

Race and Identity

- *the fruits of racism and the image of God*

THE EFFECTS OF RACISM

The fruits of racism

The fruits of racism are evidenced in every facet of living in a multi-racial community, and are an integral part of the daily grind of living for many people of colour in our society. David Haslam in his book 'Race for the Millennium' somewhat paradoxically describes Racism's effects, as its 'fruits'. If they can be spoken of in such a way, then they are indeed bitter fruits; vile smelling, evil tasting and when digested gut wrenching. This ranges from name calling-using derogatory terms - to, issues that severely impact individual's physical, psychological and emotional existence, and brings with it a slow suffocation of the human spirit. Inherent in all this is the tacit belief that the colour of one's skin and the racial group in which one is born, confers on the individual characteristics of superiority or inferiority, depending on which group you are in. With this comes certain privileges and expectations for the superior group, and which members of the inferior group are denied.

Racism attacks the core of our being, our humanity and our dignity. Far from developing and nurturing our inner self, it eats away at our very core and degrades our God-given humanity and dignity. Racism is as pernicious as it is evil. As children of God we are told that we have been made in his image and that we are all equal.

'Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens,
but fellow citizens with God's people
and members of God's household'.
(Eph 2:19)

Yet racism's 'fruits' and effects on individuals, whole communities and nations have shown that it has only served to perpetuate and increase inequalities within our society.

□ Employment

Discrimination in employment is well documented over the years. Black immigrants were encouraged to come to England to help rebuild the country after WW2. Many found themselves working long hours for example in factories, driving and conducting on busses and in The National Health Service. The effect of racial stereotyping ensured that black immigrants were employed on the basis of what they were expected to do as a member of an inferior group, rather than been seen as an equal, with the ability and experience to carry out any other type of jobs. The kinds of jobs they undertook or were encouraged to take therefore were mostly manual, domestic or cleaning jobs. People of colour were not given the opportunities to improve themselves by working for promotion in the workplace, or when applying for white-collar jobs. Employers overtly discriminated by refusing to interview or employ black people for higher status and better-paid jobs. Application and



interview procedures were used that would ensure that black people did not succeed in obtaining the employment of their choice.

The 1976 Race Relations Act was to have ensured that racial discrimination in the workplace was wiped out. However, this only made the discrimination more covert, in that employers used other tactics for not employing minority ethnic workers. Some employers are now monitoring their work force to ensure that their employment practices are more equal, and minority ethnic applicants are ensured a better chance of interview, being appointed, and once appointed given training and improved chances of promotion.

However, there are many employers who believe that they have no need to implement any policy of Equal Opportunity because as they see it 'no one has made a complaint'. It has been demonstrated that in job applications for example ethnic minority applicants are still being discriminated against and, as they are not aware of this they are therefore not in a position to complain. The CRE report on Large Companies and Racial Equality, exemplified Nottingham Racial Equality Council, who tested employers by sending out fictitious applications from equally qualified Afro-Caribbeans, Asians and white people to companies in response to their advertisements in the Nottingham Evening Post:

"The results were stark: the minority 'applicants' were four times as likely as the white to be rejected. Even if these 'applicants' had suspected that they had not been fairly considered, they would have a hard time proving their claims"(1995)

□ Housing

In encouraging members from the Black Commonwealth to come and help rebuild the 'Mother Country', Britain did little or nothing to facilitate housing and accommodation for those who entered. In fact, there was a stark difference in how black, West Indian immigrants - in particular - were treated in relation to East Europeans for example. Where housing, education and some help with employment were afforded Eastern Europeans there was none for black immigrants. Given that the majority came with the intention of staying only a short time and then returning home, nonetheless they still required at least adequate housing when they arrived. What they received however was less than satisfactory. Many only had friends to accept them when they arrived, and had to find private living accommodation from landlords who made it clear that they had no room for 'Coloureds, Irish or dogs'. Those who were able to pool their resources and buy their own homes found that estate agents were very helpful in finding them houses to buy in the least desirable of neighbourhoods, and would sell at a higher price than they'd expect a white buyer to pay.

In many instances accommodation was so difficult to obtain that individuals ended up renting 'a bed'. The 1991 census showed that 35% of the worst housing in the owner occupied sector was occupied by Black and Asian groups compared to only 7% occupied by white groups. (CRE. Housing & Homelessness, 1999) Examples of discrimination by Housing Organisations still exist as much as it is for private sector rented accommodation. The CRE reports that:

"Housing organisations will usually have systems for determine priorities between different groups of housing applicants. In general, ethnic minorities have been



over-represented in those categories tending to receive poorer properties, and under represented in those categories tending to receive better accommodation. For instance, homeless applicants receive poorer property than applicants who are being transferred from one public sector property to another. The operation of such a rehousing system, which has the effect of one racial group receiving poorer quality accommodation than another racial group, is indirectly discriminatory and unlawful, unless it can be justified". (Code of Practice in Rented Housing 1991).

This is also a demonstration of institutional racism in practice, and can be argued to be representative across all areas of service delivery.

□ **Health**

The issue of equal health care is a global one as much as it is a national and local one. Globally, excessively rich, multi-national companies apply a two-tier system of marketing, which directly affects the health of individuals in those countries. Examples of such activities include the practise of trialing drugs on people in developing countries - Depo-Provera being one such drug. They encourage new mothers to consider bottle-feeding as a far superior method of feeding their babies as opposed to breast milk. They ignore the very fact that this contributes greatly to the increase of infant mortality as a result of parents' inability to pay the high prices that this incurs. This inevitably poses problems of nutrition and ill health. (A recent Television programme on ITV- December 2000) exposed tobacco companies who are currently exporting cigarettes with high nicotine and tar content, made deliberately for export to developing countries, knowing full well the serious health issues caused by tobacco. It has been further demonstrated that death from heart disease and lung cancer has increased alarmingly in these countries.

At home we find that in many cases a two-tier service operates for ethnic minority patients. Some examples include:

"A doctor at a family planning clinic prescribes Depo-Provera for some of the Somali women who regularly attend the clinic. The doctor does not take the time to explain the possible side effects of this drug, or discuss alternative contraceptive methods. The doctor's failures to do this means that Somali women are likely to receive a more restricted, and possibly dangerous, service".
(CRE. Race Relations Code of Practice in Maternity Service. 1994)

Additionally, where:

"Afro-Caribbean people presenting symptoms of cancer are only prescribed aspirin because the GP does not take the time to reach a proper diagnosis".
(Race Relations Code of Practice in Primary Health Care Services. 1998)

□ **Education**

Our children are our future, and it behoves us to teach them well. We have a responsibility to equip them with the knowledge and understanding to enable them to pursue their goals and dreams; to be scientists, doctors, astronauts, teachers, or whatever their dreams inspire them to become, to push the boundaries of their abilities.



It is sinful to inculcate in our youngsters, feelings of such low self-esteem that they limit the boundaries of their potential academic, economic and social development. A system, which makes assumptions about the inability of another group to learn and achieve, prepares the whole group for failure. This continues the cycle of deprivation and demoralisation with all that this deprivation attracts. Everyone has a right to aim towards good jobs that pay well in order that families can eat a balanced meal regularly, and therefore ensure better primary health care for families for example.

Some of these assumptions determine that black children in general are unteachable and lack discipline. In particular, these assumptions affect black boys, many of whom, have become disenfranchised and, disproportionately, face exclusion and expulsion from schools. Reports have concluded that black children do exceptionally well at nursery school. At this time it would seem that the issue of race, identity and the assumptions that goes along with this has not yet permeated their consciousness. The question we must ask ourselves is this: what happens after they leave nursery education, and enter the realms of primary, secondary and higher school learning? What are the interactions that take place to discourage and disenfranchise black children in our schools?

The CRE reports on investigation done in Birmingham LEA and concluded, "That:

- Ethnic minority pupils were four times more likely to be suspended than white pupils for similar offence;
- Ethnic minority pupils were three times more likely to be placed in suspension units than white pupils;
- Ethnic minority pupils were six times more likely to be suspended under the age of 14 than white pupils;
- 43 per cent of the pupils in the special units were of Afro-Caribbean origin, whereas only 10 per cent of Birmingham's school population were from this racial group;
- Ethnic minority pupils were more likely to be suspended or referred after shorter periods of 'disruptive' behaviour than white pupils".

Children in the Caribbean do not demonstrate these characteristics, so we need to really look at the interplay between school, society and community to determine what is taking place. Another investigation at St George's Hospital Medical School: -

"Found that St George's had directly discriminated on racial grounds by using a computer programme to sort application forms which gave adverse weighting to ethnic minority candidates, thereby reducing their chances of admission."
(Lessons of The Law. 1991)

□ **Criminal Justice**

The handling of the murder of Steven Lawrence is the classic example of how the criminal justice system still fails people of colour in our society today. The issues of how police handles minority ethnic individuals, include such incidences as deaths in custody; stop and search policy; and the automatic presumption that black people are thieves and muggers are many. National Olympic champion, Linford Christie, himself became one such victim of the stop and search policy, where he was accused of stealing his own car. The



Metropolitan Commissioner, who publicly stated that young black men are muggers, further compounds the problem. The further killing of Joy Gardener by immigration officers is again a further case in point, which illustrates the extent to which a system has, demonstrates contempt for particular groups within our society, especially when no one has been charged for this murder. It further signals to society at large that 'black life is cheap'. A Sivanandan points out that:

“Black wrong-doers, prisoners, psychiatric patients are, by virtue merely of their blackness, rendered an under-class of that already under-privileged citizenry. Black vagrants are even more readily than their white counterparts the sport and playthings of macho white policemen. Young blacks are frequently stopped and questioned on the basis of no more than a generalised suspicion that if they are black and young and on the streets they can up to no good. And the way that blacks are subjected to violent arrest stems from another presumption: that blacks are violent and aggressive by nature and must, from the outset, be dealt with violently and aggressively... The contempt for blacks on the streets is carried into the contempt for blacks in their homes, for black family life”. (Deadly Silence: Black Deaths in Custody; Institute of Race Relations www.homebeats.co.uk/resources/custody.htm)

Systems, which covertly and overtly conspire to unfairly treat others on the basis of skin colour and racial origin does not mete out justice. It turns its back on what is right and just, and calls us to question the morality on which this system operates. It is certainly not Christlike, and burdens us with the responsibility not to sit back and do nothing.

It was Pastor Niemoller, victim of the Nazis who said that, “For evil to succeed, is for good people to sit back and do nothing”:

- The slave trade and subsequent colonisation of Africa and the Caribbean
- The dispossession of land and rights from the Maoris in New Zealand
- The Aborigines in Australia
- The Native Americans
- The ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo
- The genocide in Rwanda
- Having high expectations.
- Taking into account how children develop their view of the world [positive and negative identity].
- Ensuring children have a good understanding of the past i.e that they understand the full history of the 'motherland'.
- Ensuring children have the skills, knowledge and ability to make a positive contribution to our multi-racial / multicultural society in which they live.
- Personal life
- Church life
- Work life

Racism has been described as the sin that destroys the image of God. It is a sin which scars all humanity and feeds injustice .As a church Jesus has clearly called us to fight this

¹ Rabbi Hugo Gryn CBE [1930 - 1996]



sin wherever it may rear its ugly head. We are not called to pass by on the other side, to be keepers of the status quo; we are clearly called to make a difference.

Jesus - the role model

Jesus in his life here on earth, clearly challenged the racist status quo of Jewish society, which pushed Samaritans to live on the periphery. Much like black people today, Samaritans were characterised as inferior both culturally and historically; unclean including spiritually; generally not to be trusted; and a threat to the Jewish way of life. The religious leaders of that time not only supported the status quo they actively supported racial intolerance. For them to accuse Jesus of being a Samaritan as they did in John 8:48, was their harshest form of rebuke. Jesus though chooses to champion the Samaritans, rather than distance himself from them. He pointedly refuses to make a denial as to being a Samaritan. Jesus challenged the Jew's intolerance and went out of his way to draw attention to the Samaritans in a positive light, calling them true neighbours and disciples. His interaction with this hated group must have caused his Jewish followers and his disciples much discomfort and guilt along with feelings of confusion; His actions repeatedly challenged the stereotype of Samaritans that was deeply ingrained in the Jewish psyche.

John 4; 7 - 47 tells the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. When Jesus asks her for a drink of water, she responds by asking him:

" How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me a woman of Samaria?
(Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans)."
(John 4: 9)

Later in the same passage, we see Jesus disciples astonished that he was speaking with her. (John 4: 27). But Jesus efforts bear fruit. He did not allow the statement by the women that Jews and Samaritans do not *share* anything in common to dissuade him from his mission.

" Many Samaritans from that city believed in him
because of the woman's testimony, ...
So when the Samaritans came to him
they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days.
And many more believed because of his word."
(John 4: 39 – 41)

Jesus was tearing down the glass wall of racism, crossing a cultural divide, and proclaiming a message of salvation for all.

But it is through the story of 'The Good Samaritan' that Jesus clear message of anti racism speaks loudest. In Luke 10 Jesus tells the story, we now know so well, of a man who is robbed on the road to Jericho and is then left to die at the roadside. Both a priest and a Levite subsequently pass him by on the other side of the road :

" But a Samaritan while travelling came near him,
and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.



He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them.
Then he put him on his own animal,
brought him to an inn and took care of him ..."
(Luke 10:33-34)

Jesus uses the actions of the Samaritan to help the lawyer answer his own question as to how he would inherit the kingdom of God? And who is his true neighbour.

The challenge to the church today is clear. In a society where racism still dehumanises people and deprives them of justice, will the church be content to walk by on the other side? Or will it be, like Jesus, a force that challenges racial intolerance in a drive to root out what has been described as a pernicious vein of poison?

Local church and personal challenge

" Racism is in the end a spiritual issue which has to be addressed for the health of us all"
D. Haslam. 1996.

As Christians we must face up to the fact that being anti-racist will require us to take risks; to move away from what for many white Christians is a comfortable state of affairs, which favours them, and unfortunately causes the church and Christians, too often, to mirror the society we live in. It cannot be denied that many churches, especially in multicultural areas of Britain have made moves towards valuing multiculturalism and diversity in British society. But following the more active paths of anti-racism is what is needed if we are truly seeking to repair the cracked image of God presented by racial intolerance.

Why hasn't this happened already? There are many reasons. Again David Haslam, in his book, 'Race For The Millennium', provides an excellent overview of this argument. We have tried to summarise them as well as drawing on my personal experience and those of other commentators on the church's response to racism to suggest some possible answers:

- Many Christians fear that discussing racism in the church setting may lead to heated arguments and discussions among us. Some fear that it will lead to feelings of guilt and make congregations uncomfortable.
- Often churches choose to make a more optimistic assessment of racism in Britain and feel that taking an anti-racist approach is unnecessary and divisive.
- Other churches feel comfortable to claim that racism does not exist in their midst and there is, therefore, no need to tackle the issue. When decoded this often means that there are very few or no black people in the congregation, and therefore there is no reason to address what is really a 'problem' for black people. No need also for them to engage in the self - examination of their views to other races and their stance on racial justice issues in their community, their work places and in British society as a whole.



- Both black and white churches alike have often found it easier to reduce the gospel to one that only relates to personal salvation.
- Sadly a lot of churches have joined in the rush to discredit 'Political Correctness' as the 'new sin' threatening British churches; in so doing they have effectively gagged and rubbished those seeking to instil anti-racist practices within the church community.
- Many non-white members of 'mainly white' churches have felt treated like invited guests. Rarely do black members attain ownership and the authority to set agendas. Church leaderships have found it less problematic to see them as travellers passing through - often substituting the teaching of hospitality to strangers in place of the anti-racist message. This is regardless of the fact that the majority of their non-white members are British Citizens, who were probably born and brought up in this country.
- Other 'mainly white' churches have salved their consciences by proclaiming the value of black churches as a solution to racism; ignoring the fact that it was the negative reception received by black Christians in the traditional church, which initially fuelled their development. If segregation in education, housing, and the work place is not deemed acceptable, why are British Christians happy to promote and accept it as a solution in church life?

Listening, repentance and reconciliation

We need to acknowledge the reality that racism and its poison persist:

“Blindness does not justify optimism. Legitimate optimism comes from facing problems squarely and working to overcome them.”
D. Shipler. 1999.

As with any other sin denying its existence and failing to repent of it dishonours the message of the gospel and the truth of Christ as the saviour of all mankind.

“White British Christians continue to find it extraordinarily difficult to listen to Black Christians, whether in the field of worship, liturgy, spirituality or social concerns, whether in ordinary church meetings or in academic discourse. However listening in order to understand is an essential part of preparation if repentance is to be genuine and reconciliation possible.”

Anti-racism in the church

Setting practical suggestions. What can the local church do?

Haslam suggests:

- Churches should get involved in the battle against racial violence.
- Push for non-racist immigration policies.
- Fight for a fair criminal justice system.



- Find out about and get involved in anti-deportation campaigns.
- Read the minority press.
- Get in touch with anti-racist organisations. Read their newsletters and magazines. [e.g. The Church Commission for Racial Justice. The Commission for Racial Equality. The Runnymede Trust.]
- Make direct contacts with people affected by racial injustice e.g. Refugees, race attack victims, and offer support.
- Make twinning links with mainly non-white congregations. But, don't be superficial; be prepared to listen; allow them to share their experiences of being non-white Christians in Britain.
- Mainly white and multicultural churches need to audit themselves and examine exactly what opportunities they provide for their non-white members to hold power, to be preachers, lead worship, and to act as youth leaders. This will mean have to learn to live without always being in control and will need to accept black leadership.

Do these suggestions make you uncomfortable? Are they just too radical? You need to ask why? Is there anything in these suggestions that contradicts the way in which the Christian message has called us to live our lives? Think carefully before you close your mind to these suggestions.

Glen Kehrein, a US Evangelical Christian suggests:

- Don't deny the reality of racism.
- Don't look for simple answers to complex problems.
- Become a learner by admitting you know little of black people.
- Get beyond guilt to action.
- How much you accomplish depends on how much you invest.
- White churches must become part of the solution.
- All of us share responsibility in healing the wounds of racism

It has been said that positive individual attitudes are simply not enough for racism is more than just personal.

Questions

1. How should Christians deal with the 'fruits of racism'?
2. What role can education play in dealing with racism and prejudice? How important is it?
3. Why has the Christian church so often been responsible for both racism and prejudice? What must be done to eradicate these attitudes?

Open Reflection

You encounter a subtle but clear attitude of racism in the behaviour and responses of a leader in a local church. What is your reaction and what action do you take? What strategies would you advise to challenge all forms of racism in the Christian community of



faith? Having established this as an on going pattern of awareness and challenge within the church, what form should its voice in wider society take?

Reading & Resources

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Set to Fail? Setting & Banding in Secondary Schools 1992

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