

Why have so many Christians been racist? * Q's from the pews
July 19, 2020 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Coronavirus has kept us from doing a lot of the things that we usually do, but this is one tradition that we're going to continue – Q's from the Pews (Home Edition). Every summer, I love to dig into these questions that you give me and this summer is no different – you've given me lots of great questions to think about.

And my hope for this series is twofold – one, obviously, to answer some of the questions that you're thinking about, but also two, to get you thinking about how your relationship with God touches ALL parts of your life. Our faith is not limited to what we do in church; our faith impacts the way that we think about retirement and grandparenting and health and so I hope that these questions will stir you to think about how your faith impacts all parts of your life.

And to kick it all off, we've got a really interesting question – Jesus taught us to love our neighbour as ourselves and yet many of His followers have not done that. They've loved people like them but enslaved others. Why have so many Christians in the past been racist?

That's a great question. We know that the Christian faith is all about love and self-sacrifice and service and yet, through the years, a lot of so-called Christians have not lived it out. Thru the years, many Christians have held some very racist views.

For example, in 1842, a Presbyterian minister and missionary named Charles Colcock Jones submitted a report on the importance of evangelizing slaves and in it he wrote this little gem –

“From childhood we have been accustomed to their slovenly, and too frequently, their scanty dress; to their broken English, ignorance, vulgarity, and vice. What in them would disgust or grieve a stranger, or truly afflict us if seen in white persons, we pass by with little or no impression, as a matter of course; they are Negroes... what better can be expected?” <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/jones/jones.html#p103>

This is the sort of thing that I think the question is asking about, and sadly, that sentiment is not absent from the capital C Church today. There are still racist leanings in many Christian circles. So where does this come from? Why have so many Christians in the past been racist?

As you can imagine, there are many answers to that question, but I want to focus on just two - **1. A misinterpretation of the Bible** and **2. Sinful self-interest**. Simple as that. Misinterpretation of the Bible and sinful self-interest has been at the root of many racist Christians.

So first – **the Bible**. Christians in the past have used the Bible to argue that God established a hierarchy that put white people at the top and black people at the bottom. Don't ask me to give you a chapter and verse for that because – you're not going to find it. It's just not there. But they thought it was.

In fact, they would point to an event in Noah's life to prove that dark-skinned people were inferior. You're thinking – what? I don't remember that from the Ark at all, and you're right, because this happened after the ark. Genesis 9:20 – Noah gets off the boat, plants a vineyard, gets drunk and naked on the fruit of his vineyard and then two of his sons dutifully cover him with a blanket while the third, Ham, mocks him. Noah finally wakes up with a terrible hangover and curses Ham's descendants. You can see it in verse 24 –

24 When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him,
25 he said, "Cursed be Canaan [Ham's son"]! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers."
26 He also said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem! May Canaan [Ham's son] be the slave of Shem.
27 May God extend the territory of Japheth; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan
[Ham's son] be his slave." (Gen 9:24-27 NIV).

A lot of churches took this and said – 'see, Blacks are inferior; Blacks are meant by God to be slaves' – and this became known as 'the curse of Ham.' Now you're looking at this going – 'what? I don't see that at all' – and you're right – it's not there, but here's their logic. Noah cursed Ham's son and Ham's sons were Cush, Mizraim, Put and Canaan (Genesis 10:6) and Cush, Mizraim and Put are Libya, Egypt and Ethiopia. Therefore, the dark skinned people who come from Libya, Egypt and Ethiopia (from Africa) are under the curse of Ham and bound by God's Word to be slaves. And since the great father Abraham held slaves, why can't we? And since the NT didn't abolish it but only moderated it, it's absolutely normal to think that people of a different skin colour are inferior to you. That's just obvious right? That's an absolutely racist misinterpretation of the Bible.

And I mean that seriously, it is both racist AND a gross misinterpretation of the Bible. I mean – who did Noah curse? Not Egypt and Ethiopia and Libya – Canaan. If anything, this explains why Israel would later take the land of Canaan as their Promised Land. And look, does Genesis 9:25 say anything about race? Nothing.

And yes, the New Testament assumes the practice of slavery but it subverts it and insists that masters and slaves serve each other's interests.¹ And in 1 Corinthians 7:21, Paul explicitly says: 21 Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you--although if you can gain your freedom, do so (1Cor 7:21 NIV). And that's not even to mention the biblical reality that all people are made equally in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27, Colossians 3:11) or even the Golden Rule – treat others as you want to be treated. There's just no biblical support for saying that one race is superior to or inferior to another.

So what made these supposedly Bible believing people overlook the message of sacrificial love at the heart of God's Word and instead twist it into this gross delusion?

Well, frankly, **it was sinful self-interest**. They didn't want to give up the power and wealth that came from believing that they were better than others and so they just kept on believing a lie. Their way of life was tied up with the idea that they were superior and so they fought to preserve it, no matter how many people they hurt and how many Scriptures they perverted. Their comfort was more important to them than integrity and honesty.

Alan Cross, a white pastor in the South trying to make sense of his congregation's racist past writes this:

Why did Christians give in to this society that opposed God and His ways? Why did they knowingly go along with the ways of the world? ... It was for their own aggrandizement – or for their own increase of power, wealth, importance and safety and security. In other words, instead of laying down their lives in obedience to Christ and in sacrificial love for others... the white Christians who supported and benefited from a racist, segregated society did so for their own advantage. To oppose such a society would be to oppose their own life, safety, security and present and future prosperity as they understood it... [They]

submitted to the prevailing powers to preserve [their] own way of life. (Alan Cross, *When Heaven and Earth Collide*, 71).

People who have called themselves Christians have been willing to misinterpret Scripture, overlook the truth, demean and enslave other people because they looked different all because it would help them to get ahead. That's a sad truth that pops up all too often in church history.

And it's the sort of thing that we need to guard against. I don't think that any of us are outright racist, but I wonder if there are places in our lives where we are willing to overlook the truth in order to protect our own self-interest; things that we choose to believe about other people because they make us feel better about ourselves. I don't have an answer for that, but it's something for you to think about this week.

Rather than holding onto misinterpretations of Scripture and sinful self-interest, we need to honestly read Scripture and let it form in us a godly other-centeredness. We need to let God's Word critique us rather making it say what we want it to say.

Like Jesus, we need to look not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others and to use our power and privilege to build other people up, no matter their race. The recent conversation about race in society has really opened my eyes to some of the realities my friends deal with – I have black friends – good, God-fearing men – being stopped by strangers and accosted on account of race. I have friends teaching their kids to always have a receipt with them when they leave a store to protect themselves against false accusations. I'm a white guy so I have no idea about this stuff but if I can use my position to help, I will. We are all made in God's image, each of us equally valuable in God's eyes and we all deserve honour and respect, no matter our race.

And frankly, the good news is, it was Christians who first brought those realities to the attention of racist peoples. Yes, there were people who called themselves Christians who acted and believed in racist things, but there were also Christians who truly believed and who let God's unconditional love shape their world view and not their own sinful self-interest. And so, since I started with a really racist so-called Christian quotation, let me close with one that shows the Church at work, stamping out these racist perspectives.

Samuel Sewall, a judge in 1712, wrote one of the earliest critiques of racism in America. He wrote:

It is most certain that all Men, as they are the Sons of Adam, are Coheirs; and have equal Right unto Liberty, and all other outward Comforts of Life. GOD hath given the Earth [with all its Commodities] unto the Sons of Adam, Psalm 115. 16. And hath made of One Blood, all Nations of Men, for to dwell on all the face of the Earth; and hath determined the Times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation: That they should seek the Lord. Forasmuch then as we are the Offspring of GOD &c. Act 17.26, 27, 29....

'Tis pity there should be more Caution used in buying a Horse, or a little lifeless dust, than there is in purchasing Men and Women: whereas they are the Offspring of GOD, and their Liberty is – *Auro pretiosior Omni* (more precious than all the gold in the world).

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/ideas/text3/slaverychristian.pdf>

Benediction:

2 Cor. 13:11 - Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

ⁱ Deu 24:14 Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns.

Eph 6:9 And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

Col 4:1 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.