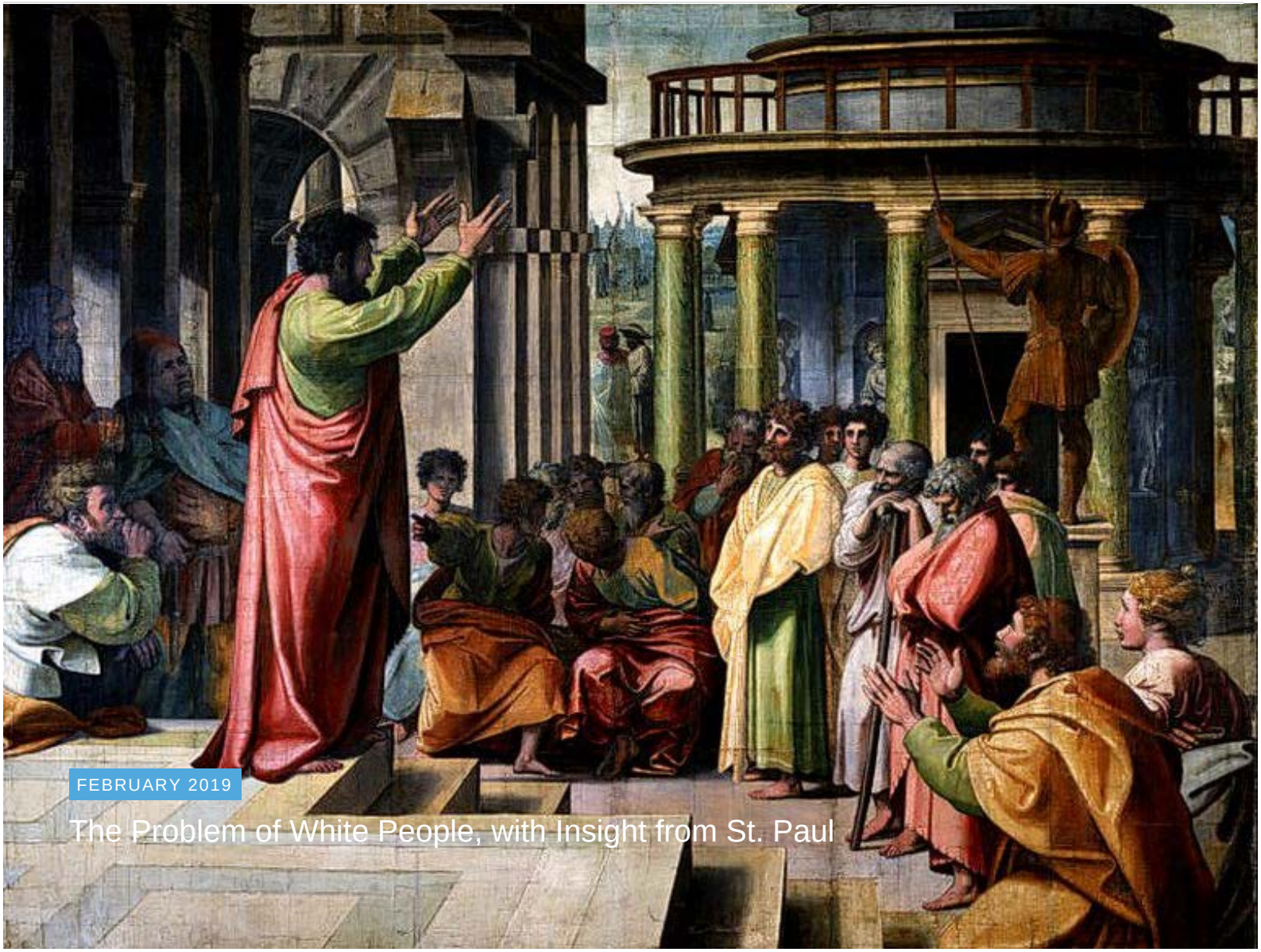
2-5-2019

The Problem with White People, with Insight from St. Paul

Jason M. Schlude
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, jschlude@csbsju.edu

The Activist History Review



FEBRUARY 2019

The Problem of White People, with Insight from St. Paul

BY EDITORIAL BOARD

FEBRUARY 5, 2019

COMMENTS 0

by Jason Schlude

"I'm proud to be white," someone recently told me. He interjected the comment in a contentious political conversation. I responded by advocating "more caution" in expression. The exchange fizzled without resolution. Yet this phrase, "proud to be white," continues to disturb. My conversation partner was no white

supremacist. But his chosen phrase would have fooled many. What lies within it is a key for understanding a threatening and intractable problem of American society: what I call "the problem of white people."

What is the problem? In simplest terms, many white people are "tired of feeling bad for being white," as my friend said. They are confident they have done nothing wrong to anyone of another race. Meanwhile, they perceive minority groups as reaping "special benefits," while the economy has left many of them behind. These white voters were key to the election of Donald Trump, whose rhetoric on race appealed to them—and still does, though the recent turmoil around the government shut-down seems to have lost President Trump ground with these voters, according to *Washington Post* and *CNN* polling and analysis. While these sentiments are particularly strong among white evangelical and Republican voters, we should not presume they are restricted to these groups alone. A recent study by the non-profit, non-partisan Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) shows some of this complexity on issues such as "Police Violence Against Black Men," "Perceptions of Discrimination," and "Explanations of Disparities Between Black and White Americans" (see the article "Partisan Polarization Dominates Trump Era: Findings from the 2018 American Values Survey"). These views extend widely—and this increases the gravity of the problem.

This phrase, "proud to be white," continues to disturb. My conversation partner was no white supremacist. But his chosen phrase would have fooled many. What lies within it is a key for understanding a threatening and intractable problem of American society: what I call "the problem of white people."

A fundamental issue is that we lack the vocabulary for white people today to feel pride in themselves. Their immigrant roots are buried ever deeper underground. They are more "white" than ever. Meanwhile, from the mid-20th century on, our country has tried to eliminate discrimination favoring white people through affirmative action. The work continues—and the controversy around the practice. Many, particularly in the Democratic party, see the continued need for this effort, while others, often in the Republican party, see it as no longer necessary and a form of "reverse discrimination." As a result, the latter group feels under siege, their ethnicity unfairly slurred. The debate has reached a pitch not seen in years, with some now openly embracing for the first time their pride in being white. The problem is the dark history of such phrasing: namely, its past

and present association with white supremacist groups.

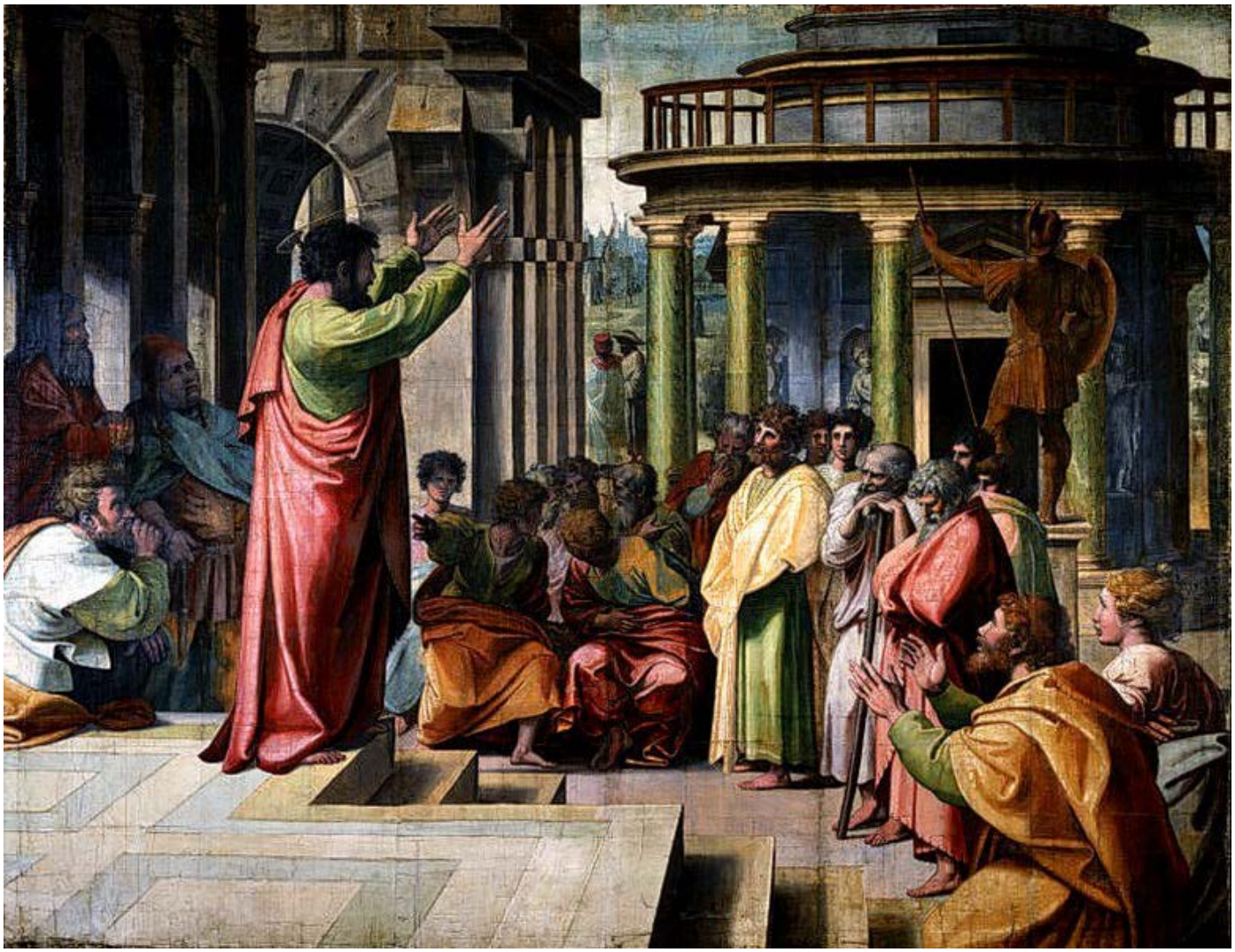
Another tactic (ostensibly more inclusive), used by some, is to focus on the idea that we are all "Americans" with equal rights and opportunities. There is no longer any need for special efforts to support and include minorities (not to mention women). Anyone can be successful. You just have to work for it. It is as if one can abandon ethnic identity, and only national identity matters. With this, we can all be equal and proud as Americans.

One can hear echoes of this rhetoric in our national political conversation, often from Republican office-holders and officials. A Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) interview (on November 15, 2018) with Tom Emmer, Minnesota's sixth district representative and new member of the National Republican Congressional Committee, offers a good example. MPR journalist Cathy Wurzer asked Representative Emmer about his new charge to identify and recruit Republican political talent. At one moment, she suggested that he was interested in "outreach" to "people of color and more women." The Representative responded, "I want to recruit the best candidates … It's not about color, it's not about faith, it's not about gender … We want people who are going to bring something new to the table." Mr. Emmer had an opportunity to discuss Republican efforts to seek out candidates of diverse background, but suggested that special efforts to do so are misguided. The goal is good ideas, anyone can have them, and anyone who does have them can surface to the top, gain recognition, and join the effort as a candidate and office-holder. Are we not all Americans on a level playing field?

This approach, too, is problematic. While it avoids the white pride issue, it nevertheless pretends that full racial equity exists, something that statistics on employment, income, housing, and education all refute. It can be no coincidence that many minority groups suffer from fewer jobs, less pay, housing centered in long-segregated neighborhoods, and lower rates of graduation and college attendance. Not all Americans have it the same.

The language and theology of St. Paul offers an interesting parallel. Paul was a Jew who adopted, in the 50s CE, the mission to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to Gentiles. In the process, he moved from Asia Minor to Greece and finally Rome. His ministry and thinking are best documented by his own letters to the communities with which he worked. In his letter to the Galatians, he writes, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:28). This was a particularly powerful statement in the context of the Galatian community at this time. Paul contended that salvation came through faith in Jesus, not works of the Jewish law. So, Gentiles did not need to be circumcised or follow kosher regulations. But the Galatians came to embrace these traditionally Jewish markers of ethnic identity.

Paul, then, advised otherwise: anyone could join the "Christian" movement, regardless of who they were. To be clear, Paul did not coin the term "Christian," yet we can see that Paul bordered on it, often speaking of "those in Christ." If someone had suggested the term to him, he would have liked it. For Paul, all "those in Christ," later called "Christians," were equal in the eyes of God, with the same opportunity for salvation through Jesus Christ, no matter what their ethnicity, legal designation, or gender.



Raphael's *St. Paul Preaching in Athens* (1515). Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Yet as with the national "American" identity, the religious "Christian" identity obscured the inequities of Paul's Greco-Roman society. Whatever Paul said, his world was patriarchal and dependent on slavery and offered special advantages according to one's own people. In fact, Paul at times seemed to endorse, or at least tolerate, some of these inequities. Consider his letter to Philemon, in which he encouraged Philemon to receive kindly his runaway slave Onesimus. While Paul asks Philemon to forego punishing Onesimus and even manumit him, he never questions slavery's legality. That he sends Onesimus back in this way implicitly affirms the practice. In short, you all enjoy equity—and yet you do not. To be fair to Paul, he truly believed

that the equality he offered was most important: one's ultimate salvation. But then and now, it was and is not enough to have equal opportunity only in the afterlife.

As with the national "American" identity, the religious "Christian" identity obscured the inequities of Paul's Greco-Roman society. Whatever Paul said, his world was patriarchal and dependent on slavery and offered special advantages according to one's own people.

To return to our own time, there is no clear solution to the problem of white people. Their European origins are increasingly distant and foreign. The language of white pride is seriously troubling. And the attempt to side-step the issue by focusing on all being "Americans" obscures inequities still requiring attention; traditionally underrepresented groups deserve our continued (and enhanced) support. At the same time, everyone, including white people, need to feel pride in their identity. Feelings of self-worth all around are necessary for working together to move our society forward. Yet our vocabulary sometimes lacks easy language for this. I offer no simple answer to the problem, but a clear understanding of it is a start. And the perfect words of the imperfect Paul can take us a bit farther. When facing community divisions that put harmony out of reach, he advocated the following, especially for the vulnerable: "faith, hope, and love"—and as many well know, "the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13). Those with privilege need to reach beyond themselves and help to elevate the those without.