

From “Once Upon a Time” to “Happily Ever After,”
and How to Get There from Here:
A Response to Vincent Bacote

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February, 3, 2020

Note: A shorter version of this essay is available on the Theopolis website.

I appreciate Vincent Bacote’s contribution to the Theopolis Conversation on racism¹ in the American church. His firsthand account of his experience as a black Christian interacting with predominantly white evangelicalism reveals many of the problems we face. There is a great deal of common ground here, both in terms of how we understand the past and what we long to see in the future.

Bacote’s “once upon a time” examination of America’s past and his realization that racism remains a live issue is a sober reminder of how much racial injustice has been woven into American history. It is especially sad to consider the failure of the church to stand up against the sin of racism; indeed, for many generations, much of the church was complicit in overt and systemic racism. The way whites treated blacks for much of our nation’s history has been shameful. The slave trade, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, bombings, redlining: there is much in our past we can only lament. Bacote notes that he penned an article in 1990 detailing the “theological failure” of the American church. I have also been critical of the American church in this area, especially [my own Reformed tradition](#) (and I must add the criticisms I made of the “theological failure” in historic Presbyterianism, especially Southern Presbyterianism, were certainly not well received at the time, indicating that many Reformed Christians are still not willing to make necessary theological revisions to address weaknesses in this area). Many of our Reformed heroes, such as Dabney and Kuyper, were glaringly wrong at just this point, as Bacote points out. My city, Birmingham, AL, despite being one of the most “churched” urban centers in the world, was ground zero for [some of the worst forms of racial terrorism](#) in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite monumental victories in the Civil Rights movement and a widespread transformation of attitudes about race, it would be naïve to think racism is *completely* a thing of the past. For one thing, this past is not all that distant. An elder in my church was downtown and heard the explosion go off at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963 in what suddenly became known as “Bombingham.” Ruby Bridges, the first black child to attend an all-white elementary school in New Orleans, and who received death threats for doing so, will turn 66 this year. Much of this history is still in living memory, and certainly reckoning with this past is crucial to understanding various aspects of the present. Like poverty, racial hatred will be with us to the end of time; they are conditions of a fallen world. Various forms of

segregation and discrimination are still active within American culture, and even the church, though not nearly to the degree they once were.ⁱⁱ We must combat racism in any and every form, even as we combat other evils brought into the world by Adam's sin. Bacote is right to sensitize us to these historic atrocities and their ongoing impact (though I'd also suggest at some point rehearsing the history over and over runs the risk of nursing old grudges into bitterness and keeping old wounds open so they can never heal – more on that below).

Bacote and I also agree in our hope for the future, the “happily ever after” dream of the kingdom where the church has become a racially diverse, theologically unified, catholic body. We want to see God's promises to Abraham fulfilled so that every family on earth comes to share in the blessings of Abraham's seed, the Lord Jesus Christ (Gen. 12:1-3; Gal. 3:8). We want to see what John saw in Revelation 7:9: “Behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” The church has a global mission, to disciple all nations. God sent his Son to save the world (Jn. 3:16), to break down the “dividing wall of hostility” between different groups of people, reconciling them to God and one another (Eph. 2:11ff). This new humanity was previewed at Pentecost (reversing the Tower of Babel), as the earliest Christians were given the gift of tongues to proclaim the gospel to those gathered in Jerusalem “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). The church is the true “united nations.” I have [preached this anti-racist gospel vision](#) and worked for it in my own life. While condemning the sin of racism is not exactly controversial in Birmingham in 2020 as it was in the 1960s (a true sign of progress!), most evangelical Christians agree there is work to be done in building relationships and catholicity across ethnic and racial lines. Even if we are no longer enforcing segregation with civil law, Christians of different ethnicities remain frustratingly distant from one another and our churches are largely racially homogeneous even in those places where there is a great deal of racial diversity. It is crucial for us to see that the work of racial reconciliation is not a distraction from the gospel; it is built into the gospel's announcement of a new humanity in the resurrected Christ.

One of the sad by-products of this racist legacy was the rupturing of catholicity, as blacks were, of necessity, forced to form their own churches and denominations. When one considers how precious (and fragile) cross-cultural Jew-Gentile unity was in the New Testament church, one begins to get some sense of the magnitude of this travesty in our own history. In Galatians 2, Peter “segregates” himself from Gentile believers and Paul confronts him to his face because this is a denial of the gospel. The true gospel is a *catholic* gospel, in the sense of including believers of all ethnicities, nationalities, etc. Anything that divides believers from one another on the basis of skin color is anti-gospel; it is segregating that which Jesus came to integrate.

But what stands in the way of the “happily ever after” ending we long for? Here, Bacote and I part ways; indeed, I would say that Bacote’s approach to the race problem is likely to exacerbate it and repeat the errors of the past, albeit in the opposite direction. I fear the way Bacote has framed racial issues will end in another theological failure. This is the paragraph I especially wish to focus on:

The modern West (a culture and world constructed largely by those of European descent) constructs something called “whiteness” and regards that as the standard by which other humans are to be measured and judged. The extent to which this operates as a cultural norm among white Christians plays a sometimes hidden (more so these days, less so when racial discrimination was the law of the land) role when theology is constructed and ethical practices emerge out of faith commitments. When this unspoken factor has been at work, it helped set the stage for a segregated society, hence the emergence of African-American versions of denominations, and also the emergence of a theodicy problem for blacks who try to make sense of a Christian faith that has not often compelled their white brothers and sisters to seek their flourishing.

What is “whiteness”? And what happens when whiteness is problematized in this way? Bacote is not merely saying that many whites have racial blind-spots that make them inadvertently offensive to black Christians. No doubt, we all have blind-spots about all kinds of things. But whiteness is something different, something deeper. Bacote’s claim is that all whites inevitably and necessarily participate in systems of oppression, which in turn maintain various forms of white supremacy in our culture. In other words, even when whites make efforts to not be racists they are still racists. And those whites who deny they are racists just prove how deep the problem runs since they are oblivious to their own ingrained racism. Being white has become the sin for which there is no absolution – or so it would seem. Whites cannot escape their own whiteness. If the problem was identified as hatred of those of another race, or excessive pride in one’s own race, then whites could be called to repent of those things. Hatred and pride are identifiable sins. But how do whites repent of whiteness?

This is a classic example of a double bind. Whites are put in a no-win situation. Whites can either *admit* they are racists, or they can *prove* they are racists by denying they are racists. But this erects an insurmountable barrier and cuts off any possibility of real fellowship between blacks and whites. I have seen this double bind play out in many ways. For example, I have seen whites move into low income neighborhoods with the aim of helping minorities, only to be accused of gentrification. I have seen whites adopt minority race children with the aim of giving them a loving home, only to be accused of paternalism. Occasionally, the charges may carry a grain of truth, but most of the time they are attacks on kindhearted people who are simply seeking to help others as wisely as they know how. Of course, if they refused to help and kept

to themselves, they would also be open to various charges of racism, indifference, etc. Again, it's a no-win situation – the happy ending we want becomes impossible when the problem is framed this way. Given the assumptions of “whiteness,” *everything* whites do will be interpreted as racism. Whites cannot get outside their own whiteness, so the problem of race becomes permanently intractable. Whites (rather than sin and Satan) become the enemy.

Bacote says “whiteness” means whites make their own culture the standard by which they judge all humans – as if to be fully human, one must live as whites live. Thus, all whites are white supremacists at heart, even without knowing it or intending it. This is a massive claim, and certainly not one Bacote proves. It is not fair (or kind) to make this accusation against all whites. And it is also a charge that could be levelled against other people groups, so it is not a uniquely “white” sin. For my part, I certainly do not see “whiteness” as the ideal for humanity; I see Christ (who was certainly not white!) as the ideal. But here is the real question: Does Bacote believe that a white person could disagree with a black person on an issue *and that disagreement not be driven by racism?* Or is any dissent on the part of whites taken as proof of racism?ⁱⁱⁱ

[Bacote's approach is quite different from that of Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) King certainly exposed the sins of whites, but he did not identify a sin called “whiteness.” King refused to play the game of identity politics. He was being profoundly biblical in his justly famous “I Have a Dream” speech when he said, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” But isn't Bacote pre-judging whites on the basis of skin color when he identifies whiteness itself as problematic? What happened to King's dream of color blindness? While King rightly stood up to the racism of whites, he also believed the best about whites, and thus believed that they could overcome the systemic racism that had plagued American society; he believed whites could come to share his dream and thus rise above their sordid past. But when simply being white makes one complicit in racism – “whiteness” -- the hope King had for whites and for a racially integrated society is negated. Once everything gets racialized, so that every issue is looked at primarily through the lens of race, there is no way forward. Instead of racial blindness, we have racial obsession, leading to a hardening of racial divisions.^{iv}

Bacote is invoking the categories and language of critical theory when he speaks of “whiteness.”^v [Critical theory \(a better label than “cultural Marxism”\) is not nearly as benign as Bacote suggests in his essay.](#)^{vi} Critical theory has proven to create a critical spirit in its adherents, training people to police so-called microaggressions and looking for ways to be offended so they can gain victim status. But this is not the way of Christ; it is not the way of love. Critical theory analyzes all relationships in terms of power struggles, which are inevitably zero sum games. One group will win at the expense of the other. Of course, critical race theory casts whites in the role of permanent oppressors, but it should be obvious this approach is a

dead end if we are sincerely hoping for racial reconciliation. Those who advocate some form of critical theory actually stand in the way of racial reconciliation because critical theory, by definition, divides us into adversarial racial groups locked in power struggles. The dream of racial oneness is blocked, as skin color is allowed to trump ethical character and theological conviction. Critical theory does not include a message of or means to racial reconciliation.

This kind of identity politics raises another set of questions. If whiteness is the real barrier to racial reconciliation (rather than sin that all humans are complicit in, no matter their skin color), how do our racial identities relate to our Christian identities? If we make racial identity ultimate, then we can never be united in some higher identity, such as an identity in Christ that both blacks and whites share. Identity politics destroys catholicity, as it necessitates a distinct church and theology for each racial grouping. Indeed, identity politics creates a fleshly community because, contrary to Paul's example, it regards each man according to his flesh (2 Cor. 5:16). While our ethnic and cultural differences must be recognized and appreciated, why can't we just be brothers and sisters in Christ? Why can't we recognize that what we share in common as image bearers and believers vastly outweighs our differences?

To unpack this further: Why should race be treated as the most important feature of a person, as in critical race theory? What is more determinative, one's racial identity or one's Christian identity? If pressed to its logical conclusion, identity politics necessitates a black church and black theology.^{vii} But how does the black church then relate to the rest of the catholic church and how does black theology relate to the orthodoxy defined in the creeds? How do black interests relate to Christian interests? Identity politics actually produces a false gospel, a sectarian gospel. The true gospel teaches God so loved blacks, whites, and every other people group, that he gave his only beloved Son on the cross to accomplish their salvation; thus, according to the true gospel, our common salvation outweighs whatever other differences we might have in ethnicity, experience, etc. There is not a black gospel and a white gospel. There is *one gospel* black and white believers share.

Bacote says he is not interested in pushing white guilt. Nevertheless, his approach inevitably produces white shame. But if whites and blacks are to be reconciled, this shame of whiteness must be overcome. How can this happen since critical theory lacks any redemptive element? No matter how much whites grovel before their black brothers, it will not change the past or atone for historic wrongs. The only solution is the blood of Christ, which both grants forgiveness for sin and compels us to forgive the sins of others. Fundamentally, the historical issues of racist oppression and white supremacy in American history are gospel issues, having to do with forgiveness, repentance, and restoration. But Bacote does not bring gospel grace to bear upon this history. There is no mention of forgiveness. But without forgiveness, relationships, including racial relationships, are stuck forever on the wrongs of the past, never able to move

forward into a healthier future. Race, rather than grace, is central in Bacote's account. But I am afraid the more we focus on race, the less we are able to focus on Christ himself as the answer to racial division and every other form of brokenness that plagues human society. Contrary to Bacote, we must oppose critical theory because it stands in the way of racial reconciliation and in fact reinforces racial boundaries and identities in unhelpful and divisive ways. Because there is no forgiveness in critical theory, there can be no final reconciliation, no ultimate redemption, no hope for a transformed future in which blacks and whites embrace one another in love, truth, and forgiveness.

Bacote identifies whiteness as the fundamental issue, so it is not surprising he is generally pessimistic about the prospects of racial reconciliation. After all, as long as there are whites, "whiteness" will remain, will it not? Bacote's approach lacks concrete proposals that would allow whites to manifest repentance and rebuild unity with blacks who do not trust them. There are plenty of areas where our society could better serve blacks,^{viii} and there are plenty of areas where personal relationships between whites and blacks could be renewed.^{ix} But here's a question that must not be sidestepped: Even if all "whiteness" was completely eliminated tomorrow, it is not clear the biggest problems facing black communities would be immediately solved. While remnants of personal and systemic racism remain in America, the eradication of racism would not automatically cause black mothers to stop aborting their babies at an astonishing rate; nor would it automatically cause black fathers to take responsibility for raising and providing for their children. Eliminating racism is a noble goal, [but racism is not the only problem, or even the largest problem, facing blacks in 2020 America.](#)

Finally, a word on behalf of Western civilization. Bacote says that the modern West is a world constructed primarily by whites ("those of European descent") which then fosters "whiteness" (white supremacy). In other words, Western civilization is *intrinsically* racist. But this is a very short-sighted and narrow-minded view of Western history. While it is certainly important to be familiar with the plight of blacks in America the last 400 years, it is also vital to be familiar with the history of Western civilization for a thousand years before that. Interestingly, King routinely appealed to the great thinkers (e.g., Aquinas) and traditions (e.g., natural law) of Western Christendom in building his case against racism in the Civil Rights movement – the same tradition Bacote now wants to accuse of encouraging white supremacy! In truth, Western man built a flawed but impressive civilization that has benefitted the whole human race, giving the world wonderful art, architecture, music, and literature, and inventing such institutions as the hospital, the university (like the one in which Bacote teaches as a tenured professor), republican government, and modern science. In addition to all that, slavery, so prevalent in the ancient world, was all but eradicated in the West by the twelfth century (though it was sadly reintroduced in the "new world" in the 17th century).^x It is simply untrue to suggest that the whole of Western history is characterized by "whiteness" even if most of the builders of

Western civilization had white skin. In reality, whites of European descent did not produce these cultural treasures because they were white; they were able to create what we know as Western civilization because they had the gospel. There is nothing more foolish than belief in white supremacy. But belief in the supremacy of Christ and his gospel is the way of wisdom for all of us, no matter our skin color. And when we believe in the supremacy of Christ and the identity he gives us as members of his new humanity, we will produce a culture of goodness, truth, and beauty, a culture that represents the whole diverse human family at its best. This is what true racial reconciliation in Christ looks like.

The purpose of the Theopolis Conversations series is to bring different branches of the church into discussion with one another, that we might grow in mutual understanding and love. I hope the questions I have raised for Bacote will be fruitful as the rest of this conversation unfolds.

ⁱ It is worth pointing out that, technically speaking, there is only one race, the human race. What we refer to as various “races” are really a mix of biological variations and cultural constructs that distinguish different groups *within* the single human race (cf. Acts 17:26).

ⁱⁱ Specific, anecdotal instances of racism by individuals should be addressed as such and not used as proof that an entire class of persons share in the same attitudes and actions. Generalizations as such are not wrong, but we should be careful about making unwarranted leaps, e.g., one white person says something racist, therefore all whites must be racists.

ⁱⁱⁱ Of course, it should also be pointed out that not all blacks think alike (just as not all whites think alike). In particular, conservative blacks such as Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams, Ben Carson, Clarence Thomas, etc., are generally dismissed as not being “really” black because of their conservative views. This is one of the problems of identity politics: by treating people as members of a larger group it forecloses the possibility of individuality; blacks are essentially forced to go along with a certain kind of groupthink.

^{iv} Ironically one of the best ways to aid in racial reconciliation is to minimize the significance of race to our identity. In other words, talking about race less might be one of the most anti-racist, racially healing things we can do.

^v See, e.g., Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility*. “Whiteness” is generally associated with white privilege, the notion that whites in our society have a built in advantages and unearned benefits. The reality is that in any culture, the subgroup that is in the majority will likely have certain advantages. But there is no doubt that critical theory has largely overblown the realities of white privilege in today’s culture. Consult, e.g., J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* or Tim Carney’s *Alienated America* to see that for many whites today, any notion of “privilege” is a myth. [The truth concerning “privilege” is actually much more complicated than simply looking at one’s skin color](#). There are certain privileges that come with growing up with a loving mother and father; certain privileges tied to genetic inheritances such as intelligence, athletic ability, physical beauty, etc.; certain privileges that come from being born in a nation like America; and so on. In some cases, forms of “reverse racism” actually make life *more* difficult for whites than for minorities, e.g., “affirmative action” quotas for professional schools. The majority (if not the totality) of those Hilary Clinton called “deplorables” are whites. And so on. Critical theory vastly oversimplifies the complex ways a variety of factors beyond skin color come into play in determining the actual opportunities and outcomes people experience in our culture. Privilege is not exclusively for whites (even if it once was), and many whites are almost entirely lacking in privilege today.

^{vi} Indeed, critical theory has been evaluated as an alternative religion, a rival to Christian faith. [David French observes:](#)

For the in group, it’s easy to see the appeal of the philosophy. There’s an animating purpose — fighting injustice, racism, and inequality. There’s the original sin of “privilege.” There’s a conversion experience — becoming “woke.” And much as the Christian church puts a premium on each person’s finding his or her precise role in the body of Christ, intersectionality can provide a person with a specific purpose and role based on individual identity and experience.

[Likewise, Joe Carter:](#)

As an analytic framework for identifying the effects of systemic sin, intersection theory may be of some use to Christians. But when it is used to justify the creation of ever more narrow and increasingly divisive identity groups, it becomes another secular worldview that Christians must reject. While characteristics such as race and gender are not erased when a person becomes a member of God’s kingdom, our identity as Christians is rebuilt around Jesus.”

It should be noted that critical theory has had a very corrosive effect on the Christian faith in other areas, including male/female relations, homosexuality, transgenderism, etc. Critical theory turns groups against one another because every relationship is interpreted as a power struggle of oppressor versus oppressed. Critical theory cuts us off from another because it relativizes and privatizes truth, e.g., truth becomes a function of one's social location, so there is a different "truth" for each group. This obviously threatens objective truth, rationality, and most crucially, *sola Scriptura*. Contrary to critical theory, truth is not male or female, rich or poor, black or white. Truth is truth, and our conception of what is true must be tested against an objective standard, ultimately Scripture.

^{vii} [This is why some black Christians have decided to divorce themselves from predominantly white evangelical churches](#). The segregated have become the new segregators. This is not to say that white Christians cannot do a better job of welcoming Christians of other ethnicities into churches in which whites have majority membership, but it is to say identity politics is a way of thinking that runs contrary to the gospel.

^{viii} Examples include prison reform, since evidence suggests the justice system does not always treat blacks the same way as other groups, and welfare reform, since various government programs have undermined the black family by subsidizing the proliferation of children born out of wedlock.

^{ix} Examples include joint worship services between predominantly black and white churches, building pastoral relationships across racial lines, deliberate acts of hospitality that bring different ethnic groups together in our homes, etc.

^x See, e.g., Alvin Schmidt, *Under the Influence*, chapter 11.