:58).

The language of the New Testament locates Christians within a new family, a family with God as its head and with relationship in Christ as its main location. And this new familial and thus ethnic identity is to shape the behavior of Christians to be a certain type of people. But this still leaves unanswered the question regarding the extent to which this new ethnic identity eradicates one's old ethnic identity. In answering this question we might consider two examples: First, the example of the life of the Apostle Paul; and, second, the oft-cited passage in Gal 3:28 (“there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”).

The Apostle Paul was sent to the uncircumcised (Gal 2:7). It appears that while he defended Gentile converts from groups who would have exorted them to become Jewish, he also did not cease to be a Jew. See, for example, Paul’s cultural practices when he went up to Jerusalem and into the temple in Acts 21. But at the same time, Paul’s primary ethnic identity is as one who “is subject to the law of Christ” (1 Cor 9:21). In his letter to the Corinthians, he is inflexible in regards to his primary identity as one whose life is ruled by the law of Christ, but he is flexible in his other ethnic orientations. He is willing to live as a Jew for the sake of winning those who are Jews and to live as a Gentile in order to win those who are Gentiles. But neither Jewish nor Gentile ethnicity is his primary identity. In some ways, Paul displays an example of “nested identity.” On the one hand, his primary identity is as a follower of Jesus, but he can act within other ethnic identities that he also has.

One of the verses that comes easily to mind when discussing the question of whether previous ethnic identity should be eradicated is Galatians 3:28. A surface reading of the text apart from its context in Galatians can be understood as communicating that all the significant social boundaries of the first century are eradicated through oneness in Christ. One can name three significant social boundaries at this point: ethnicity (Jew/Greek), status (slave/free), and gender (male/female) (Hays 2003:185). This reading would “level the playing field” in a radical assertion of equality in which the persons involved cease to belong to their previous identities as Jew or Greek or slave or free or male or female and instead are all the same in Christ.

Others have suggested that Galatians 3:28 should be understood in light of the privilege that falls on one side of the equation. In other words, Jews, free people, and males had more power and position in the court of reputation of the new Christian movement than Greeks, slaves, and females. For the sake of Christian unity, Paul reminds his audience that these are no longer their primary identities. Rather, their primary identity is now located in Christ. Do people cease to be male or female when they come to Christ? No.
But these identity markers are no longer their primary orientation towards life. Rather that orientation is as one who has put on Christ and been born not only into new life but into the new ethnic identity of God's family. Some have argued that the underlying concern behind Paul's presentation of his preaching to the Jerusalem elders (Gal 2:2) is that his assertion that Gentiles were fully children of God without being circumcised would not be accepted and would thus force a split between groups who advocated circumcision and those, like himself, who did not (Hansen 2007:85). In Galatians, Paul identifies his audience as his children, “Sarah's offspring, residents and children of the eschatological Jerusalem, sons of Abraham, heirs of his blessing, and, above all, as sons of God through Jesus Christ” (Hansen 2007:129). This is a new ethnic identity—a reworking of the traditional Jewish identity that is only possible in light of the cross. In light of this, Paul must confront any idea that “separate-but-equal” was a sufficient understanding of Christian unity. In Gal 2 this is demonstrated in the confrontation between Peter and Paul over table fellowship. Peter has withdrawn from eating with the Gentiles, leaving two implied choices: one, separate tables; or, two, Gentile conformity to Jewish dietary practices (which would be another move towards becoming Jewish). Paul argues for unity in Christ, rather than for separate practices. In this regard, it is the new identity as members of Christ that forms the most important ethnic identity for believers. At the same time, Paul is still able to recognize the other ethnic identities of the believers. Thus, he can identify Titus as a Greek (Gal 2:3) who is accepted by those in Jerusalem. But these types of ethnic realities should never be the controlling ethnic reality for Christians. Thus, one can hear the call to a new identity as the people of God, and such a call may mean giving up controlling ethnic identities as well as other identity markers, but there appear to be secondary ethnic and identity markers that still remain.

**Ethnicity and Race in the United States**

All cultures, including those of first century Palestine, develop ideologies that are used to “make sense” of the ethnic or cultural diversity of their social reality. The term ideology is most commonly used to refer to the political beliefs of a person or movement, and often with negative connotations; to label someone an ideologue is to dismiss him or her as a propagandist for a cause, someone who cannot be rationally engaged in a political discussion. However, the term can also be used in a broader sense, seeing ideologies as “schematic images of the social order” that are “most distinctly, maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience” (Geertz 1973: 218, 220). Using the term in this way, the anthropologist Raymond Scupin has written,
Cultural anthropologists have established that ingrained attitudes, general and scientific prejudices, and economic competition have often had far more to do with racial definitions than have the real physical attributes or geographic origins of people. ‘Race’ in these investigations is conceived of as a cultural construction, not a biological fact. It is in reality a kind of ideology, a way of thinking about, speaking about, and organizing relations among and within human groups” (2002:12, emphasis added).

In North America these ideologies were used prior to colonization in encounters between Native American groups. But our focus here is on how the ideology of race developed within the dominant (white) population, and how this continues to affect race relations in the United States today.

Perhaps a good starting point for the articulation of this ideology is found in the writing of one of our Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson. The same person who penned the incredible words that “All men are created equal” also wrote in 1781, “I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (Notes on the State of Virginia, Query 14, Laws). Less than a hundred years later this “suspicion” was a scientific “fact,” and codified through, among other things, the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision in 1857, which declared that slaves were “chattel” (i.e., moveable property), remained so even if they moved to free territories, and could not become citizens of the United States.

Racialism in the West, the belief “that Caucasians are biologically superior and that most people of color, especially blacks, have an inferior culture determined by their ‘race’” (Lieberman 2003: 36) has its scientific roots in the classificatory work of the Swedish botanist Linnaeus. His publication in 1758 classified humans into four categories—white, red, yellow, and black—and attached behavioral characteristics with each “race.” As Lieberman notes, “It was a taxonomy of superiority-inferiority that reflected the politically correct views of his time. It was a way of thinking that would prevail, with few exceptions, for the next three hundred years” (2003: 38). The scientific bases for this ideology of race was further expanded in the first half of the nineteenth century through the cranial measurements of Samuel Morton. Morton’s results supported the prevailing view that Caucasians had larger brain sizes, and were therefore more intelligent and advanced than other “races.” What Morton’s work really demonstrates is the power of our ideologies to affect how research is done and how results are interpreted. Morton systematically, though perhaps unintentionally, made sampling errors that reinforced the dominant racialist ideology of the day (see Gould 1996 for a thorough critique of Morton’s methodology). So strong was this racialist ideology that many prominent
scientists proposed that the different races represented separate “creations” (polygenism). By the time anthropology as a discipline came on the scene in the latter half of the nineteenth century, this racialist view of the world was firmly rooted in science. Not surprisingly, the early anthropologists applied these views to the cultures of the world, seeing some as being in the evolutionary stage of savagery, others in barbarism, and still others (i.e., whites) as civilized.

Race As A Cultural Construct

The twentieth century saw science move away from this typological model of “race” as the fields of genetics, physical anthropology, archaeology, as well as anthropological fieldwork among cultures around the world, helped to dispel the previous racialist assumptions. However, this model still largely informs the “folk” or popular understanding of race in the United States (as well as most of the West). People find it hard to grasp that “race” as they understand it does not exist, and that it is, in fact, a cultural construct. One of the important things that our cultures do for is categorize the world, including the social world. When race is presented as “not real” to an audience (e.g., students) it is often met with the incredulous response “Of course races exist. Just look around you.” What they fail to grasp is that the meanings they are attributing to these different categories of humans is based on a particular interpretive framework provided by their culture, not biology.

Probably the best way to illustrate this fact is to examine how other cultures categorize humans and define “races.” In the United States we have developed a system where race is related to ancestry—you are what your parents are. And if a person’s ancestry is mixed, then we have traditionally applied the “one drop rule” and hypo-descent. That is, if a person has any ancestors who were racial minorities, then that person is considered to be of that minority race. A current example of this would be president Obama; he is equally of African and white American descent, yet he is viewed as “black.” Brazil, on the other hand, defines races based on the physical appearance of the person. Characteristics such as skin color (and shade), hair texture, eye color, lip and nose shape are taken into consideration to determine “race.” A person’s race depends on the combination of these characteristics that he or she has. Contrary to what we would find in the United States, in the Brazilian classificatory system siblings can be different races. So, people who would be classified in one way in Brazil are often classified in another way in the United States, and vice versa, which can be quite confusing and disconcerting for the individuals involved (see Fish 1995). Races, then, are not found in nature, but rather in culture.
Social Ideologies

To argue that race is a cultural construction is not to say that race doesn’t matter, because it is real in its social implications. And those social implications are determined, to a certain degree, by the ideologies we hold about the way society is, or should be, structured and the relationship among its various parts. In other words, social ideologies are the “lenses” we use to view social reality. Throughout most of American history the dominant social ideology has been assimilationist in nature. Immigrants were to come to the United States, give up their “native” cultures and identity, and “become American.” Just what “becoming American” meant depended on the particular social ideology that was employed. Early in our history the dominant ideology was Anglo-conformity. Through this lens “becoming American” meant adopting the cultural beliefs and social practices inherited from the British colonists. This ideology can be clearly seen in the writing of another of our Founding Fathers, John Jay, who wrote in 1787:

Providence had been pleased to give this one connected country, to one united people, a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs (The Federalist Papers).

A more contemporary example of this ideology is when the district attorney in the movie My Cousin Vinny addresses the jury in a murder case, and tells them, “You’re the jury. It’s your job to decide who’s tellin’ the truth. The Truth: that’s what verdict means. It’s a word that came down from England and all our l’il ole ancestors;” which is met with a bewildered look by an African American member of the jury.

A second dominant assimilationist social ideology, and one that is still widely employed today, is the Melting Pot. In contrast to Anglo-conformity, the Melting Pot does not advocate assimilating into the sociocultural patterns established by our l’il ole English ancestors, but rather into something distinctly American. As a French immigrant, Jean de Crèvecoeur, wrote in 1782,

What then is the American, this new man?...He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received into the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world (Letters From an American Farmer).

In the 1960s a third social ideology began to develop which challenged the assimilationist assumptions of the previous two and acknowledged the continued cultural diversity found in the United States. This ideology, referred
to as cultural pluralism, or more recently, multiculturalism, argues that
American society is, and always has been, socially and culturally heterogeneous
(Takaki 2008). It also points out that although the dominant social ideology
has been assimilationist in nature, not all minority populations were allowed
to assimilate—people of color were, and to a certain extent still are, excluded.
Interestingly, whereas certain immigrant groups were initially classified as
separate “races” in the American racialist scheme, eventually many of them
came to be considered “white” (e.g., Italians and Irish. See Guglielmo and

Today the assimilationist and pluralist social ideologies are both held by
large segments of American society, which has spurred lively, if not angry,
debate over such issues as immigration, access to social services, education,
and health care. Considering just the first of these, immigration, those holding
to an assimilationist ideology argue that the influx of such a large number of
Latinos is a threat to American society as assimilation cannot occur fast enough
to incorporate them into the American mainstream. This is very similar to the
argument that was made around the turn of the twentieth century when large
numbers of immigrants were arriving from southern and eastern Europe
(my grandfather from the Basque Country of Spain being one of them). At
that time the fear of the impact these immigrants might have on American
society and culture, based on the assimilationist ideology, led to very restrictive
immigration policies in the 1920s that essentially stemmed the flow of these
immigrants. Advocates of multiculturalism, on the other hand, view the
influx of immigrants from Latin America as something positive for American
society as they infuse the society with values that Americans have long viewed
as positive. These include, among other things, a deep belief in, and
commitment to, family, and a strong work ethic.

What’s interesting about social ideologies is that the same person, or
community, can employ different ones depending on the context. An example
of this is found in the Iowa town of Postville (see Bloom 2001). Like many
small towns in Iowa, Postville’s main economy is based on a local meat
packing plant. When the plant was purchased by Hasidic Jews from New
York City and turned into a kosher meat plant, the people of Postville, the
majority being descendants of German immigrants, were puzzled by the
culture and religious practices of these newcomers. Still, they expected the
Jews to assimilate into the dominant culture and society of the town.
However, in order to maintain their kosher lifestyle, and their religious beliefs
and practices, the Jewish residents largely remained segregated from the native
population. This development was not viewed positively by many of the
natives in Postville, who couldn’t understand why these “white” people
wouldn’t want to become a part of the larger community. A second population
also arrived in the town around the same time to work in the meat plant—
Latino immigrants. Unlike their assimilationist frustrations with the Hasidic Jews, the native population was not too keen to have these immigrants in their town, and although the church was a place where natives and immigrants could have come together, many of the whites started going to church in nearby towns to avoid this engagement.

So, on the one hand natives used an assimilationist ideology with respect to the white Jews, but on the other a pluralist ideology (in its segregationist form) when it came to the Latinos. In this case we see the interplay between ethnicity and race; the Jews were “white” but had a distinct identity and culture, while the Latinos were culturally different but were also, according to the American scheme, of a different “race.” What the Postville case also illustrates is that it is members of the dominant society who set the rules of who gets to (or should) assimilate, and who can’t (or shouldn’t be allowed to). And, as we’ve indicated above, throughout American history it has been people of color who were kept out.

**Biblical Ideal for the People of God**

The biblical ideal is for those who follow Jesus to take on a new ethnic identity as the children of God who find their new life clothed in Christ and filled with the marks of their new life in Christ: love, joy, peace, patience, godliness, self-control, brotherly love, goodness, mercy, justice, obedience, and burden sharing. From the early days of the church there has been a concern over the markers of identity. There were some in the early church who argued that circumcision would be the only way in which Gentiles would come to fully belong to the early church. But this position was rejected in place of a position in which all were made new together as a new people of God with a new identity. In addition, other New Testament texts, including 1 Cor 8-9 and 12-14, argue that Christian unity is promoted when those with power and position are willing to give up their rights, position, and even honor for the sake of the weaker brother (e.g., 1 Cor 8-9) and when there is a recognition that all parts of the body of Christ are needed. In a similar way, one can assert that although all are one in Christ Jesus, individuals do not cease to be male or cease to be female; nor are slaves suddenly made free or those who are free made slaves. The challenge in light of Corinthians is to lay down those identity markers that would cause one group to exalt themselves over another. For the way of Christ is the way marked by self-sacrifice for the purpose of building up the unity of the body of Christ. This may mean the sacrifice of particular ethnic identity markers in order to best serve the unity of the body, but it does not have to mean and should not be taken to mean a complete eradication of one’s previous ethnic identity prior to being gripped by the way of the cross.
Ethnicity, Race, and the Church in the United States

Unfortunately, and much to our shame, the church in the United States has not been “a city on a hill” when it comes to challenging the dominant racialist ideology of the broader society. On the contrary, we too often have read scripture through the lens of that ideology, using it to justify such abominable institutions as slavery, as well as such segregationist practices as Jim Crow laws in the South. Race relations have certainly changed a great deal since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, but sadly what Martin Luther King, Jr. observed back in 1963 is still largely true today—that 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in our country. Today “[n]early 90 percent of American congregations are at least 90 percent one racial group” (Emerson and Kim 2003:217). Emerson and Kim give several reasons for this continued segregation along racial lines, such as 1) churches, like other voluntary associations, tend to attract members who are socially comfortable with one another; 2) churches often serve as “enclaves of support and identity,” especially where different languages are spoken; and 3) churches tend to draw from their local neighborhoods, and therefore reflect the racial/ethnic composition of those neighborhoods.

However, another key element is that, as we’ve stated above, the church is affected by the ideology of our racialized society. As Emerson and Smith note, “a racialized society is a society wherein race matters profoundly . . . it is a society that allocates differential economic, political, social, and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines that are socially constructed” (2000:7). They go on to argue that white evangelicals have not dealt well with racial issues because they most often misdiagnose the problem, seeing it as personal rather than structural. As a result, the argument goes something like this: “If I and my acquaintances are not racist, then the issue with race is dealt with and the problem is with racial minorities over-blowing the issue.” Emerson and Smith continue, “Most white evangelicals, directed by their cultural tools, fail to recognize the institutionalization of racialization—in economic, political, educational, social, and religious systems” (p. 170).

The lasting impact of this segregation is that whites don’t get to know people from ethnic and racial minority populations, and vice versa. However, blacks and other minorities have had to adapt to the dominant culture and society, and therefore know it to a certain degree, whereas whites, owing to their lack of immersion in minority cultures and associations, don’t know or understand the “cultural toolkit” of these minorities. Thus the problem of the racialized church continues in its seemingly never-ending cycle.

To break this cycle will take intentional effort on the part of all Christians involved. White evangelicals will need to work hard to understand the complexity of our racialized society, and the role that race continues to play
in our churches, if we are to bring about true reconciliation. This will be no easy task since, as Clifford notes,


And for their part, ethnic and racial minority Christians will have to forgive past injustices at the hands of the dominant group, and develop a level of trust that will free them to interact with their white brethren in the unity and love of Christ. Again, given the past, and present, abuses, this will be no easy task. But as Volf (1996) argues, we as Christians have the hope of reconciliation because we, above all other peoples and religions of the world, have a theology of the cross. How can we, who while we were yet sinners were reconciled to God, not forgive and be reconciled to our brothers and sisters in Christ?

Ultimately, true reconciliation will take place only when all Christians in the United States take on the “markers” of our identity in Christ discussed above—love, joy, peace, patience, godliness, self-control, brotherly love, goodness, mercy, justice, obedience, and burden sharing—and, with humility, strive to understand and serve one another as brothers and sisters in the family of God.

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Endnotes

1 The authors found the collaborative process for this paper both enjoyable and challenging. While there was broad agreement on most of the points presented, there were certain areas where the authors “agreed to disagree.”


Though there may be more evidence of racial understandings in the Old Testament (Hays 2003).

There are, of course, exceptions to this. Quakers and other Christian groups were some of the early abolitionists in the country, and the Civil Rights Movement originated and was sustained by the African American church in the South.