

RESPONDING TO VODDIE BAUCHAM'S "ETHNIC GNOSTICISM"

Reuben L. Lillie
The Loop Church of the Nazarene
Chicago, Illinois, USA

I'm concerned by the concept Voddie Baucham calls "ethnic gnosticism" and even more concerned by how others, namely white Christians, often receive his words.

Does the term fit?

First, I'm concerned by the term "ethnic gnosticism" itself. Baucham calls ethnic gnosticism the belief that "somehow because of one's ethnicity, . . . one is able to know when someone or something is racist . . . without any evidence." By evoking the idea of gnosticism, Baucham says valid evidence that something is "racist" must come from a "mediated" source. In other words, according to Baucham, to speak out of one's experience as a person of color is an invalid basis for detecting racism at work. Seeking a measure of objectivity is important, but ruling out personal experience as a source of knowledge is impossible. It's a false premise. And it's why the term ethnic gnosticism doesn't work to describe the phenomenon Baucham detects.

Personal experience is the funnel through which we take in the world, process information, read scripture, form opinions, and act toward others—even pray. None of us has the option somehow to become disembodied, purely rationale minds that read, listen, think, speak, act, or pray apart from experience. Particularly for Christians of the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, experience is actually one of four vital sources of authority for doing theology along with reason, tradition, and scripture.

As a white person, there are, in fact, facets about the experiences of people of color that I have to be taught, which I have to study in order to learn them. But a person of color, in fact, has a lifetime of experience already. It's not unlike how, as a male, I must be taught about the female menstrual cycle, but my wife, mother, and sisters have experience I'll never fully understand the same way they do. That's not gnosticism, that's life. That's not "special" or "secret" knowledge, that's how human diversity works. *I can learn*, but my second-hand knowledge, which requires inquiry, is qualitatively different compared to the kind others gain automatically through first-hand experience.

A person of color can also benefit from studying racism, just as women can benefit from studying female anatomy and physiology. But the key reality which voids the term ethnic gnosticism is that a black person in the United States comes out of the womb as a student of black experience and cannot disenroll—I did not, and I never have to learn about it if I don't take the initiative. The rhythm of life already teaches people of color plenty about oppression that white people will never comprehend as people of color do.

None of us can know *everything* there is to know about race and ethnic relations. But all of us can learn to be better listeners and seek to understand how even our best intentions can have detrimental effects.

Does the term help?

Second, I'm concerned about the implications ethnic gnosticism, as a term, has within current conversations about race and American Christianity. Because the idea of ethnic gnosticism hinges—whether or not Baucham intends it to—on devaluing *experience*, the term has the effect of devaluing *people*, particularly people of color.

Let's consider the phenomenon Baucham wants to describe with the term ethnic gnosticism. Essentially, a person of color *feels* a white person's behavior is motivated by racism. And, crucially, for Baucham, those feelings don't count as evidence that racism was at work. The actor's intentions are all that matter—nothing to do with the recipient. In other words, for Baucham, the burden of proof someone's speech or actions are "racist" lies with the victim, not the perpetrator—and the primary evidence is inadmissible. The person of color's reaction in such a situation, according to Baucham, are subject to further investigation, not the person's behavior who elicited those feelings. People of color are just too sensitive or just plain paranoid. White people are just doing their best, or at least deserve the benefit of the doubt, but people of color must prove beyond doubt they're not overreacting.

For Baucham, it seems something either is blatantly "racist" or it isn't, and most times it isn't. A situation must involve an intentional act of discrimination; it must clearly be motivated by prejudice; and it must be directed toward a specific person or group. If a situation fails to meet any of those criteria, then racism isn't in play. But racism isn't so cut and dry; in fact, it's really messy. Racism isn't reducible to interactions between two individuals. It isn't simply a matter of establishing motive in finite incidents. It isn't a zero-sum game. And determining the influence of racism in a given instance isn't about if you or I love Jesus or are trying to be a good person.

Instead, racism is a social condition, a disease. Not an incurable disease, but, like cancer, it's one for which society at large hasn't yet developed a large-scale treatment. Yes, Christians rightly also understand racism as a sin-sickness. But the sin of racism isn't the kind whose effects disappear instantly by confessing it to God in prayer. Racism has lasting consequences. It leaves scars that, in turn, recall unpleasant memories from time to time. Like grief, the process of dealing with racism's effects at work in American society—especially the church—is ongoing.

We must not confine racism to a trivial reading of one of John Wesley's definitions for sin as "a willful violation of a known law of God." This misappropriation of Wesley is part of the problem. Indeed, racism is a complex manifestation of human depravity that one would think Baucham, as an ardent Calvinist, would readily acknowledge.

The idea of ethnic gnosticism effectively dismisses those voices on the receiving end of centuries of racism and legitimizes those voices who routinely get the benefit of the doubt by racism's design. It perpetuates a narrative of blaming people of color for "misunderstandings" about race, rather than holding white people accountable for what they often fail to see, namely, that *all of us* have been—and still are—affected by this sin-ridden disease of racism.

Should a white person's reputation be ruined from a single incident, even as Baucham admits "we're not there yet?" No, of course not. Christians should (many do) know better than to treat racism like the "unpardonable sin" Baucham says his opponents think it is. That's a straw person

of Baucham's and John McWorter's making. Even if someone dubs racism an "unpardonable sin," that person doesn't represent the millions trying to have a more careful conversation.

Forgiveness, after all, is the currency of Christian relationship, as Baucham passionately proclaims. To that end, we ultimately don't need the concept of ethnic gnosticism. It mislabels the problem and simultaneously removes the call for repentance that ought to accompany forgiveness. It works to absolve white Christians from having to listen to voices (especially Christians of color who disagree with Baucham) who don't make white people feel better about themselves. Which brings us to my greater concern, namely, how white Christians often receive words like Baucham's.

Before You Share . . .

Too often, white Christians, particularly American Evangelicals, watch and share a video like Baucham discussing ethnic gnosticism for the same reason some latch onto Candace Owens's comments following the death of George Floyd. The truth is, many white Christians circulate videos and articles of Baucham's work, not because he is an articulate Evangelical who cites the Bible and makes some valid points, but primarily *because he is a black person* who speaks against the unsettling points raised by millions of Christians (among other voices) about racism.

For a white Christian looking for answers, sharing Baucham's words on social media is tempting. It's a way of "speaking" into the broader social conversation, without actually thinking and speaking for oneself. Why not just let him do the talking? The sheer fact that Baucham is black somehow makes it harder to argue with him, right? Baucham provides a shield to hide behind. Conveniently, a white person can avoid engaging voices of color who disagree with Baucham.

Amplifying Baucham's voice like this, however, results in suppressing other important voices from various black experiences—voices we cannot imagine would be invited to speak in front of the same audiences he typically is. Sharing content of Baucham unpacking ethnic gnosticism effectually stalls the conversation, helps white Christians feel better about themselves, and leaves injustice unaddressed. Meanwhile, many worthwhile things Baucham has to say go unheard too. We must not weaponize one person's words—even mine—to silence the outcry of millions who remain subject to the effects of centuries of racist policies and structures. Instead, white Christians should listen to multiple voices of color, and specifically make a concerted effort to hear those who are decidedly *unlike* those voices one might otherwise be inclined to amplify.

As Christians, the burden of proof that we truly desire to do better lies with us, not anyone else. When a person of color points out lingering racist attitudes or conduct a white person may otherwise fail to see in our society, our churches, and our own lives, the Christlike response is to receive that correction graciously—not to claim it doesn't exist then devise a theory that says so.

We can all prove we want to do better by thinking before we share content. Let's make sure we're not silencing others. Let's listen to a variety of voices. Let's not weaponize anyone's voice. Let's speak for ourselves. Let's ask for forgiveness and forgive others appropriately. And, when citing sources, let's do so charitably and gracefully. For example, to borrow the prophet Micah's words, let's prove we want to do better by seeking justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).