

Ethnic Harmony Affirmations and Denials

*A Statement by the Council of Elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church
February 6, 2021*

The elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church recognize that the issue of ethnic harmony has become a source of some significant confusion and division. We lament that many people have experienced the painful effects of ethnic partiality and injustice. We are all broken people, and we all stumble in many ways (James 3:2). We seek to humbly put ourselves under the word of God. We pray that the word of Christ would dwell in us richly (Colossians 3:16) and that the love of Christ would control us completely (2 Corinthians 5:14). We are eager to maintain the oneness of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3), and we have a fervent longing to love one another by speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). We believe that this cause of love and clarity requires both affirmations and denials. We have tried to speak clearly and concisely about what we are for and what we are against. We believe that in the absence of biblical clarity, ethnic harmony becomes a “wax nose” that we can shape and twist any way we like. It is possible to use the same terminology but utilize a different standard of reference. We simply cannot allow politics or secular culture to define our terms or determine our beliefs. Jesus puts his finger on ethnic harmony and says, “Mine.”

Therefore, the aim of these affirmations and denials is to rightly represent the voice of Jesus Christ. The One who designed ethnic diversity has unparalleled authority and has the final word on the whole issue. The lordship of Christ over the church means that his designs and his purposes should be brought to the forefront of the discussion rather than fading into the background while we mimic secular assumptions, arguments, and solutions. We must think deeply and biblically about how Christ aims to be made much of in ethnic harmony.

1. The Image of God

We affirm that God created every human in his image with equal worth in his sight (Genesis 1:26–27, 5:1–2, 9:6; James 3:9).

We deny that humans can treat other humans unjustly without offending their Creator. God does not show partiality or favoritism (Deuteronomy 10:17, 2 Chronicles 19:7, Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11, Galatians 2:6, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25, 1 Peter 1:17), nor should we (Proverbs 18:5, 24:23, 28:21; James 2:1–13; cf. Jude 16). Therefore, ethnic partiality is sinful.

2. Race

We affirm that we all share one race—the human race. We share the same bloodline. We all have the same original parents, Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:20, 5:1–2; Acts 17:26).

We deny that the modern category of *race* matches what the Bible says about humans. According to contemporary usage, *race* is primarily physical or biological—focusing, for example, on skin color, facial features, and hair texture. The category of *ethnicity* matches more closely what the Bible says about humans. Ethnicity is primarily cultural—that is, it includes shared physical characteristics and ancestry but also includes characteristics such as culture, language, and geopolitics.

We acknowledge that it is important to understand the role that the term *race* has played in our nation's history and throughout the world. The concept of race is part of a painful past; it is a social construct that has been used in the service of oppression with ongoing implications of superiority and inferiority. We deny that Christians should uphold divisions along racial or ethnic lines. *Racism* is sinful because it dishonors God by exhibiting an explicit or implicit attitude, belief, or practice that values one race over other races.

3. People Groups

We affirm that God's global plan to save sinners includes people from every ethnic group (Genesis 12:1–3; Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 10:9–43; Romans 1:5; Galatians 2:11–16; 3:8, 14, 16, 28–29; Colossians 3:11; Revelation 5:9, 7:9, 14:6)—both Jews and Gentiles (Genesis 12:1–3; Deuteronomy 7:6–8; Matthew 28:18–20; Galatians 3:8, 14, 16, 28–29; Colossians 3:11).

We deny that any one people group has more value in God's sight than another. We exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things *for the joy of all peoples* through Jesus Christ.

4. Interethnic Marriage

We affirm that God approves of interethnic marriage (e.g., Numbers 12, Ruth 4:13–22). Opposing the concept of interethnic marriage manifests deep-rooted ethnic partiality.

We deny that God approves of interfaith marriage—that is, marriage between a believer and an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:39, 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1).

5. Our Neighbors

We affirm that we must love our neighbors across ethnic lines—even when such love is countercultural, costly, and inconvenient (Luke 10:25–37).

We deny that ethnic groups should perpetuate antagonistic us-versus-them relations.

6. Church Unity

We affirm that the church must maintain the unity (including ethnic harmony) that Christ powerfully created (Ephesians 2:11–3:6, 4:1–6; Colossians 3:11). We affirm God’s calling on all Christians to love one another as Christ loved us by means of kindness, forgiveness, and humble self-sacrifice (Ephesians 4:32, Philippians 2:1–8; Colossians 3:12–15).

We deny that any self-defining characteristic is more significant than our identity in Christ.

7. Ethnic Diversity in the Church

We affirm that the church should prize and welcome the ethnic harmony that Jesus purchased with his blood because that glorifies God.

We deny that ethnic diversity should be an end in itself that we pursue at any cost. We deny that diversity should be treasured above biblical fidelity and sound doctrine.

8. Justice

We affirm that the church must love and do justice, which entails treating all peoples from all ethnicities justly and encouraging its members to pursue justice in society. Justice is making righteous judgments according to the standard of God’s righteousness (1 Kings 3:28, Proverbs 29:4). We recognize that individuals and groups with power have often exploited the vulnerable for their own gain (Exodus 1:5–14, James 5:1–6) and that sinners can create unjust systems (Esther 3:7–14, Psalm 94:20–21, Isaiah 10:1–2). We should examine suspected examples of systemic injustice on their own merits, seeking to destroy ungodly strongholds and taking every thought captive to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4–5).

Although worldly systems of thought can make accurate observations, we reject all systems of thought that view relationships primarily through the lens of power—that is, those with more power are inherently oppressors, and those with less power are inherently oppressed (see Colossians 2:8). We deny that only those with more power can be guilty of showing ethnic

partiality. Any person of any ethnicity can be guilty of showing ethnic partiality (cf. Acts 6:1, James 2:1–13).

9. Political Engagement

We affirm that when pursuing justice in society, Christians should distinguish between clear biblical commands and issues that require wisdom. For a clear biblical command, there is a straight line from a biblical or theological principle to a political position (e.g., the Bible forbids murder, so we oppose abortion). For an issue that requires wisdom, there is a multistep process from a biblical or theological principle to a political position (e.g., immigration policy). Fellow church members should agree on what the Bible clearly commands, and they should recognize Christian freedom on issues that require wisdom (Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8). We also affirm that believers should consistently hold their kingdom citizenship as primary over their citizenship in any nation on earth (Philippians 3:20, Ephesians 2:19, Hebrews 11:13–16).

We deny that we must completely agree on issues that require wisdom in order to be fellow church members. Such issues include tax policy, government spending priorities, accounting for ethnic disparities, presenting American history, specifying systemic injustices, and analyzing policing and America’s judicial system. Christians should respect fellow church members who have differently calibrated consciences on such political issues. Further, insisting that Christians agree on such issues misrepresents Christ to non-Christians. Consequently, we reject any attempt to fuse together one’s national/political identity with one’s Christian identity in a way that equates or conflates allegiance to country with allegiance to God.

10. The Mission of the Church

We affirm that the mission of the church is the Great Commission: “Make disciples of all nations” by baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and by teaching them to observe everything that Jesus commands us (Matthew 28:19–20). God has commissioned local churches, acting corporately, to teach everything Jesus commanded and to equip saints for their various ministries (Ephesians 4:11–12). While Christians care about alleviating present earthly suffering, we care especially about alleviating eternal suffering by verbally proclaiming Jesus as Savior and Lord and calling all to repent and believe (Acts 14:27; Romans 10:14–17, 15:18; 1 Corinthians 15:1–2, 11; Colossians 1:28).

We deny that doing justice is equivalent to the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1–2). Good works are the fruit of regeneration and conversion (Titus 2:14, 3:14). We also deny that the church’s corporate mission is identical to the mission God has given individual believers. God has not commissioned local churches, acting corporately, to advocate across the whole range of issues that comprise the work of government.