

## Race Through the Fisheye

Have you noticed the “fish eye” mirrors on the back of RV windows? From the trailing vehicle you see nothing but distortion. From the inside is a panoramic view of following cars. Such are racial relations in the US. From the outside perspective of whites, the lens of racial relations is distorted and perplexing. From the black insider perspective, much of what follows them down the road is rather clear—a consequence of slavery and racial oppression, both institutionalized and non-institutionalized. Whites think relations are getting better all the time, and take their SUV’s into the passing lane. But seventy-four percent of black adults and 62% of black teens think racial relations are getting worse<sup>1</sup> and that they can’t accelerate into the passing lane to get beyond this issue. There is too much unresolved dead weight. So our cultures look at each other through the fish eye, without really seeing.

What is the basis of blacks and whites getting along as though color were a non-issue? We must go back centuries to when Africans sold their black victims to Arabs and Europeans, who then, as in West Africa, fattened them to 140 lbs. for shipment, being “graded” by strength and beauty, then shipped to strange continents, as many as 10-15 million from that area alone from the 1500s to the 1800s<sup>2</sup>. For whites, we need to begin to understand a family tree where the great-great grandmother may have been a white man’s slave to be used as he chose. Or where one’s own mother, as a sharecropper, was required to have sexual relations with the landowner. A friend had a suspiciously light-colored brother and her mother—that sharecropper-- years later, told her that she didn’t have to have such relations. Where state laws forbade teaching blacks to read, and where no southern state gave the legal permission for slaves to marry<sup>3</sup>. Where the only small freedom was found inside Shady Grove Baptist church. A self-taught pastor did the best he could to shepherd the flock and give hope to his people.

OK, granted that all this happened, and more. Do you expect whites to pay reparations or something? The reparation is perhaps feeling a little pain for the past, going an extra mile in understanding when black folks seem too thin-skinned. It’s acknowledging that blacks were the only unwilling immigrants to land here, brought as machines, costing hundreds or thousands for one in good condition. We whites have a lot to live down. Looking at history is a fairly light penance, if penance for ancestors were appropriate. But blacks quickly note—it’s not just about history. It’s about today and the day before. It’s about staring at interracial couples (and I sometimes find myself critiquing my own feelings here). It’s about being stereotyped, even by other blacks. Jesse Jackson had the candor to admit to being mortified to find himself relieved when the footsteps behind him were not those of a black man. For whatever complex of reasons, if you check out the next road crew or kitchen staff for ethnic composition and management, looks awfully black, doesn’t it? The jobs at the bottom generally are black. With more Hispanics, that may not change. But if they were all white,

with mostly black supervisors, how would we whites feel? Yes, there are mysteries in the observed order of things. How can American slavery, when further importation was officially abolished in 1808 and Emancipation given in 1863, still be blamed for what we see today? Have some survival strategies and attitudes survived these past five generations to the detriment of the race? Those who simply don't care anymore and those who are marginalized are often in the ghetto—the “bricks.” They have high self-esteem from the home-boys, while “bustin’ a sag” on Main Street with their underwear in full view. They appear, at least, not to care anymore what the white world thinks, and carry their rapper-narrated environment via Walkman CD and mega bass, truck-eating dual speakers. This is in-your-face, let-me-see-if-I-can-embarrass-*you* behavior. Reconciliation is not the issue. Maintaining identity is.

But the majority of Blacks seem to care. They look for sincere white folks they can trust. Trust. The bedrock issue in all human relationships. How can we build trust? Or why should we try? For a pagan there is probably no good reason, unless it involves business, or an “upper-story” self-contradictory philosophical premise of the inherent dignity of people who somehow evolved by “time, plus chance, plus nothing.”

For a Christian, we try because we are neither better nor worse than any other ethnic group. If *all* of us came from Adam and Eve, and from them God made every nation (Acts 17:26), then we are *all* brothers and sisters. God shows no partiality, as culture and religion-bound Peter finally grasped in Acts 10, then why should we? Jesus was extolled in Rev. 5:9 because: “With your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (“*ethnous*”—NIV). If every tribe, people and nation had to be purchased by the same costly price, one ethnic group is not inherently superior in God's view than another, or an additional price would have been required. To be “godly,” then, is to share God's estimate. To consider ourselves superior because of our ethnic group membership (through no efforts of our own) is ungodly.

Those “in Christ” are “one in Christ,” superceding divisions of ethnicity, socio-economic status and gender (Gal. 3:28). Economic disparities are even harder to bridge than ethnic ones (Prov. 19:7—Christ is the best socio-economic development foundation the world will ever see). Those reconciled to Christ are commissioned to be reconcilers between God and man (2 Cor. 5:18-20). If we won't love radically different brothers and sisters in Christ, doesn't this compromise our efforts to reconcile those whom God already loves to Himself? Will we love long enough to build trust? Will we keep trying to make eye contact through the plastic lens?

---

<sup>1</sup>Barna Research Online, “Existing stereotypes about African-Americans are way off the mark—and impede reconciliation,” Feb. 1, 2000, [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org).

<sup>2</sup>Lamb, David. 1987 ed., *The Africans*, p. 146-148. ISBN: 0394753089.

<sup>3</sup>Davis, David B., "Slavery," in World Book Encyclopedia, 1984, p. 416.

Jim Sutherland, Ph.D.