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Oliver's "No flesh shall glory: How the Bible destroys the foundations of racism" (book review)

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Book Review



Oliver, C. Herbert (2021). *No flesh shall glory: How the Bible destroys the foundations of racism*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing. 131 pp. \$14.99. ISBN 9781629959016

With the current angst over race and other identity issues the reappearance of Herbert C. Oliver's *No Flesh Shall Glory* is a welcome balm to a troubled nation. The discourse on such issues as systemic racism, critical race theory, and the Black Lives Matter movement can, at least in social media today, leave one frustrated, bewildered, unfriended, or canceled. Thankfully, P&R Publishers have the courage and wisdom to publish this new edition of the 1959 original which speaks prophetically to these issues. Also included is Oliver's essay "The Church and Social Change" which resulted from two lectures he presented in 1964. This new edition appeared before Oliver's passing in November of 2021 at the age of 96. Oliver was born and raised in Birmingham, AL. A graduate of Wheaton College and Westminster Seminary, he served as pastor in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Maine before returning to Birmingham in 1959 where he worked for the Inter-Citizens Committee. From there he moved to Brooklyn, NY where he fought for equality in schools and later served as pastor of the Westminster Bethany Presbyterian Church for twenty-five years before retirement in 1992.

Written during the days of the American civil rights movement, *No Flesh Shall Glory* is as relevant today as when it first appeared. Only chapters 3 and 4 would appear dated to the contemporary reader, dealing as it does with the three sons of Noah and the argument of earlier commentators who point to them as the source of various races. Oliver is a deep thinker steeped in the Bible, philosophy and western history. He references the Old Testament prophets, New Testament apostles, Aristotle, and other philosophers with equal command to build his arguments. Scriptural references are noted in the text but, writing for a broad audience, he avoids footnotes and there is no bibliography. His writing is clear, powerful, persuasive, and highly readable.

Oliver predicates his argument firmly on the biblical foundation of the unity of all mankind. He unequivocally asserts that the human race is one and eschews the concept of "race solidarity." He calls out the term "race relations" as unbiblical and advocates instead for the biblically-supported concept of "human relations." For Oliver, all lives, indeed, do matter. The author argues that the source of racial strife is our sinful nature. While he admits that misunderstandings will occur among people, even people of goodwill, he asserts that they can be resolved when the "basic truth that the unity of the human race is made foundational in our thought and actions"

(p. 22). He often references the theory of evolution as one of the most damaging doctrines of western culture. He cites it as the fuel of racism and segregation because it fails to discover the true dignity of mankind. This line of reasoning concerning evolution will be familiar to readers of more recent works such as *One Race, One Blood*, by Ken Ham and A. Charles Ware (revised and updated, 2019) or *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* by Carl Trueman (2020). Oliver references the problems of evolution in greater detail in chapter 5 in which he discusses Christian ethics and segregation. Here he examines the ethics of evolution and hedonism and their negative impact on culture and social interactions. He finds that only the higher standard of Christian ethics has the surest hope of combating the evils of racism and segregation.

An additional gem to this new edition is the essay “The Church and Social Change.” In it, Oliver discusses the rightful role the church must play in bringing about justice and social change. While not using the term “systemic racism” Oliver nonetheless illustrates how ancient and pervasive the concepts of inequality and slavery were and are in world culture. He begins with examples from Aristotle’s *Politics* and works his way to the modern era. Along the way he notes how the church was too often influenced more by social conventions than the teaching of Jesus Christ and allowed the sins of inequality and class distinctions to bring shame upon it. He finds the work of reformers such as John Calvin transformative because Calvin was compelled to civil disobedience in order to survive the oppression of those in power. He looks to Calvin for inspiration in fighting against the segregation found in southern America. In one of the most compelling narratives in the work Oliver retells when he, a successful, well-educated, law-abiding citizen with money in his pocket, found himself hungry one day at lunchtime surrounded by restaurants and diners, yet none were open to him solely because of the color of his skin. He concludes that the church has a duty to be the leader of a social revolution in fulfilling its calling to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. All libraries with adult readers should consider this important work for their collections.

Reviewer

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