A HOUSE ON FIRE

How Adventist Faith Responds to Race and Racism

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Jesus as an antidote for spiritual racism

John Skrzypaszek

My heart raced. I felt like jumping up and screaming with anger and utter frustration. *How dare you! Why are you such a racist? Do you have any idea how it makes me feel?*

My anger and frustration occurred in a setting comprising Christian colleagues and fellow pastors. During a discussion on the complex nature of multicultural society, an individual erupted with a full dose of antagonism: "I would pack them all in one bundle and send them back home where they belong."

As I recall this incident from several years ago, I admit that the racist slur caught me off-guard and unprepared. I suppressed the emotions sitting on the tip of my tongue, wanting to unleash pain-inflicting retaliation. However, the surrounding silence pinned me down even further into a state of shock. I expected a response—words of defense from others around me—but I felt isolated and alone, lost in a world of emotional frustration and pain.

I am the son of a migrant—an "invader" of a culturally different world from the land of my early childhood, yet a land I adopted as my new country, a land of freedom and opportunities. It called to my mind struggles with assimilation and the loss of childhood friends. I remembered the moments of despair and longing for acceptance—not to be branded as a newcomer and a "wog," but the hope of being viewed as just one of the boys. Sitting in what I thought was a safe place, the hurtful remark revived a plethora of indescribable emotions. I was ready to strike back with anger—but instead I waited for at least one voice of defense, only to be met by a wall of silence that surrounded me in this Christian setting. In the prevailing quietness, an awareness grew of the possibility that the fermenting anger in my heart could ignite antagonistic traces of reciprocal racism against my brother and colleague—so I also needed spiritual healing.

Racism espouses the notion that some races are inferior to others, causing behavior based on such convictions. The consequential flow

of racism's behavioral characteristics becomes evident in attitudes that exude intolerance, discrimination, ignorance, injustice, sexism, unfairness, chauvinism, fanaticism, sectarianism, dogmatism, faith hate and narrow-mindedness. These qualities trigger hatred and indifference between people of different races, and they are also vigorous in religious spaces. David Horan extends the meaning of racism in the context of the spiritual experience. Reflecting on the "soul-warping disease"[1] of racism from the perspective of a Catholic theological ethicist, he states:

> There are many ways to understand racism, namely as a political issue, as a sociological phenomenon, as a cultural divide. But for me, at its deepest level, racism is a soul sickness. It's a profound warping of the human spirit, one that enables human beings to create communities of cold, callous indifference to their darker sisters and brothers. Stripped to its core, racism is that disturbing interior disease that enables people to not care for those who don't look like them.[2]

I will argue that spiritual racism is evidenced in social injustice, religious intransigence, authoritarian mistreatment, and bigotry. The description of racism as a "profound warping of the human soul" reminds me that, like those infected by a virus, we might be carriers of a coldness and insensitivity to people who look and think differently. By its unruly nature, such spiritual racism hides in waiting under the cloak of religiosity.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church unambiguously declares that any form of racism "destroys the heart of the gospel."[3] However, as Henderson has suggested, "the spirit of racism may simmer within its boundaries so quietly that it can exist without much notice because it's just a norm."[4] Racist attitudes are deeply ingrained in the history of the church, but every so often, different traces of the disease surface unexpectedly in sanctimonious attitudes of rigidity against those who dream progressively, searching for a new and deeper understanding of God's presence in the changing world. It reappears as a reactionary response to any configuration of progressive variations that tend to rattle the denominational status quo of theological and organizational modus operandi. The protective responses materialize in abusive power, formalism and callous indifference to people who think differently.

The aforementioned traits tend to set aside a Christ-centered response to human brokenness, one that uplifts human dignity and value, and that imparts nourishment for spiritual healing with hope and motivation. Not surprisingly, Henderson argues that racism's nature is "deeply spiritual.... Racism demands our spiritual bifocals and our attention."

No matter how persuasive the efforts to glorify one's distinctive religious superiority, the presence of the "soul-warping disease" in any form calls for a soul-searching recognition of our condition of wretchedness, blindness, and nakedness (see Revelation 3:17). With this in mind, let's refocus on the gospel—the Jesus story—as an antidote to any traces of racism. Let's enter the world that Jesus embraced with the attractiveness of His life and ministry—the good news of the gospel.

Cry against racism

Jesus commenced His messianic ministry in an environment surrounded by racial barriers between Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles. The prevailing attitudes of hatred and hostility did not escape His disciples (see John 4:9, 27). Racism's unhealthy sentiments were rooted deeply in the Jewish leaders' ethnocentric view of the nation's role in God's plan of salvation. Instead of creating an environment of welcoming acceptance and nurturing support for people of all tribes and ethnicities, the prevailing self-focus birthed the soul-warping disease.

Luke's gospel draws attention to Christ's presence in the Nazareth synagogue (see Luke 4:16). On the Sabbath day, "the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him [Jesus]. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written . . ." (Luke 4:17).[5] The selected passage's subject permeated the walls of the existing intolerance and hatred with a transparent and outright annunciation of God's vision for Jesus' messianic mission:

> The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and the recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18, 19; see also Isaiah 61:1–3).

The selected reading reverberated with God's attitude against the ills of injustice and unfairness, caused not only by the Roman oppression, but also the Sabbath-day ambience in the synagogue. The attitude in Luke 4:18, 19 echoed God's words as spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

> Is not this the kind of fasting, I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58:6, 7).

The selected reading touched the nerve center of the nation's soul-warping disease: the mistreatment of its own flesh and blood—people of

the same faith and theological convictions. It made people remember the unchanging nature of God's heart and what matters to Him most. It featured God's affinity with the spiritually marginalized, enslaved and blind—people longing to be free from the tyranny of spiritual oppression and the life-damaging traces of any form of racism anchored in the human heart.

Even though Jesus spoke with the authority of a teacher, He did not present the message in a dictatorial manner. His words called for regeneration—a departure from the set barriers of insensitive exclusivity and a fenced practice of religiosity—into a new spiritual awareness.

As Geldenhuys argues, "No-one will be able to do much for mankind unless he has a deep realization of the terrible need of the human race. An imperfect insight into the actual needs and misery of man results in giving an inadequate prescription for finding relief."[6] Christ's words emerged from the depths of the known distress of human oppression, as He aimed to break down the existing walls of racism by focusing on people marginalized by religious bigotry. In this context, He announced the dawn of new hope, not as a distant expectation, but as a present reality: "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). Jesus was a bold opponent of injustice, unfairness, and mistreatment of human life, but simultaneously a carrier of hope and healing: "All spoke well of Him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips" (Luke 4:22).

His words called for regeneration—a departure from the set barriers of insensitive exclusivity and a fenced practice of religiosity—into a new spiritual awareness.

However, the message rattled the listeners' insolence and unmasked the destructive nature of the deeply fastened roots of spiritual racism evidenced in the listeners' sarcastic thoughts, culminating in their attempt to kill Jesus. Thus, it challenged the hearts of those who were captives in the power of sin and spiritually blind. The narrative suggests that Jesus read their intentions. As Geldenhuys noted, "Jesus observed their unsympathetic and skeptical attitude and said they would undoubtedly quote Him the proverb: 'Physician, heal thyself.'"[7]

Nevertheless, He didn't use the deplorable situation as a springboard for retaliation, but as an opportunity to open His followers' minds to the reality of their spiritual short-sightedness as entrenched in the nation's history (see Luke 4:24–27). Like a gentle prodding of the conscience, the message urged them to grasp the whole meaning of His messianic mission. Indeed, they stood on the threshold of the pivotal event: "the year of the Lord's

favor" (Luke 4:19), referred to by Lane as "Jesus' own appearance, which is the decisive event in the redemptive plan of God."[8] While they refused to cast their vision beyond the boundaries of national exclusivism and the soul-warping disease of racism in all its forms, Jesus the Messiah would expand the edge of God's kingdom of grace and salvation to the despised people and those who were marginalized and rejected.

The message was forthright, but simultaneously inviting and inspirational. Jesus stood His ground and audaciously announced "the end of the known world and its relinquishment" and "the reception of a new world given by God."[9] From the perspective of this proclamation of God's kingdom of grace, Jesus did not hesitate to speak out against the dominant presence of intolerance, discrimination, injustice, and fanaticism, derived from humans' traditional narrow-minded, distorted view of God. When His explanation of God's purpose went beyond the egocentric limitations of his hearers' understanding, the destructive traits in their hearts elicited reactionary anger and vindictive actions: "All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff" (Luke 4:28, 29).

Surprisingly, Jesus just walked away silently. Why did He not retaliate by unleashing God's fury and anger against the prevailing closed-minded attitudes of religiosity? Actually, He did. His words provoked His followers to identify the disease in themselves. However, Jesus stood His ground as a Game-changer. His way was not argumentative rallying cries or the occasional reciprocal exchange of anger, but to draw attention to the inviting news—the nature of God's kingdom of grace, a place of healing and restoration of spiritual sight, a place of healing that I need to experience and understand.

The Game-changer's voice

Luke presents Jesus' ongoing passage through Capernaum and Galilee as a immersion into the plight of human suffering (see Luke 4:31–44), a journey that gradually paved the way to the cross. Nothing could stop His designated goal: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to other towns also because this is why I was sent" (Luke 4:43). The voice that carried the good news to the poor was not framed in theological ideas detached from the "events that gave these ideas definite expressions."[10] Instead, Jesus staged a retort against physical and spiritual ills from the life-inspiring realm of God's kingdom of grace that He represented.

His heart's compassionate sensitivity responded to the cries of the suffering people walled in by the dry, life-damaging religiosity of the

"teachers of the law" (Matthew 7:29; see also Mark 1:40, 41; 2:25). However, Jesus encircled the reality of life with a new vision of God: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only Son, who came from the Father full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Ellen White described the impact of Christ's ministry so fittingly in the following passage:

> Since Jesus came to dwell with us, we know that God is acquainted with our trials and sympathizes with our griefs. Every son and daughter of Adam may understand that our Creator is the friend of sinners. For in every doctrine of grace, every promise of joy, every deed of love, every divine attraction presented in the Savior's life on earth, we see God with us.[11]

We can hear God's attitude in his searching voice—"Where are you?"—the voice that enshrouded the brokenness of human life with the reassuring promise of messianic hope (see Genesis 3:9, 15). In Jesus, the same voice was now touching the damaged domain of human life with grace, forgiveness, and a gently nudging invitation to follow Him.

The Game-changer and the healing of the heart

The soul-warping disease of racism, religious dogmatism, and bigotry could find its antidote only in being matched and melted by the depth of God's love as revealed through Christ (see John 3:16). While His voice and actions condemned the damaging influence of religious dogmatism, it would take much more than a transition from one system of beliefs to another to spiritually heal hearts of this disease. Jesus, the promised Messiah, appeared as a Game-changer and a builder of a new, relationally oriented pathway to God's heart (see John 14:6).

Jesus called for a spiritual makeover, experienced through a life-transforming relationship with Him (see John 17:1–3). In this sense, Benner argued that "God's call is more than a journey toward a destination. It is deliverance from oneself. It's a call to a journey of transformation, not simply a transition to another country . . . a call to a journey that would leave people changed forever."[12] Jesus pointed out that defending the status quo of orthodoxy, even reading Scripture as the ultimate source of salvation would not suffice (see John 5:39, 40). Spiritual healing required much more than correctly defined theological constructs; it required presence and relational connectedness with an authentic source of influence—Someone who loves, cares, and understands.

The introductory chapters of John's gospel outline the key features conducive to the gradual process of transformational healing. First, the

inquisitive openness to "know" and the willingness to share time with Jesus generated spontaneous responses that framed the awakening of new spiritual insight: "We found the Messiah, the King of Israel" (see John 1:25–51). While the disciples continued to maintain the spirit of antagonism toward the Samaritans and failed to comprehend the purpose of Christ's Messianic role, Jesus did not hesitate to provide encouragement, motivation, and unconditional acceptance, rather than criticism, by changing Peter's name and encouraging Nathanael with a more excellent vision of God (see John 1:51).

Second, the wedding miracle at Cana reminded the disciples to focus on the unfolding presence of God's grace, for the best was yet to come (see John 2:10). As Leon Morris suggests, Jesus "changed the waters of Christlessness into the wine of the richness and the fullness of eternal life."[13] Christ's miracle of changing water into wine unfolded the pathway of creative inspiration for life as a reminder and assurance that the best comes last. Even though the disciples did not understand the miracle's spiritual significance, they "put their faith in him" (John 2:11, CEV).

Finally, Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus confronted the intellectually minded teacher with spiritual insight, challenging him to receive the healing and life-transforming power of God's grace streaming from the cross (see John 3:10–17). This vision empowered him with courage against all the existing traits of the human heart's warping disease to carry the body of Jesus openly to the grave (see John 19:38–40). No wonder, Seemands writes, that "the greatest illustration of genuine friendship is the cross. From a human standpoint, God took the worst injustice and the deepest tragedy that ever happened and turned it into the most sublime gift man has ever known: the gift of salvation."[14] The cross became the fulcrum of transformational spiritual healing from the destructive traits of the soul-warping disease of spiritual racism.

Furthermore, Christ's ministry modelled the all-inclusive application of the gift of salvation during His conversations with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (see John 4:1–37) and the Canaanite woman near the region of Tyre and Sidon (see Matthew 15:21–28). He called Levi, the despised tax collector, and ate with sinners (see Mark 2:13–17). Amid our world's injustice and unfairness, He refrained from involvement in politically polluted schemes to enhance His cause. As a Game-changer, He lived to inspire disheartened and disillusioned people with hope and healing.

A personal reflection

I am not exempt from the possibility of releasing frustration and pain exerted by the reality of unfairness, injustice, intolerance, discrimination,

chauvinism, and religious narrow-mindedness, which tend to invade the privacy of spiritual freedom found in Jesus. I am disturbed by beliefs locked in the cage of cold dogmatism, void of the unfathomable depth of God's love. I am sad to see an increasing avalanche of theological arguments and political games stemming from the pressures of authoritarian control. It is easy to cave in and release the simmering soul-warping disease of spiritual racism. Nevertheless, the impact of God's grace inspires me to step into the world of injustice and unfairness, of pain and frustrations, with the vision of hope I find in Jesus. His life empowers me with boldness to speak courageously against social injustice, religious dogmatism, authoritarian mistreatment, and spiritual abuse, but it also challenges me to be the carrier of the gospel's good news—Jesus.

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1 Daniel P Horan, "Christians must develop an anti-racist Spirituality," *National Catholic Reporter* (November 24, 2021), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/christians-must-develop-anti-racist-spirituality-mennonite-authors-argue>.

2 ibid.

3 "Racism," Official Statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, <https://www.adventist.org/official-statements/racism/>.

4 Jonathan Henderson, "Deeply Spiritual," *Adventist World*, June 10, 2020.

5 Unless otherwise specified, Bible texts in this chapter are quoted from the NIV.

6 Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), page 169.

7 ibid.

8 William L Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), page 65.

9 Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), page 4.

10 John Dickson, *Promoting the Gospel* (Sydney, NSW: Blue Bottle Book, 2005), page 198.

11 Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), page 24.

12 David Benner, *Sacred Companions* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), page 26.

13 Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), page 176.

14 David A Seemands, *Healing for Damaged Emotions: Recovering From the Memories That Cause Our Pain* (Wheaton IL: Victor Books, 1992), page 36.