Where Did the Different Races of Man Come From?

Question: In discussing the Bible with a non-Christian, he raised a question concerning the different races of people since Noah's day. Essentially he wanted to know how all the races of people could have come from only Noah and his family. Apart from the inspirational statements of Genesis, could you help me respond to his question? J.D., Glens Falls, NY.

Answer: Our understanding of genetics not only shows that it is not impossible for all races to trace their ancestry to one person, it may even be the most likely explanation! However, while science cannot tell us whether or not that person was Noah, it can tell us that the history offered in Scripture is very plausible.

How boring it would be if all people were the same! The different races are not a part of God's creation-week activities. Adam and Eve carried all the traits of all the races in their genetic information just as most of us today have genetic information for brown eyes even though we may have blue eyes, or even another colour. The genetic information is there, within us, and it may show itself in a subsequent generation. For this reason it's hard to tell what Adam and Eve looked like, even though we know they were perfect.

What makes a race, anyway? Generally, racial characteristics are evident mainly in skin colour, hair type and facial features. (There are slight biochemical differences, too, but these differences are explainable on the same basis as the more obvious physical features.) Skin colour is determined by the amount of melanin in the skin. Melanin is a brownish-black pigment which is commonly found in many types of animal tissues as well as in human beings. And all humans have some melanin in their skin unless they are albinos. Melanin does more than just colour our skin, however. It also provides protection against skin cancer caused by the sun. For example, Minnesota has the highest rate of skin cancer in the United States today, not because it is the sun capital of North America, but because it has a very high percentage of northern European stock - peoples with very little melanin in their skin.

People of the same race can vary greatly in their skin colour. Northern Europeans are much lighter skinned than Italians, even though they are the same race. And the people of India are much darker skinned even though they, too, are Caucasian. Generally, the closer one gets to the equator, the darker skinned the people are likely to be.

Perhaps an even more obvious racial trait is the unique facial characteristics of different groups of people. Most of these characteristics are not a result of different bone structure, but of fatty deposits under the skin which are largely hereditary. Oftentimes it is easy to tell that a person is part of a given family simply because he or she has unique facial characteristics which fit in with that family - in more simple terms: "they sure look like sisters!" Likewise, each of the races has such unique characteristics which consist mostly of inherited soft tissue shapes and forms. "Round eyes" or "slant eyes" are commonly seen examples of these differences. The same is true for hair characteristics.

All of the racial characteristics are merely differences; they do not make any race any more or less human or any more or less intelligent. As a matter of fact, the genetic basis of all of these differences was created by God and present in the first perfect pair of human beings. They provide evidence of the range of God's creativity, and some of these differences, such as skin pigmentation, have their source in God's wisdom, as we have seen. About 1400 years after the creation of the first human beings, we see the human race preserved through the three sons of Noah. This bases the current world's population on the descendants of three families. But the matter is further complicated by the additional division of the world's population several hundred years later through the confusion of tongues at Babel. This division ultimately provided the basis for the current world's nations and races.

As one moves closer to the equator, we typically find that people have more melanin in their skin. This additional skin pigmentation provides added protection against skin cancer, which is more likely as one moves toward the equator where the sun's intensity is strongest. It has been suggested that here we have a true example of "natural selection" (but careful now, this only means that certain traits are removed from the population, there is no new genetic information added.) It has been suggested that individuals who had very little protection of skin pigmentation and who moved closer to the equator
were gradually wiped out of the population by skin cancer, thus not producing more offspring with light pigmentation. After many generations there would be few people left with light pigmentation near the equator. It is also possible that God moved those with more pigmentation to settle in the sunnier reaches of the earth, thus providing for their needs in this way. At the same time, since little pigmentation is needed in the colder climates, it appears that God led people who had little pigmentation to settle in these climates. Consequently, we see a gradual increase in skin pigmentation as we move closer to the equator, no matter which race we are looking at.

With the division of the peoples of the earth at Babel, we have a limiting of the gene pool. Evidently God divided the world’s population into quite a number of languages, effectively cutting off certain genetic possibilities for each group, and through the generations, purifying certain traits through marriage of second and third cousins or more distantly-related, but related, individuals. This would have the same effect as modern dog or horse breeding where selection of mates removes certain traits from the available gene pool while highlighting other traits. Through the years, as certain traits such as skin pigmentation, hair type and soft tissue characteristics became rather unique to various basic groups of peoples, these peoples settled into their respective areas of the earth and fathered more tribes and nations, so that today many nations are found with similar racial characteristics.

Originally, all of the racial characteristics were found in both Adam and Eve, as well as Noah. Each race today represents only a small amount of the genetic possibilities which were originally found in these individuals. Therefore, interracial marriages represent a recombining of some of the racial characteristics found in our first parents and an increase in the possible features which may be evident in children produced by such marriages. With our modern knowledge of genetics, the modern races certainly make sense in light of the Scriptural history of man.

by P.A.B.

Source: 'Bible Science Newsletter'