A HOUSE ON FIRE



How Adventist Faith Responds to Race and Racism

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Christ, race, and grace

Kayle B de Waal

Racism is deeply ingrained in many countries of the world. Whether we are talking about culture, politics, education, religion, sports, or the arts, racial injustice pervades and influences so much of what happens in our societies. There are far too many examples—some abhorrent and shocking, others insidiously evil—of racial injustice to write about but here are three from the United States and Australia to better situate this chapter.

It disturbed me greatly to read about the inhuman treatment of an older Black woman during the global financial crisis of 2008, when she was evicted from her home in the early hours of the morning. She was provided no shelter or even assistance to try to find shelter by the authorities who had evicted her. Shockingly, her dog was taken to a shelter.[1]

It has long been recognized in Australia that the criminal justice system represents a key site of injustice and inequity within society.[2] Recently, a *Sydney Morning Herald* investigation demonstrated once more that racism is rife among the police and extends to the criminal justice system in the state of New South Wales.[3] The *Herald*'s investigation into local court data discovered that Aboriginal people are twice as likely to go to jail as non-Aboriginal delinquents in the Northern Rivers and Sydney City areas.[4]

Third, the Productivity Commission's report card on Indigenous Australians' wellbeing found that the number of Indigenous children ending up in out-of-home care across Australia had tripled over the previous two years.[5]

These three examples shed light on the personal and corporate nature of racism, of its ability to dehumanize an old lady who had worked hard all her life, of its capacity to destroy young men and even children who we would think would be bright with hope for a better future. No age group is exempt from the devastating effects of racism!

Drawing from my own experiences of these realities, I believe it is only as we understand the divinity of Jesus that we are empowered to obey His teachings and follow His example, particularly as these relate to the issue of race. But I also believe in the power of grace to make a difference in every aspect of our daily lives as we live for Christ.

The backstory

I was born and raised in apartheid South Africa. My name is a product of colonization and has Irish and Dutch derivatives. My dad worked in Zambia in the late 1960s and taught with an Irishman named Kayle. I came along in 1971 and Dad gave me that name. Coincidentally, my granddad on my mum's side was an Irishman, Kenneth Yorkshire Lawler. His ship was bombed by the Nazis in World War II, just as they were approaching Cape Town.

I grew up in a happy and loving home. My brother Lincoln and I enjoyed a good extended family life with aunts, uncles, and cousins. In my formative years, I was oblivious to the oppressive conditions in which my parents lived and worked. We were classified as "colored" by the government—a term I wrestle with in my own mind even today—as an indication of the mixture of our Black and white ancestry. My father's family is from a small town called Harding in the southern part of the province of Kwazulu-Natal, so my hunch is that my Black ancestry must be of the Zulu tribe, though it is difficult to tell. My father's European ancestors were French Huguenots.[6] In my early teens, I became more aware of the political situation in the country, but my life was consumed with play, friends, and church. It was only in my late teens that I was politically sensitized to what was happening in South Africa by my school teachers, the media, and to a lesser extent my parents. They were mostly concerned with raising their two sons, amid the joys and challenges of day-to-day living.

As a school leader, I organized and led a protest march in 1989 with all my fellow senior students opposing the apartheid regime. By this time, there were huge protest marches across the country calling for the dismantling of apartheid. International sanctions were taking their toll. My sense of fairness and justice was deeply troubled during those years, and I felt strong solidarity with Black students, who suffered far worse than I did. Nelson Mandela's release from Pollsmoor prison in February, 1990, after 27 years in prison, is a vivid picture in my mind to this day.

For most South Africans, the Bible has been "both oppressor and liberator":

> it has supported apartheid and struggled against apartheid. . . . The dilemma that confronts South Africans in their relationship with the Bible is captured in the following well-known anecdote: "When the white man came to our country, he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us, 'Let us pray.' After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible." This anecdote clearly points to the central position that

> the Bible occupies in the process of oppression and exploitation. The anecdote also reflects the paradox of the oppressor and the oppressed sharing the same Bible and the same faith.[7]

Because racism is so deeply entrenched in the human heart, we need divine power to change our hearts and set us free. And the truth of human need and nature is revealed in the God-Human person of Jesus.

The divinity of Jesus

The Christian faith would not exist in its current form if Jesus was simply embraced as a great moral teacher or prophet. Everything about the Christian faith rests on the divinity of Jesus, hence its importance for Christian faith, life, and practice. The Bible provides compelling evidence of Jesus' divinity, so we need to explore how His divinity is revealed in and through His person, His fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, His ministry of healing, and His acceptance of worship.

We turn to the gospels, which arguably "were written within living memory of the events they recount."[8] It is evident that the gospel writers saw more in the person of Jesus than simply a human. In fact, they saw more in Him than could properly be described as a demigod. Matthew identifies Jesus as Emmanuel, which means "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).[9] "Emmanuel" describes the concept of the incarnation—God becoming man. The identity of Jesus as "God with us" is consistent with John 1:1, which refers to Jesus as the Word who was with God, and who was God. The mind-wrenching reality, John tells his readers, is that *this* God, the God who is the Word, became flesh (*sarx*) (see John 1:1, 14). It is utterly shocking that the height of the self-revelation of God in John 1 is God becoming flesh.[10] As the representative head of a new humanity, Jesus represents all flesh, irrespective of color. As I reflect on this notion of "God with us," I know that God's hand was and is upon South Africa as the painful transition from apartheid to democracy continues.

Each of the gospel writers quote Isaiah 40:3, "A voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" In Isaiah, "the Lord" refers to Yahweh, but now the gospel writers see this as prophetic foretelling: a prediction fulfilled in Jesus, whom they understand to be Yahweh incarnate. Ironically, Jesus comes not only as the one for whom the way has been prepared, but also as the one who continues the work of preparation. We read of Jesus performing many miracles in the gospels and demonstrating power over nature and demons, epileptics, paralytics, and lepers (see Matthew 4:23, 24; 8:2, 3; Mark 5:1–20; 6:30–50). These healings had to be accomplished with divine power. Sometimes the people had to just touch

His garment and they were made well (see Matthew 14:36). At other times Jesus knew "in Himself that power had gone out from Him" (Mark 5:30, ESV). When Jesus healed the great multitude, "power came out from him and healed them all" (Luke 6:19, ESV). Jesus is so willing to heal that at times His power goes ahead of Him.

The first-century gospel writers do not want their readers to equivocate on the question of Jesus' divinity. The best way to make this point is to put Jesus in the place of would-be sacrilege. Jesus accepted worship from believers and even demons (see Matthew 14:33; Mark 1:34; 5:6–10). In Matthew 8:2, 3, the leper worships Jesus. Since Jews were monotheistic, either Jesus was flagrantly denouncing this Jewish teaching and His own heritage or He did indeed understand Himself as the divine Messiah and hence worthy of worship. The early Christians continued to worship Jesus as God. This is seen in the doxologies that refer to Him (see Romans 9:5; 2 Peter 3:18; Revelation 1:5b, 6), in the prayers offered to Him (see Acts 7:59, 60; 2 Corinthians 12:8, 9), and in the songs and hymns sung to Him (see 1 Corinthians 14:26; Philippians 2:5–11; Colossians 3:16, 17).[11] The New Testament writers understood that Jesus is not only God-in-action or God-by-revelation, but rather that He is both God-in-nature and God-by-action.[12]

The gospels record accounts of Jesus raising people from the dead, including Jairus' daughter (see Matthew 9:23–26) and the son of the widow of Nain (see Luke 7:14). In His divinity, Jesus demonstrates how much He cares, especially as He grieves for Lazarus (see John 11:44). Jesus arrives as the God-Human. In other words, as humanity at its best. With this background of the divinity of Jesus, with its relationship to humanity, in place, let us now explore His teaching and example.

The teaching of Jesus

The teaching of Jesus emphasized the radical, courageous nature of love that God's people should have for people of other races. His teaching challenges us as we think about race, racial injustice, and racial habits. In Matthew 5:41, Jesus reminds His hearers: "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles." This notion of someone forcing a believer to "go one mile" refers to a Roman soldier's prerogative to force a member of a subjugated people—a Jew in this instance—to carry his supplies for a mile.[13] During that mile, the Roman has the upper hand and he uses his power to force compliance from the Jew. The believer is powerless and under mental strain and emotional subjugation.

Yet, the moment the believer begins the second mile—a moment of

tremendous courage—something happens in both him and the Roman. He is now free even while continuing to carry the Roman's load. It is difficult to gauge the response of the Roman. He might be insulted at the audacity of this Christ-follower to continue to carry his load or he might be grateful and experience a touch of God's grace. He might also become frightened by the physical strength of a supposedly "weaker" race, undaunted by the load of Roman warrior dress. Jesus calls on us to take no offense when we are unjustly treated and to love our oppressors. The same virtue that would enable a follower of Jesus to embody the strength to endure twice the expected load is required in order to be able to endure injustice and mistreatment. This strength finds its source beyond the natural resources of this world. This is no easy task, a task that we cannot accomplish in our own strength, but only in the grace He supplies.[14]

Furthermore, in His teaching, Jesus often uses positive Gentile examples to shame His fellow Jews for their lack of receptivity (see Matthew 11:20–24; 12:41, 42; 21:31, 41, 43). For example, Matthew 12:41 reads: "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here." The gospel writers held to the conviction that Jesus was infinitely greater than Jonah in His nature, person, and mission. In fact, Jonah preached a message of repentance to the city of Nineveh for 40 days, while Christ preached among the Jews for several years. Jonah performed no miracles to authorize His preaching; but Christ performed miracles. All the same, the people of Judea did not repent, though the people of Nineveh did.

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These two examples from the teaching of Jesus remind us of the responsibility we face as Christ-followers to live out the claims of the gospel. Because He is divine, Jesus can supply the power we need to live out those claims. In addition, His teaching reminds us of the dangers that religious forms can become to our spirituality. We may go through the ritual and habits of the Christian faith but if our hearts are hard (see Mark 8:17), we will remain insensitive to the transforming power of grace. This is probably why the call to repentance was key to the teaching of Jesus. The Ninevites were quick to repent after hearing Jonah preach for 40 days. How many sermons have we heard, yet failed to repent? They repented after listening to a simple message. By contrast, we have God's full and final revelation in Jesus Christ (see Romans 2:5; Hebrews 1:1, 2).

The example of Jesus

If ever a human being lived free from prejudice—meaning that He purged Himself of prejudice—it was Jesus. He treated everyone the same, whether they were open sinners, shrewd tax collectors, women of ill repute, or men of war. As Jesus was preparing to issue the Great Commission, which is directed toward all nations, His last act was the cleansing of the court of the Gentiles at the temple, so that God's house could fulfill its true purpose as a "house of prayer for all the nations" (Mark 11:17). Jesus' actions matched His words!

It is interesting to note that even Jesus' enemies recognized His lack of prejudice: "You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth" (Luke 20:21, NASB). Jesus went out of His way to build relationships and meet the needs of people of other races (see Matthew 15:21–28; John 4:4–7). He sought the spiritual welfare of people of other race groups and did not condemn or judge them (see John 12:20–24). As an example, let us briefly examine how Jesus publicly affirmed others of a different ethnic group—in this case, a Roman centurion.

The story recounted in Matthew 8:5–13 is not just about a Roman centurion's servant who is sick but also presents "a staggering reversal of ethnic and religious expectations."[15] The centurion is an important professional military officer in the Roman army who leads a group of 100 soldiers. He is required to keep the peace in this occupied land. As a Gentile, he would have been despised by the Jewish people. This would be even more the case because he was a Roman soldier.[16]

From this encounter with Jesus, we learn that God will welcome those who many view as unworthy, when they approach Him in faith. This man has such great faith—"just say the word"—that he even believes that Jesus can heal at a distance (see verse 8). Faith knows no race and has no boundaries. Jesus teaches that there are going to be some very surprised people at the arrival of His kingdom (see verse 11). Some folk who were convinced they had a right to heaven's kingdom are going to be sorely perplexed when they learn that they were not ready for its arrival. Others will enter God's kingdom because they knew they had no right to claim God's grace but threw themselves unreservedly on the goodness and mercy of God. Grace is both gentle and brutal. For the colonizer—the centurion—grace is gentle. For the colonized people witnessing this acceptance of the unacceptable, grace can be experienced as brutal. The colonizer experiences the grace of antiracism in the very land of and in front of the very people subjugated by the racial oppression. Antiracism cuts both ways.

Race and grace

Racism impacts every area of our lives. God's immeasurable grace—freely available and readily dispensed in and through Jesus Christ (see Ephesians 2:8, 9; 2 Corinthians 9:15)—is the godly weapon we have to defeat racism, in the myriad ways it emerges in our day-to-day lives. The teaching and example of Jesus remind us that it is only in relationship with Him that we can live out our calling as Christ-followers in the 21st century. The far-reaching nature of God's grace means we need a daily infusion of this grace from Him to love everyone. God's grace is the only thing that can change human hearts. God's power, on display in Jesus, is ready to effect that change. As hearts change, so communities will change!

Scripture does not give one definition of grace, as it is such a multifaceted concept. Peter identifies God's grace as manifold (see 1 Peter 4:10). This means we can experience God's grace in many ways. As we encounter racism in many ways, so we can experience God's grace in many ways. For example, when Paul and Silas were in prison, God gave them grace to sing (see Acts 16:25). God can give you the ability to talk about your troubles with His grace (see Colossians 4:16). He can give you strengthening grace when you are sick (see 2 Timothy 2:1). The grace of Jesus can give you inner strength (see 2 Corinthian 12:9) and ample power for good works (see 2 Corinthians 9:8). God's grace can defeat every racist slur, every racist joke, every racist innuendo, and every racist thing hurled at you.

As we encounter racism in many ways, so we can experience God's grace in many ways.



Jesus never stopped giving grace to His disciples, even though they were slow to learn and grasp His mission (see Mark 4:35–41; 6:45–52; 8:14–21). After a tough day of ministry, Jesus sent the crowds away and the disciples into a boat: "Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on the land. He *saw* the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them" (Mark 6:47, 48a, emphasis added). Despite the distance and the darkness, in His amazing grace, Jesus saw them in their anguish. For Mark, with his high Christology, Jesus was Yahweh of the Old Testament, who saw His people in distress (see Exodus 3:7).[17] Mark explains that Jesus "was about to pass by them" (verse 48b). Mark's words are saturated with the language and thought world of the Old Testament. The language "pass by" (*parelthein*) is an allusion to Old Testament theophany stories in which God revealed His glory (see Exodus 33:19–23; 34:6; 1 Kings 9:11; Job 9:11). Jesus wanted to pass by and reveal

His glory to the disciples, but their fear and lack of perception did not make this possible.[18]

I opened this chapter with a transparent confession: in my formative years, I was oblivious to the oppressive conditions in which my parents lived and worked. In this life with Christ, He passed by and revealed His glory to me despite my lack of perception. This same Christ can reveal His glory to those who live in fear of the other, for the gospel casts out fear (see 1 John 4:18). May the teaching and example of the divine Christ in race relations grow our faith and inspire our lives, so that we may see and show more of His glory.

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1 Eddie S Glaube, Jr, *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Broadway, 2017), pages 13–15.

2 K Hazlehurst and K A T Dunn, *Indigenous Criminal Justice. Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, No 13 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 1988); C Cuneen, *Conflict, Politics and Crime: Aboriginal Communities and the Police* (London: Routledge, 2020).

3 Ella Archibald-Binge, Nigel Gladstone, and Rhett Wyman, "Aboriginal people twice as likely to get a jail sentence, data shows," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/aboriginal-people-twice-as-likely-to-get-a-jail-sentence-data-shows-20200812-p55kwj.html>.

4 ibid.

5 Julie Power, "Systemic racism still a barrier to Indigenous Australians' wellbeing," *The Age*, December 3, 2020, < www.theage.com.au/national/systemic-racism-still-a-barrier-to-indigenous-australians-wellbeing-20201130-p56j77.html>.

6 Many Afrikaner names, like my surname, were derived from French Huguenot families (French Protestants), who arrived at the Cape of Good Hope as refugees in the 17th century after expulsion from France by Louis XIV. So Theron (Therond), Du Plessis, Nel (Neel, Niel), and du Toit are all Huguenot names as are most Afrikaans surnames. Most Dutch or Huguenot names in Afrikaans diverged from European spelling traditions, which were only formalized in the 19th century. See Pieter Coertzen and Charles Fensham, *The Huguenots of South Africa 1688–1988* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1988), Bertrand Van Ruymbeke and Randy J Sparks, *Memory and Identity: The Huguenots in France and the Atlantic Diaspora* (Minnesota, MN: South Carolina Press, 2003)

7 Gerald West, "Reading the Bible Differently: Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated," *Semeia*, 75, 1995, page 21.

8 Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), page 7.

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

10 Grahame A Cole, *The God who Became Flesh* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), page 108.
11 Millard J Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), pages 470–471.
12 Murray J Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), page 291.
13 Michael J Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), page 250. Roman military personnel could even organize bands of unpaid laborers from the common people to construct roads, fortifications, and public buildings. The most familiar New Testament example is when Simon of Cyrene was forced into service by the Roman guards to carry Jesus' cross (see Mark 15:21).
14 ibid.
15 ibid, page 341.
16 ibid.
17 M Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), page 190.
18 ibid.