



Whiteness

Where does one start in a book dedicated to thinking about ethnicity? It is a topic that refuses to go away, affecting the world and the church in ongoing conversations, arguments, and issues. The topics of race, ethnicity, and social justice, so intricately interconnected, continue to make their way up the social media highway, forcing Christians to address the chaotic mess left in their wake. The rhetoric has been bold, openly unapologetic, and divisive. It is almost unbelievable that some of the things being touted across various platforms on and off the internet are being said with a straight face. We must be willing to address these things with historical honesty and scriptural faithfulness, unflinchingly dealing with these critical topics through the lens of a biblical worldview.

What Is “Whiteness”?

And so we start by exploring the idea of “whiteness” and endeavoring, first and foremost, to place a concrete definition around what the term actually means. This is a deviation from the work of so many “experts” in the field of ethnicity who never bother to define the terms they use and then use ambiguity to attach this undefined “whiteness” to whatever change they want to see made. But words have meaning, and context—for better or worse—is derived from the meaning we

give to the words we use daily. So to have an informed, intelligent, and, more importantly, biblical conversation about the subject of “whiteness,” the term “whiteness” must be objectively defined so that our discussion of this subject is based on that objective definition as held up against what the Word of God says about it.

Here is our working definition of “whiteness,” distilled from what the ethnicity “experts” seem to be saying when they use the term: Whiteness is anything that is not blackness. Of course, such a definition demands that we ask, What is “blackness”? For this answer, we turn to the man many consider the father of black liberation theology, Dr. James H. Cone. In his book *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. 1*, Cone defines “blackness” as “the affirmation of black humanity.”¹

Can you imagine a white person being allowed to define “whiteness” in the same terms as Cone defines “blackness”? Suppose someone said, “Whiteness is the affirmation of white humanity.” It is unthinkable and would never be tolerated in today’s culture. Instead, when reduced to its most fundamental level, the term “whiteness” essentially encompasses everything not related to “blackness.” In other words, *anyone* of *any* ethnicity other than black is guilty of whiteness. This is the only definition that can cover the level of ethnic hatred in the ongoing cultural dialogue surrounding race and ethnicity and remove the ambiguity exploited when whiteness is mentioned.

An Example: The 2019 Sparrow Conference

In 2019, the final meeting of the Sparrow Conference was held in Dallas, Texas. Around two thousand women gathered for what was described as an evangelical Christian racial reconciliation conference focused on the goal of equipping peacemakers.² Unfortunately, peace is the last thing the Sparrow Conference is remembered for. A quick internet search reveals the controversy surrounding one of the

1 James Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. 1* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 101.

2 Nicola A. Menzie, “Comments about ‘whiteness’ prompt controversy at Sparrow Women conference,” *Religion News Service*, April 10, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2019/04/06/comments-about-whiteness-prompt-walkout-at-sparrow-women-conference>.

speakers, a woman named Ekemini Uwan, better recognized by her X handle, “@sista_theology,” and as one of the co-hosts of the *Truth’s Table* podcast and co-author of the new book by the same name.

While Uwan was not a central figure at the Sparrow Conference, some of her comments during an interview session there detracted from the other speakers and the organization’s peacemaking goal. “We have to understand something,” Uwan explained to the thousands of women gathered at the Music Hall at Fair Park. “Whiteness is wicked. It is wicked. It’s rooted in violence. It’s rooted in theft. It’s rooted in plunder. It’s rooted in power. It’s rooted in privilege.”³ She went on to challenge attendees to give up whiteness and recover the ethnic identities “your ancestors deliberately discarded.”⁴

Ekemini Uwan is an alumna of Westminster Theological Seminary and holds a master of divinity degree. She is neither ignorant nor unintelligent. In fact, quite the opposite. She is an extremely sharp and bright woman. Despite this, we must strongly disagree with the worldview Uwan holds regarding whiteness and find it to be an excellent example of the deliberate manipulation of the ambiguity previously mentioned. Unfortunately, her comments at the Sparrow Conference, which prompted several attendees to walk out and sparked a national uproar, introduced many to the term “whiteness” who had never heard it used before. But “whiteness” is not a new term, nor has the subject gone unaddressed in the past.

The Absurdity of Whiteness

In June 2015, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed entitled “What Is Whiteness?” Written by Princeton professor emerita and historian

3 Julie Lyons, “Sparrow Falls: ‘Whiteness’ Brings Down Dallas’ Biggest Christian Racial Reconciliation Conference,” *Dallas Observer*, July 18, 2019, <https://www.dallasobserver.com/news/dallas-evangelical-conference-on-racial-reconciliation-exposes-deeper-white-black-divide-11710520>.

4 “Ekemini Uwan Interview by Elizabeth Woodson,” Evernote, accessed May 17, 2023, <https://www.evernote.com/shard/s285/client/snv?noteGuid=d2b1dbde-dec5-4b60-b824-e440dcc70d4d¬eKey=5f4ee2319dfd09c9cb717920f65dc4d9&sn=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.evernote.com%2Fshard%2Fs285%2Fsh%2Fd2b1dbde-dec5-4b60-b824-e440dcc70d4d%2F5f4ee2319dfd09c9cb717920f65dc4d9&title=Ekemini%2BUwan%2BInterview%2Bby%2BELizabeth%2BWoodson>.

Nell Irvin Painter, it is essentially an attempt to explain and define whiteness and who qualifies as ethnically white—and is therefore guilty of said whiteness and, consequently, is called to repent of it. Painter wrote,

We don't know the history of whiteness, and therefore are ignorant of the many ways it has changed over the years. If you investigate that history, you'll see that white identity has been no more stable than black identity. While we recognize the evolution of "negro" to "colored" to "Negro" to "Afro-American" to "African-American," we draw a blank when it comes to whiteness. To the contrary, whiteness has a history of multiplicity. The useful part of white identity's vagueness is that whites don't have to shoulder the burden of race in America, which, at the least, is utterly exhausting. A neutral racial identity is blandly uninteresting. In the 1970s, long after they had been accepted as "white," Italians, Irish, Greeks, Jews and others proclaimed themselves "ethnic" Americans in order to forge a positive identity, at a time of "black is beautiful." But this ethnic self-discovery did not alter the fact that whiteness continued to be defined, as before, primarily by what it isn't: blackness. Eliminating the binary definition of whiteness—the toggle between nothingness and awfulness—is essential for a new racial vision that ethical people can share across the color line. Just as race has been reinvented over the centuries, let's repurpose the term "abolitionist" as more than just a hashtag. The "abolition" of white privilege can be an additional component of identity (not a replacement for it), one that embeds social justice in its meaning. Even more, it unifies people of many races.⁵

What Painter is saying is that despite attempts by people of non-black ethnicities to distinguish themselves as being of distinct ethnicities in their own right, "whiteness continued to be defined, as before, primarily by what it isn't: blackness." Painter gives validity to the definition of whiteness given at the start of this chapter: whiteness is anything that is not blackness. Ultimately, it doesn't matter that the other ethnicities Painter mentioned in her article—Italians, Irish,

5 Nell Irvin Painter, "What Is Whiteness?," *New York Times*, June 20, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/sunday/what-is-whiteness.html>.

Greeks, and Jews—are not ethnically white. What matters is that those people are not black, and whoever is not black is, by default, white. Those other ethnicities are all guilty of “whiteness” simply by virtue of not being black.

It is hard to miss the absurdity here. Painter, in attempting to explain what whiteness is, only succeeds in defining what it is not. At some point, the word “whiteness” becomes so malleable that it is essentially synonymous with sin. As such, it can be applied to anything that isn’t blackness in an attempt—unfortunately, a successful attempt in our culture—to assign guilt to things not worthy of it. This term has been so twisted and warped that all meaning is lost, yet it is employed to the applause of cultural warriors and social justicians, many of whom, sadly, also claim the name of Christ.

The Invention of Whiteness

The concept of whiteness is an invented social construct with absolutely no basis in biblical orthodoxy. It’s like someone sauntered into the kitchen, grabbed a mixing bowl, added a little critical race theory and a dash of black liberation theology, put it in the oven, set the temperature at 375 degrees for thirty minutes, and produced this half-baked idea. “Whiteness” is merely the postmodern regurgitation of an idea that has been propagated for decades by such noted critical race theorists as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, Patricia Williams, Richard Delgado, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, as well as advocates of black liberation theology such as James Cone, Paul Gauthier, Pope Benedict XVI, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Frederick Herzog, and José Miranda.

We will deal at length with critical race theory and liberation theology in the coming chapters, but it is essential to note some key aspects of each. Critical race theory (CRT) is a concept originating in the social sciences that “race,” instead of being biologically grounded and natural, is socially constructed and functions as a means to maintain the interests of the white population that constructed it. According to CRT, racial inequality emerges from the social, economic, and legal differences white people create between “races” to maintain elite white interests in labor markets and politics and

create the circumstances and structures that give rise to poverty and criminality in many minority communities. CRT combines progressive political struggles for racial justice with critiques of the conventional legal and scholarly norms, which are viewed as part of the illegitimate hierarchies that must be destroyed. Adherents of CRT reject the idea that “race” has a natural referent, instead claiming it is a product of social processes of power.

The religious movement known as black liberation theology originated within Latin American Roman Catholicism in the late twentieth century and sought to apply religious faith by aiding the poor and oppressed through involvement in political and civic affairs. It stressed heightened awareness of the “sinful” socioeconomic structures that caused social inequities and urged active participation in changing those structures. Liberation theologians believe that God speaks particularly through the poor and that the Bible can be understood *only* when seen from the perspective of the poor. Black liberation theology centers on the struggle, lamenting and grieving over structures that prevent the poor from being liberated.

Critical race theory and black liberation theology focus on the liberation of black people from the racist “structures” that exist in America and the demonizing of white people who are to blame for creating those structures. Adherents of these ideologies believe that no person—that is, no *white* person—should ever have a socioeconomic advantage over any non-white person since such advantage must have been the product of a structured and choreographed system of race-based oppression, which, in creating those advantages for white people, consequently resulted in myriad disadvantages for black people. In other words, if black people are not experiencing the same level of socioeconomic success as white people—and the assumption within both CRT and black liberation theology is that all white people, simply because they are white, are basking in the glow of socioeconomic success in America—then something must be done to destroy the structures and level the socioeconomic playing field because they are inherently racist by design. Such baffling logic calls to mind the Thomas Sowell quote, “Envy was once considered one of the seven deadly sins before it became one of the most admired