

# Race, justice and social analysis



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## Introduction

Following the tragic death of George Floyd, the issue of racism has once again come to the fore. A lid has been lifted and we can all see more clearly the ways racism has permeated every facet of society. The world is waking up to the reality of racism; there is a renewed desire for anti-racist action and justice. The Church has been part of the problem and must dismantle the structures that have upheld racism. We must also think creatively and develop alternative structural arrangements that make a real difference and bring about meaningful change.

## Justice

The word 'justice' conjures up many feelings that revolve around an innate desire to see things made right where wrongdoing has taken place. We want to see an end to situations in which the strong take advantage of the vulnerable, both at an individual and societal level. The challenge we find when we encounter the issue of race, and therefore racial justice, is that many of us have an impoverished understanding of the concept of race and structural violence.<sup>1</sup> If our biblical understanding of justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tzedakah*) point towards notions of impartiality, equality and advocacy for the marginalised and poor,<sup>2</sup> then we must consider the inherent contradiction of wanting to seek impartiality, equality and advocacy when dealing with a system such as race, which in and of itself has the opposite aims.

It is widely accepted that race is a social construct and, of course, its construction changes and

evolves over time. However, there are some fundamental and essential features of race that give it its value and maintain its permanence. It was, and is, a tool for differentiation, separation, hierarchy and categorisation based on formally mute bodies communicating truths of an 'irrevocable otherness'.<sup>3</sup> The categorisation of European, Western or white as primordial, with others distributed in a downwards categorial fashion,<sup>4</sup> casts doubt on those who lack this understanding to be effective in their efforts towards racial justice. Many would argue against statements such as 'racism is baked into society' to ward off racism becoming a totalising ill that is sitting at the door of every form of injustice. Of course, we all know that we are dealing with sin, but if our social analysis fails to see the permeations of this insidious sin, which has been curated by a carefully managed ignorance,<sup>5</sup> we will again fall short of the vision required to live in accordance with the second commandment (Exodus 20.4).

The idea of breaking down unjust structures requires us not only to be well versed in biblical justice, but also in the theories of race that have articulated the ways the separation and division of white and non-white peoples, languages, cultures and norms that have been maintained and justified for hundreds of years. This social analysis is necessary for any form of justice work in the Church to be anything more than a substandard reconciliation powered by placebo because we are at war with a very vexing antagonist.

## The Church, theology and race

One of the principal challenges facing the Christian community in this country is understanding the ways we have participated in, and contributed to, the upholding of racism. We were simply too shocked, surprised and unprepared to process, interpret and respond to the racial unveiling that ensued after George Floyd was murdered. We are yet to see widespread sustained practices born out of theological reflection that seek to re-humanise black and brown people within our churches and wider society. Reports of institutional racism within the Church have been well documented. Unfortunately, we are still witnessing expressions of Christianity that remain the 'cultural property of the West' when we should be moving towards a Christian identity that seeks to reconstitute the familial.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus asks, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' (Matthew 12.48, ESV). This is loosely being answered by the our church congregations, but the paterfamilias of the house still seem to be making the majority of the decisions that reinscribe a body and soul separation. We are still attending churches in which people are the object of evangelical activities, but the physical and social aspects of the lives of many black and brown people – the underfunded schools, decrepit housing, school and prison exclusions, poor health, racial disparity in the criminal justice system, black maternal fatalities, discriminatory school practices, and I could go on – seem to evade our budgets, theology, philosophy and church ministries. Our websites are flooded with welcoming statements, family centred activities, mid-week groups and the occasional mention of a social-action project, which tend to be focused primarily on the results of societal breakdown and not the cause. This is all important work that is being carried out by committed staff and volunteers and I am not disparaging it – far from it. However, I am questioning why contemporary followers of Jesus seem content with maintaining structures of subjugation that have a detrimental impact on many of the issues faced by non-white people.

Our role as Christians is to break the social, political and cultural mould of status quo where injustice is rife and uphold both goodness and fairness. This is right at the centre of true religion.<sup>7</sup> Becoming a revolutionary is not the goal as such. Rather, the aim is to enter more deeply into Christ and his teachings. This is what Gregory of Nyssa did through his theological reading of Scripture. For Gregory of Nyssa, Christian identity was a transformational identity, one that ecstatically exits the worldly order of things and liberates the reader of Scripture from tyrannical self-enclosure.<sup>8</sup> This form of reading Scripture remakes, rather than reinscribes, identity. We contemplate the life and work of Christ in light of the world around us. Injustice is challenged and things are remade because we understand more fully that the

presence of the cosmic battle dispels any notion of a neutral world. Happenstance is not the rational justification for unjust structures.

Gregory of Nyssa recognised this as it pertained to the ancient practice of slavery in the fourth century when many of his contemporaries, such as Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea, saw the institution, simply put, as 'the way things are'.<sup>9</sup> Gregory of Nyssa's intertextual reading of Scripture led him to contrast Solomon's ownership of slaves in Ecclesiastes 2.7 as a distortion of the order of creation because man had 'forgotten his limits of his authority' and had subjected all things, not just birds, plant life and animals.<sup>10</sup> His rejection of the institution of slavery is deeply theological. This is evident from his reflections, 'If he is in the likeness of God, and rules the whole earth, and has been granted authority over everything on earth from God, who is his buyer, tell me, who is his seller? To God alone belongs this power.'<sup>11</sup> Gregory of Nyssa wants us to realise that lordship and mastery are 'inflections of sheer power'.<sup>12</sup> He also wants to theologically undo the way we conceive of power, because God does not enslave what is free. God is free. Humans are made in God's image, which means freedom is a constituent aspect of humanity. For Gregory of Nyssa, humans remain free regardless of the social order we construct, such is his understanding of the covenant of creation whereby our freedom is not superseded by legal or societal structures.<sup>13</sup>

## A new imagination

When Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann speaks of freedom and justice in *Prophetic Imagination*, he, too, wants us to see God as being free and God's people as requiring freedom to worship him. Brueggemann's understanding of the Exodus narrative is pertinent because he makes the argument that a reform of Egypt was not on God's agenda. The mild adjustments to a violent and oppressive system and structure of disempowerment were never going to be God's intent. The exodus was exactly that, an exodus – an exit and departure from bondage. As we think through what it might mean for the Church to remake structures that have previously failed to honour our theological oneness that is found In Christ (Galatians 3.28, ESV), I want to consider something Brueggemann urges us to do but we often find challenging – that is, to imagine an alternative.

We are great at implementation but often fail in our imagination and therefore have inadequate vision:

Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing ... it is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination to keep on conjuring and proposing future alternatives to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

1. Part I: 'Afropessimism' and the rituals of anti-black violence - *The Mail & Guardian* (mg.co.za).
2. T Keller, 'Justice in the Bible', *Gospel in Life Quarterly* available at <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/justice-in-the-bible/>
3. P Gilroy, 'Race and culture in postmodernity', *Economy and Society*, 28/2 (1999), pp.183–197.
4. ND Chandler, 'On Paragraph Four of "The Conservation of Races"', *The New Centennial Review* 14.3 (2014), pp. 255–288. *JSTOR* available at [www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.14.3.0255](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.14.3.0255)
5. P Gilroy, *Never Again: Refusing race and salvaging the human* (Holberg Lecture, 2019), available at [www.newframe.com](http://www.newframe.com)
6. JK Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
7. PL Metzger, 'What is Biblical Justice?', *CT Pastors/Christianity Today* (Summer, 2010).
8. Carter, *Race*, p. 235.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
14. W Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* 40th Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), p. 40.
15. *Ibid.*

16. You can access material and media at Christianity and the status quo at Religion Online ([www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org)).

17. You can access material and media at (14) MOF Church Live: Education Sunday with Dr J Kameron Carter, 25 July 2021, on YouTube.

18. You can access material and media at 2 Timothy 4, Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers ([biblehub.com](http://biblehub.com))

19. C Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2016).

When we consider the work of dismantling racism inside and outside the Church, when we engage in thinking through our internal structures and operations as a Church, we need to focus on our vision for change. Do we possess an alternative imagination that is not restricted to what we think we can implement based on our resources and people? Brueggemann is quick to note that throughout the Old Testament the prophets are not preoccupied with the question of whether the vision can be implemented because imagination must come before implementation.<sup>15</sup>

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There have been several recent articles and books written on the issues of structural racism in the Church in the UK and the failure of the Church to engage in issues of racial justice specifically and social justice more broadly. The likes of Ben Lindsay, Chine McDonald and Reverend Francis-Williams have not only provided enormous amounts of social commentary, theological reflection and real-world examples and experiences for us to learn from, they have also been advocates of change. The question remains as to whether we will engage with their work and those who have gone before them. Will we allow prophetic imagination to begin the work of re-envisioning and rethinking through new possibilities? We need new arrangements and a new impetus to allow the Church to be radical in its pursuit, to make the necessary sacrifices and stand for change regardless of the cost.

Comfortable Christianity has always been an oxymoron, there was nothing comfortable about the cross of Christ. Status quo Christianity has always been unable to fight the moral conflict of our time, where people desire to become godlike, our desires dominate and with many people seen as mere resources.<sup>16</sup> To top it off, race neatly categorises people in order of importance and the 'least of these' (Matthew 25.40, ESV) almost always suffer the most. Can we imagine a Church and society that is willing to be selfless, loving and humble? Can we imagine a Church and society that rejects man-made classifications of people, which relegate some to social mobility and others to social death?

## New tools

In a recent sermon, J Kameron Carter, reminds us that when the apostle Paul is incarcerated for the last time, he implores Timothy to bring him three things; his cloak, his books and the Word of God or the parchments (2 Timothy 4.13).<sup>17</sup> Now these three items are really significant and if we pay close

attention to them, we may grasp a vision to rethink the tools and *telos* of justice work and the breaking down of unjust structures.

Paul, the aged prisoner, was probably in a cold damp prison and so he wants his cloak to keep him warm and allow him to survive the inclement weather.<sup>18</sup> This is the first item in need of re-imagination. In her book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe writes about anti-blackness being as pervasive as the weather in that it is a constant part of our ecosystem.<sup>19</sup> When she explains that the constant threat against black life finds its flashpoint gratuitously like bad weather and precipitation, our theological imagination and social and historical analysis should kick in as we seek justice and precipitate action for change. The cloak, or we could call it a raincoat, takes on a new meaning in light of the black and brown sisters and brothers around us catching hell in our churches and communities, and we need to be the ones to distribute the metaphorical raincoats to provide protection to those in our communities for which the social systems fail.

The next item that Paul requests are his books. Such a seemingly benign request seems strange, but there's a lesson in it for us. As CH Spurgeon urges, when commenting on this verse, we need to be readers. In the age of digital media, short attention spans and fast-paced lives, we need to be those who read and educate ourselves so we understand the society and culture we live in. As it pertains to the issue of race and justice, education is paramount.

The final item Paul requested were the parchments containing the word of God. as we have seen, Scripture reveals Jesus, the one who brings healing, redemption and hope to our broken world.

## Where do we go from here?

Whether we need to more fully understand the issues of race and social justice in our society today, or we need to engage with the theological thought that subverted injustice and made a real difference, the books and Scripture are available. As we focus on the call of Christ and begin to imagine alternative structural arrangements in the Church and society, and have acquired the necessary knowledge, there must be action, there must be change. The best of our faith tradition stood above the parapet, stood against the dominant cultural malaise, rejected the impotent theological reflection and allowed the work of Christ to advance in the face of resistance. Race, racism and injustice will never have the last word when the redemptive Spirit of Christ is calling people not to a set of textbook practices, policies or programmes but to himself. We must respond to the call and be available to new possibilities.