Lion and Lamb Apologetics

You Don't Need to be "Woke" to Be Biblical: A Review of Eric Mason's *Woke Church*

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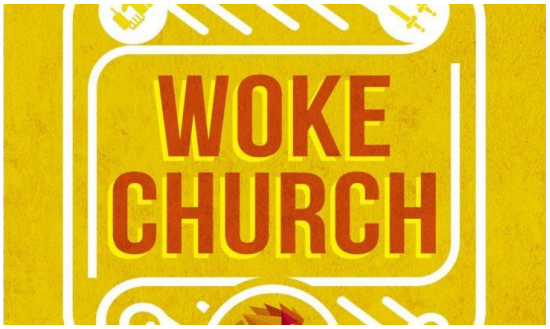

Only a few brave souls darken the door of my gym at 6 o'clock a.m., so us regulars know one another's faces pretty well.

Several weeks ago, I had a curious exchange with one such fellow addict, Amir (name changed). An early-middle-aged, outgoing, husky, black man, he sports an "In God We Trust" tattoo on his forearm and can often be seen in his characteristic white tee and gray sweatpants pacing back and forth between the benches and the abdominal machines, performing his ritual supersets. I took it upon myself to get to know him and steer the conversation towards spiritual things, asking about his Islamic name.

Loudly and excitedly, my new friend proceeded to explain how throughout his childhood he bounced between church and mosque only to decide that they were all "saying the same thing." His faith, he offered, is essentially one of self-determination and disciplined, moral living (one-third of the American trifecta consisting of baseball, apple pie, and moralistic therapeutic deism).

I began to press on the uniqueness of the Jesus of the Bible in distinction from the Isa of Islam. Amir's response was striking. Speaking of the Bible, he retorted, "I can't devote myself to a book that has been used to oppress blacks and justify slavery."

On its face, his sentiment is understandable. The historic silence of many American Protestant denominations and institutions on issues of race and slavery is a repugnant blight on our gospel witness. But the same argument could be used against the Qur'an, which was used to justify the heinous Arab and North African slave trade perpetrated until very recently. (For instance, only since 2007 has it been possible to prosecute slaveowners in Mauritania.) But the logic breaks down quickly. The *abuse* of a religion or text is no argument against its *use*.

Why this anecdote? Amir isn't the only one making such arguments. I suspect men like him were among those in mind for Dr. Eric Mason as he penned *Woke Church* (Moody, 2018).

As the title suggests, *Woke Church* is intended as a rally-call to American churches—particularly those of us who are more of the melanin-challenged variety—to take seriously the plight of blacks in America, reappropriating the lingo of #BlackLivesMatter and similar trends in service of a Christian social ethic.

In spite of its politically-polarizing title, Mason spends the majority of the book making a number of observations with which both sides of the social justice debate can agree, from his decrying of the general apathy of many suburban churches to his salient condemnations of police brutality. The book offers readers a pulse on the felt needs facing the black community through the eyes of an urban, Calvinistic church planter, and most fair-minded readers can happily nod along with many of Mason's broad statements about neighbor-love, empathy, and missional living.

And therein lies the problem of the book. One does not have to be "woke" to embrace the biblical imperative of love for neighbor. But by introducing a series of faulty terms, arguments, and assumptions inherited by the broader social justice movement, Mason undercuts his own case. Try as Mason may to redefine the term, *woke* is simply *not* a synonym for Christian charity, and his insistence otherwise dilutes the book into a trendy, politically-correct pamphlet light enough to catch any passing sentimental breeze.

That said, one problem with the current social justice debate is that both sides fail to extend the judgment of charity. On one extreme, all the SJW's are thought to be closet Marxists; on the other side, anyone who questions the orthodoxy of racial reconciliation is a racist. My aim is to offer a grounded critique that avoids both ditches.

To that end, this review is divided into four serious critiques followed by some positive observations. My goal is neither to give a "hot take" and rally one side, nor to kowtow to the eminent evangelicals on the "woke" end of the spectrum; rather, my aim is simply to bring Scripture to bear upon Mason's work and advance the conversation forward.

Critique 1: Misplaced Identities

At the root of racial reconciliation confusion is a failure to prioritize one's identity in Christ over one's belonging to a category, ethnic or otherwise, carved out for victim status.

Mason commits this error as early as page 23 in recounting a conversation between himself and his children while watching new footage reporting the enslavement and trafficking of Libyan refugees:

> My eight-year-old son, Nehemiah, started crying. He said, "Who are these people?"
>
> I said, "Son, these are our people."
>
> He said, "These are *our* people? Is this *today*?" He could not wrap his eight-year-old mind around it. He began to weep because he could not reconcile the idea of slavery in today's age.
>
> My son couldn't believe that people of any kind would be enslaved, particularly people that looked like him. Nehemiah had never been to Libya. He had never met any of the people featured in the video that we watched, but they looked like him, and he immediately understood his connection to them. They were *his* people.

Mason's young son's compassion is admirable, and we must all follow the Mason household's example in rejecting apathy. But caught up in all this is a fallacious conflation of identities; Mason writes of his son that the Libyans were "*his* people" (emphasis in the original), although the family had no connection to Libya. The underlying assumption is that a black family in Philadelphia is to maintain solidarity with Libyans not simply on the basis of the *imago Dei*—much less shared values, language, culture, or beliefs—but based on pigment.

But aside from the futility of assessing the motives of man-stealers half a world away, my concern is that Mason is confused about who the real *us* is. For Mason, is "us" the black community—not only in the U.S., but everywhere where people happen to possess darker pigment, even in cultures and societies where skin color doesn't carry the same significance that it does on our shores? Would I be equally justified in telling my white daughter that "her people" are really white Italians, Germans, Czechs, and Irishmen scattered across Europe, suffering all their injustices? Should I not instead encourage her to see the colorful collection of believers in the body of Christ *in our own church* that we attend each week as "her" people, her brothers and sisters, her primary "us"—and then, by extension, the global body of Christ?

I am sure Mason affirms the communion of saints in the invisible church; however, when we swallow the world's insistence that we divide into classes and categories—ethnic, economic, or otherwise—we undermine biblical anthropology and invite the sin of partiality into our midsts.

This faulty logic betrays itself in various sections of the book. On page 43 Mason uses the words "we" and "our" to refer simultaneously to America as a whole *as well as* to the church: "[W]e must pursue honest reconciliation that faces the issues of our broken past

in this country. We must take the time to revisit our history and proclaim the gospel to each season and seek reconciliation, restoration, and restitution, as is appropriate." While his sentiment is commendable, his confusing use of pronouns almost conflates American national identity and its accompanying historic sins with the renewed identity we receive in Christ as the covenant people of God. Though I doubt this was his intention, a greater level of precision and distinction would have strengthened his argument. Who needs to repent: unbelieving America, or the church of Christ—and for what? Precision matters.

Conversely, Mason throughout the book is actually at odds with himself on the issue of identity. To his credit, he writes, "We should feel more at home with people in the Christian family than our own ethnicity. In other words, the best part of our family should be those who have the same eternal blood type, not just the same physical blood type.… it grieves my heart to see that we so often treat each other like we're from different bloodlines" (66). This is the heart of the issue, and hopefully a proposition on which both sides of the racial reconciliation conversation can stand. We belong to the Christian family before we belong to any other family—white, black, or otherwise. In Christ there is no ethnic category that holds any weight in terms of our salvation or Christian fellowship (Colossians 3:11).

But then, in a reversal of tone on page 100, Mason bemoans the ills of even genuinely inclusive churches:

> I fear that with all of the multiethnic congregations being former, we will lose the focus on engaging the systemic needs of blacks. Many times in multiethnic spaces, others get primacy and the needs of blacks are minimized. It almost feels like in order for the church to be one, blacks have to merge with whites as the standard church, then we spend the rest of our lives trying to 'integrate' a system that wants us present, but is not willing to shape the central systems to make room for all people.

The accusation is that even in "multiethnic spaces," some ethnicities have unique "systemic needs" that aren't being addressed. The solution, then, is to alter the systems and structures of the local church to favor certain ethnicities over others, thereby compensating for some imbalance presumably caused by the existence of the hegemonic ethnicity. Honest reflection on the content of the New Testament shows that this is utterly foreign to the apostolic faith.

Mason continues: "I fear that if we partner with whites that they will find a way to subjugate blacks and make us dependent on them in a way that kills our freedom of a truly black led institution." At the risk of stating the obvious, would Mason let this statement fly if the roles were reversed? Imagine saying: "I fear that if we partner with

blacks, they will find a way to wrong whites in a way that kills our freedom to have a truly white-led institution." Such a statement would rightly be dubbed vile, racist hate speech. I am not making this statement; I am showing how absurd it would *be* to make.

Though we should not be so naïve as to think that creedally orthodox churches are incapable of partiality or prejudice—American history proves otherwise—to prescribe a system of blanket favoritism to compensate for past injustices undercuts the real, biblical basis of reconciliation: unconditional love (1 Corinthians 13:1-7) and forgiveness (Matthew 18:22). For the Apostle Paul, believers from all ethnic backgrounds are one in Christ, and their divisions no longer matter (cf. Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11). A believer is crucified with Christ, and his true self is hidden in the Son of God (cf. Galatians 2:20, Colossians 3:3). Any pastoral counsel that glosses over this glorious reality and stirs suspicion and fear of certain ethnic groups within the church invites people to commit the sin of partiality (James 2:1).

Critique 2: Faulty Definitions

Another crack in Mason's foundation concerns faulty and naïve definitions of cultural buzzwords, which are themselves moving targets. Mason attempts to redeem the term "woke" from the secular political left and breathe biblical meaning into it. While I'm all for taking dominion of the dictionary, the vernacular is what it is. Definitions matter. We cannot religiously retool the popular cultural lexicon without garnering suspicion or misunderstanding both within the church and the watching world.

The back cover defines *woke* this way: "able to understand how cultural, socioeconomic, philosophical, and historical realities inform our responsibilities as believers in Jesus Christ." If this is what it means to be woke, sign me up. But our vocabulary as creatures of the word must come to us by other means than baptizing the latest hashtag.

Mason acknowledges that the term derives from Pan-Africanists and Black Nationalists (p. 25), but immediately appropriates it as a synonym for Christian wakefulness (*à la* Ephesians 5:14). Commendably, Mason repudiates these racist groups and those like them, including the Black Hebrew Israelite movement; however, the problems presented by appropriating a politically-charged term remain. On page 112, Mason makes reference to what it means to be "biblically woke"—a phrase as theoretically meaningless as "Christianly nationalist" or "biblically Republican." What would happen if someone released a book titled *Redneck Church*, *Conservative Church*, *Libertarian Church*—etc.? However such terms are defined, their broad-brushed application (as an adjective modifying the very church of Jesus Christ) overshadows the best of authorial motives.

Mason also embraces fluid definitions of other terms more central to the social justice issue. Oppression is correctly defined on page 68 as "to exploit" and "stopping others from being able to maximize and experience everything that God has made available to" the one oppressed; however, this definition is interwoven with assumptions about privilege that equivocate possession of privilege with active exploitation. On page 132, Mason talks about the believer's responsibility to address "inequities in our society"—conflating disparity with injustice, equality of opportunity with equality of outcome.

Mason also erects a blatant strawman definition of "colorblind" (106):

> "[C]olorblindness" denies God's promise to Abraham that "in you all the nations shall be blessed" (Gal. 3:8 NKJV). It denies the Father's promise to the Son that "I will also make you a light for the nations" (Isa. 49:6). It denies the Spirit's promise to us that all the peoples will praise God (see Ps. 67:5). It denies Christ's great commission to disciple the nations. It denies the Spirit's work to prepare us for a multiethnic table.… Color-blind theology denies one of the main tenets of the historic Christian faith as outlined in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the holy catholic Church." Catholicity means precisely the opposite of colorblindness—celebrating the inclusion of all ethnicities in Christ. Colorblind theology denies Christ's power to heal racial divisions, disparities, and injustices by ignoring their ongoing impact. Colorblind theology undermines unity in the church by refusing to acknowledge significant ethnic differences or address significant problems.

Mason is absolutely correct that ethnic and biological diversity are part of both God's glorious creative and redemptive designs. Believers cannot ignore each other's unique burdens, struggles, and backgrounds, including those which relate to culture and ethnicity. However, the sense of the term "color-blind," as it has been recently employed, is simply that one should avoid prejudicial judgments of individuals based on the color of their skin, judging instead by the content of their character. That those in the ministry of so-called racial reconciliation find themselves, 50 years after Martin Luther King Jr., arguing *against* such an ethic is ironic and disheartening at best—and raises the question of exactly what sort of business they are in.

Critique 3: Shifting Standards of Christian Unity

Mason's stated goal is gospel unity: "There will come a day when it won't be based on ethnicity. It's going to be based on you knowing Jesus.… That means everybody has to be equally cleaned by the blood of Jesus" (174). While Mason is correct in his conclusion that we all stand equally in need of cleaning by the blood of the Lamb, but his phrasing is strange: "There *will* come a day" (emphasis mine). "Will"? Isn't it *already* about knowing Jesus, not one's skin color?

Amidst calls for gospel unity, Mason seems to mistake the aesthetic of diversity in heaven's throne room for the basis of racial inclusion in Christ: "To say it plainly, God does care about color and ethnicity.… *And the reason He singled you out is so that He could have representation of your people group in heaven!*" (170; emphasis mine).

Is Mason actually asserting that election is *conditional* upon race? While the unfolding mystery of Gentile inclusion is one of the shining gems of biblical revelation, to construe God's decree of election as attempting to meet an ethnic quota in heaven does violence not only to our eschatology but our very soteriology.

Yes, Christ's blood has "ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9)—but not because God submits to the contemporary idol of stock-photo diversity. Rather, Revelation's diverse throne room shows us the absolute indiscriminate nature of God's lavish grace, extended unconditionally to Jews, Greeks, barbarians, Scythians, men, women, and the unreached at the ends of the earth. God is "no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34), and "the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Critique 4: Counter-Intuitive Solutions

Critics of Mason may be encouraged by what they read in chapter 7, "A Vision for Change." While much of the broader "woke" movement pushes for federally-imposed reparations, Mason's prescriptions are local, focusing on the home, the church, the neighborhood, the prison system, and the problem of fatherlessness in the black community. On whole, Mason offers refreshingly family-oriented, church-driven solutions that stand in marked contrast to the political Left's drumbeat of bureaucratic intervention.

However, some of Mason's prescriptions whiz past the heart of the problem and continue, counter-intuitively, to exalt ethnicity to a central position in human identity. While Mason also affirms that culturally-aware Christians should "dance" with God's law (54), most of his solutions draw more from simplistic sociology than exegesis. Mason simplistically advocates increasing the number of black teachers in the U.S., obscurely referencing a "growing body of evidence" that "'race affects how teachers see and treat their students'" (141). Though he joins this with an evangelistic strategy ("The Woke Church needs to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline and speak the gospel into those students' lives" [141]), the two solutions are at odds with each other. We cannot preach a gospel of repentance from partiality in schools while simultaneously employing unequal scales, which the Lord hates (Proverbs 20:10) in hiring educators.

In an atmosphere in which many, in a sense of guilt, are encouraging affirmative action-type policies—even in selection of local church elders—Mason does denounce tokenism: "When blacks who lack significant expertise are given this kind of platform, it suggests that there is not authentic care for the subject matter.… Tokenism impacts whites as well. If an unqualified black man or woman is brought into a majority white space as a professional integrationist or just as a black presence to promote diversity, but lack the acumen for the role, it hurts" (102). Unfortunately, Mason proceeds to lay the blame at the feet of insufficiently minority-conscious hiring practices, rather than attacking the larger issue of whether hiring decisions should be made at all on the basis of ethnicity.

Positives

Now, having thoroughly critiqued Mason, I would also like to highlight a few points in the book I find to be praiseworthy.

Mason is clear that God's mission advances through the body of Christ, not the civil magistrate. He is emphasizes regeneration, which many Christian often forget to do as soon as they enter public discourse. "You have to be intrinsically changed by God in order for justice to be done.… justice doesn't come by legislation, because you can legislate things and nothing changes" (50).

Let us state this even more strongly: real justice is impossible unless we are *justified*. Our gravest problem is not a *lack* of justice in society but our *assurance* of justice before the throne of God. Red and yellow, black and white, we all have enough personal and corporate sin to condemn us before a holy Judge. The gospel is not merely a program for social change, but the announcement that God in Christ is both just *and* the justifier of those who trust in the crucified and risen Savior (Romans 3:26). By faith, we receive the righteousness of Christ in place of both our inherited and individual guilt, making it possible for God to declare us righteous in his courtroom and free us from guilt and judgment.

Jesus really saves both repentant racists and the penitent oppressed (175). But apart from a sizeable segment of our population experiencing this radical, heart-transforming grace, it is folly to dream of chiliadal harmony in our day.

In terms of his pastoral approach, Mason deftly encourages church leaders to adopt an empathic posture towards those experiencing pain or frustration due to racial discord. Comparing the current conflict to a spousal argument, he writes, "We can have empathy for one another even if we disagree, because love comes before agreement" (69). This point is not lost on me as one of Mason's more critical readers. Agreement on issues of culture, race, and social justice does not have to be a prerequisite for charity.

Conclusion

I feel it apt to return to my acquaintance Amir. A few weeks after our initial exchange, I approached him in another friendly effort to build a relationship and share Christ. After an exchange of friendly jests and jabs, the sort you often give and receive in the weight room, we found ourselves in another discussion about culture and current events.

Amir, a former drug dealer who has now built a successful business, reaffirmed his commitment to pull-yourself-by-your-own-moral-bootstraps soteriology. But as soon as the conversation shifted to societal issues, I was immediately struck by his change in posture.

Conceding societal and systemic and systemic sin, I pointed out that Adam, the head of our race, is the *original* source of sin that runs in *all* of our bloodlines, rendering us all guilty before God, white or black.

"That's your opinion," Amir countered. When I took him to Romans 5 to show him the headship of Adam in original sin and the headship of Christ for salvation, he ended the conversation abruptly, "You sound like a broken record."

I am proud to be a broken record if my gospel is the gospel that cuts through excuses and resentments to get to the heart of the issue: my sin, Christ's finished work, and the call to repent and believe.

It is always easier to be angry at someone else's sin than our own. We cannot be ignorant of the way that the current social justice narrative deflects the gospel's emphasis on *my* sin in favor of an emphasis *their* oppression. Our gospel witness depends upon emphasizing our sin in Adam, Christ's gift of righteousness to his people, and the call to personal faith that lives itself out in love of neighbor.

Contrary to Dr. Mason's claims, we do not need to be "woke" to care about suffering and injustice. By adopting the world's lingo, we're playing into a larger agenda that deemphasizes the gospel of guilt, grace, and gratitude. We simply need to be biblical.

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