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# **ETHNICITY, TRIBALISM AND RACISM: A GLOBAL CHALLENGE FOR THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH AND ITS MISSION**

## **Introduction**

Ethnic, tribal, and racial identities are a challenge not only to society in general but to the Christian church in particular. As bearers of cultural differences, ethnic and racial differences are often seen as a difficulty to overcome rather than a gift from God to be treasured. Barreto (2011) puts it this way:

Ethnic and racial differences are not the problem. Prejudice and racism inject our differences with the sinful notion that our difference leads to superiority and inferiority or the distorted belief that our differences are merely cultural cues for determining who is in and who is out, rather than emblems of God's gift of diversity. (p. 129)

Ethnic, tribal, and racial differences have been successfully used either to build up or tear down communities and neighborhoods. The purpose of this paper is to explore issues related to ethnicity, tribalism, and racism and the consequent challenge they pose to the Christian church in general. Because mission always involves the crossing of ethnic and cultural boundaries, it is important that the issues related to ethnicity, tribalism, and racism be addressed and put into the biblical perspective.

## **How Do Concepts of Ethnicity, Tribalism, and Racism Interact?**

Before proceeding, it is important to define the concepts of ethnicity, tribalism, and racism.

### *Ethnicity*

“Ethnicity may be defined as a social group or category of the population . . . set apart and bound together by common ties of race, language, nationality or

culture” (Sanders, 2007, p. 21). Barth (1998) argues that ethnicity is the outcome of the establishment of social boundaries. As a boundary marker that separates one group of people from another, Hiebert (2012) contends that “this is done through the establishment of taboos on social interaction, especially intermarriage, and by the selection of markers of ethnic identity to distinguish the group from others in the arena” (p. 66). The emphasis of the term ethnicity seems to be on the external opinion of an individual or a group by another individual or group of individuals. Ethnicity is therefore an expression of group consciousness.

### *Tribalism*

“Tribalism is the attitude and practice of harboring such a strong feeling of loyalty or bonds to one’s tribe that one excludes or even demonizes those ‘others’ who do not belong to that group” (Nothwehr, 2008, p. 5). Tribalism thus prompts one to have a positive attitude towards those who are connected to him or her through kinship, family and clan, and it de facto (directly or indirectly) alienates one from people of other tribes who are not related to him or her by blood, kinship, family or clan (Nwaigbo, 2005, p. 137).

### *Racism*

Racism is defined as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capabilities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race” (Merriam-Webster, 2014). This is usually coupled with the belief that the superior race has a right to dominion over others. Racism thus insinuates that all human beings do not necessarily have the same intrinsic value. Memmi and Martinot (2000) describe it in this way:

[Racism is] generalizing definition and valuation of differences, whether real or imaginary, to the advantage of the one defining or deploying them, and to the detriment of the one subjugated to the act of definition, whose purpose is to justify (social or physical) hostility and assault. (p. 100)

This definition of racism highlights the fact that any person from any socio-cultural background can manifest racial prejudice toward people of other socio-cultural backgrounds. Racial discrimination is not confined to any single race.

From the above definitions, it is important to note that all three concepts potentially carry elements of personal, collective, and/or political self-interest. They are all grounded in the desire of an individual or group to dominate, exploit, or assault others.

## **What Evidence Do We Have That These Elements Are in the Church?**

Several authors point to the fact that ethnicity, tribalism, and racism are also affecting the Christian church. Mercer (1996) asserts that “in every sector

of American society traces of the attitudes and actions that prevailed in the days of slavery still linger” (p. 95). Unfortunately, the church is not immune to the practice of segregation. Where the issues are not race related, they are either ethnic or tribe related. Some authors even seem to suggest that more racial prejudice exists in the Christian church than outside of it. In his study on the relationship between racial prejudice and religion, Williams (1997) reported the following:

Decades of research on racial attitudes in the U.S. confirms the fact that there is more racial prejudice in the Christian church than outside it, that church members are more prejudiced than nonmembers, that churchgoers are more biased than those who do not attend, and that regular attenders are more prejudiced than those who attend less often. It’s also been shown that persons who hold conservative theological beliefs are more likely to be prejudiced than those who do not. (p. 24)

Billy Graham (1993) remarked that in spite of the fact that racial and ethnic resentment is the number one social problem facing both the world and the church, “tragically, too often in the past, evangelical Christians have turned a blind eye to racism or have been willing to stand aside while others take the lead in racial reconciliation, saying it was not our responsibility” (p. 27).

Lee (2000) notes that this is an issue in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, too:

Adventists remain as racially separated as the rest of Christianity and the rest of society. It is still true that 11 o’clock Sabbath morning is the most segregated hour for Adventism in North America. . . . Our church is still riddled with racism and segregation. . . . We must get our house in order. (p. 14)

Eleven o’clock Sabbath morning may be the most segregated hour for Adventists in North America because, although North America is becoming racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse, some churches present a paradox by their insistence on the practice of separate worship based on racial and cultural backgrounds. It is unfortunate that even though some congregations are in the position to make their churches a multicultural and multiracial community, they intentionally fail to do so (see Jones, 2013).

According to Crocombe (2007), the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa participated wholeheartedly in the South African government’s policy of apartheid. He notes that “such participation and support came easily, as there was already a great deal of racial separation and discrimination present in the Seventh-day Adventist church” (p. 1).

The Rwandan genocide of 1994 is another sad period of history when church members became involved politically and sided (racially) with their tribes rather than following biblical principles (*The Religious Affiliation of Elizaphan Ntakirutimana*, n.d.). In 2003, *The New York Times* reported the unfortunate Christian involvement in the genocide:

A Protestant clergyman and his son, a physician, were convicted yesterday of genocide and sentenced to prison by the United Nations tribunal dealing with the Rwandan killing frenzy of 1994, in which members of Hutu gangs killed an estimated 800,000 minority Tutsi and moderate Hutu over three months. The Rev. Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, 78, *the former head of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* in western Rwanda, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for aiding and abetting genocide. His son, Dr. Gérard Ntakirutimana, 45, who worked at the church's hospital, received a total sentence of 25 years for the same charges and for shooting two people to death.

With the verdict, Mr. Ntakirutimana became the first clergyman to be convicted of genocide by an international tribunal. The lengthy trial, which began in September 2001, has drawn new attention to *the role of the Christian churches during the massacre*. Three Roman Catholic priests are being held on similar charges at the tribunal's jail in Arusha, Tanzania, the seat of the United Nations tribunal on Rwanda. A fifth, an Anglican bishop, died while in detention. (Simons, 2003; emphasis added)

## **What Are Some Contributing Factors to Ethnicity, Tribalism and Racism?**

Several factors may contribute to the suggestion that some people are inherently superior or inferior. However, only three of those possible factors will be addressed in this section: human sinful nature, which resulted in both the inhumane trans-Atlantic slave trade and many of the ills of colonialism.

### *Tribalism and Racism as a Sin Problem*

Racism is more than a social problem. It is a sin, a moral and spiritual issue. Racism is a sin because it prevents Christians who harbor it in their attitudes and actions from obeying Christ's command to love our neighbor (Matt. 22:39). And our neighbor is any other human being (Luke 10:25-37).

Racism is also a sin because it has its roots in pride and arrogance (Prov. 13:10; 16:18; Isa. 2:17). This sin originated in Lucifer's desire to elevate himself above the throne of God. Note the egocentric language in Isaiah's description of Lucifer's desire:

You said in your heart, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa. 14:13-14, NIV).

In a way, because pride and arrogance are part of what motivate racial prejudice, Satan can be seen as the originator of tendencies toward tribalism and racism. The following observation on racism will stand the test of time: "We can't fight racism in all its forms until we realize that racism is not a Black or White problem; it's a sin problem. When we act in prejudicial ways towards others, we actually glorify Satan" (Esmond, 1998, p. 11).

### *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*

Many slaves were forcefully brought from Africa to America and subjected not only to hard labor on plantations but also to inhumane treatment. To establish slavery as a legal institution because of its economic benefit to America, all kinds of efforts were made to justify its practice. According to Mercer (1996), rather than standing up against slavery, the church helped perpetuate the practice, with a number of theologians writing extensive treatises endeavoring to support slavery on biblical grounds (p. 92). The supporters of slavery, including Christians, thus violated the fundamental biblical teaching that all human beings are created in the image of God and are therefore equal (Gen. 1:26-28; Acts 10:34). The relegation of Africans to a lower status of humanity was a blatant disregard for the image of God in them.

Many also argued in favor of slavery on the basis that it was a practice in the Bible. Although slavery was practiced in biblical times (e.g., Exod. 21 and Lev. 25), there are striking differences between this and the slavery practices of the European and American slave owners. In biblical times people became slaves when they were taken captive in battles, when they were unable to pay their debts, if they were born to parents who were slaves, or if they sold themselves as slaves. Provisions for freedom from slavery are also clearly outlined in the Bible: a defaulting debtor was to be freed in the seventh year (Exod. 21, Deut. 15); those who had sold themselves into slavery were to be released in the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:3); a freeborn girl who had been sold by her father on condition that her master marry her or give her into marriage to one of his sons must be freed if the master should refuse to live up to the condition of the sale (Exod. 21:7, 11); any Hebrew could be freed at any time if purchased by a near kinsman (Lev. 25); and slaves who received an injury to their body were to be released (Exod. 21:26, 27). The Scriptures offer clear guidelines to improve the condition of all slaves, whether prisoners of war, debtors, bondservants, or children of those in this situation. These guidelines also reminded slave owners of their accountability to God (Deut. 23:15, 16; 27:17, 18). In contrast, “principles of biblical justice were violated to create and perpetuate the American institution of slavery. From the capture of the slaves to the conditions under which they labored, God’s standards of justice were violated” (Mercer, 1996, p. 93).

### *Colonialism*

Racism is as intimately connected to colonialism as it is to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is often remarked that it was the same belief in the inherent superiority of the White race that was promoted in the colonial era. Koranteng-Pipim (1994) describes it in this way:

It is this spirit of inherent superiority that characterized the attitude of the

European nations as they expanded overseas, competing for colonial power and the conversion of “heathen” natives. Since the European conquerors possessed superior economic and military technology over the enslaved people of color, they were able to explain the superiority of their cultural apparatus in terms of a superior human endowment. (p. 40)

Another writer, Julian Go (2004), agrees:

It would seem indisputable that modern colonialism in the early twentieth century involved racism. Indeed, during colonial occupation, colonizing groups were granted political, economic, and social privileges denied to the colonized, and the hierarchy was typically sustained by claims that the latter were racially inferior. (pp. 35-36)

These arguments about racism as a built-in and natural product of colonialism have been supported by scholarship in the social sciences. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) remarks that the very purpose of colonial discourse was “to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin; in order to justify conquest” (p. 70).

Carney (2012) is very straightforward in his critique of both colonial powers and missionaries for racializing Hutu and Tutsi categories in Rwanda, thus hardening previously fluid lines and introducing a tribal discourse that reaped a terrible harvest in the postcolonial period:

Europeans created Hutu-Tutsi tensions if not the categories themselves. The ideological roots of Rwanda’s postcolonial ethnic bloodletting stemmed not from primordial ethnic hatreds but from colonial manipulations between 1900 and 1960. Second, the key factor in this colonial manipulation was the Catholic missionaries’ racializing of the Hutu-Tutsi distinction. In turning flexible social categories into immutable racial identities, Rwanda’s Catholic leaders ensured the long-term division of Banyarwanda society along a Hutu-Tutsi tribal axis. Missionaries, colonial officials, and Rwandan elites all became locked in a dualistic political imagination of “Hutu” and “Tutsi.” (p. 173)

Nothwehr (2008) builds on those thoughts:

Significantly, colonizers needed to justify their overtaking the property and persons of those they conquered. Justification required demonizing tribal peoples, exaggerating any conflicts among them. . . . Colonizers’ most egregious practices were to arm one tribe, set that group up against their neighbors, and then employ them to “catch” their “enemy” and sell them to the slave traders. Their eliminating one group or favoring another over against the “others” was a genocidal activity. (p. 5)

With their “divide and conquer” strategy to gain and maintain power, colonial powers, and missionaries to some extent, have thus spread the seed of ethnic and tribal hatred that continue to this day. Hallinan (2005) states that “divide and conquer was 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century colonialism’s single most successful tactic of domination. It was also a disaster, one which still echoes in

civil wars and regional tensions across the globe” (para. 24). With their military and economic controls, colonial powers not only broke colonized groups into smaller tribes and ethnic groups, they also worked to keep these smaller entities from uniting against them. They intentionally set small tribes or groups against each other in order to easily control them, their lands and territories. This colonial practice is described in *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Vail, 1991).

## **How Do Tribalism and Racism Affect the Church?**

Tribalism and racism in the church can easily destroy the early work of evangelism. Referring to the genocide in Rwanda, Shorter (1996) warns against the disastrous nature that ethnic, tribal, or racial antagonism can cause to the church. He points out that because Christians were also active participants in the genocide, killing each other in huge numbers, “within a few weeks and months the church in Rwanda came close to annihilation and a century of evangelization seemingly nullified” (p. 11). Onyalla (2005) describes the effects of tribalism on the church:

Tribalism creates discord among members of the same congregation, community and society. This malaise is spiritually, emotionally and socially crippling religious communities, hence making them unspiritual, unhappy, unloving and unfruitful, leave alone making them lead unfulfilled lives in the Church. Such people’s original inspiration and admiration of religious life, at the time when they joined it, has been tragically lost, leaving them spiritually dry, unproductive and bitter towards themselves and others. (p. 163)

The church cannot really take pride in doctrinal and theological purity if we allow tribalism and racism to dim the light of the Gospel. The world can only be convinced that the church is a better alternative when the church constantly revisits and evaluates itself on the basis of John 13:34-35: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (NIV). One of the ways Jesus demonstrated His love for His followers was that He broke the walls of division and embraced all His disciples as His brothers and sisters, irrespective of their tribe, race or nationality (Matt. 12:46-50). Peckham (1998) observes that “the law of love doesn’t do away with the differences between cultures. It does away with judging the value of culture because they are different” (p. 5).

We live in the postmodern era. This generation is generally skeptical and cynical about organized religion. The church’s betrayal of public trust in many areas (sexual abuse, tribalism, racism, and other forms of discrimination) has left postmoderns searching for things that are real, authentic, and coherent.

Postmoderns are looking for people who are transparent and genuine in what they do. Unfortunately, “this is a far cry from what is projected by many religious leaders and believers who act like they are spiritual and religious and that they have it all together” (Bauer, 2013, p. 92). The church needs to help its members humble themselves, pray and seek God’s face, turn from their wicked ways, and confront their demons of racial prejudice. This will help the church to be better equipped to minister to the rest of the world in authentic and coherent ways. The Seventh-day Adventist Church’s emphasis on doctrinal and theological orthodoxy and its longing for revival and reformation will never be good enough until they result in practical acts like courageously addressing and kicking ethnic, tribal, racial, and other forms of prejudice out of its ranks. “Reformation signifies a reorganization, a change in ideas and theories, habits and practices” (White, 1958, p. 128). The church’s official statements on racism and other kinds of discrimination are no good unless they are coupled with clear guidelines for practical implementation.

## **How Can the Church Respond to Tribalism and Racism?**

Ethnic, tribal, and racial differences are part of the identity of each individual. When we become Christians our cultural identities are not destroyed, but, as McGarry (2001) points out, we are called to live above them:

The disciples of Jesus are called in the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome any divisions that these characteristics may have brought within their own particular cultures before they became Christians. Christians are therefore challenged to experience and live out the much deeper unity . . . through baptism. . . . To be a Christian is to belong and live out the richness of one’s ethnic origin, culture, education, etc., and yet to experience at the same time an even deeper unity with those of other races and cultures, because we have been called to be disciples of Jesus Christ together. (pp. 194-195)

How then should a Christian respond to issues related to ethnicity, tribalism, and racism? Jesus’ prayer for His followers’ unity after the model of unity that exists between Him and the Father (John 17:20-23) is a clear expression that “God, who created one family of people desires and wills that His children should unite and live as one family and one human race” (Chibuko, 2010-2011, p. 100).

I agree with Mercer’s (1996) statement that “a Christian perspective toward the problem of racism should begin with an understanding of basic Bible doctrines concerning man and God” (p. 87). I suggest that the implications of the doctrines of creation and salvation, discipleship, and the images of the church in the New Testament be explored as a way of responding to the ethnic, tribal, and racial issues in the contemporary Christian church. It is my conviction that when the Gospel becomes truly central to church members’ lives, ethnic, tribal, and racial tensions in the church will no longer have the upper hand in how



one group relates to another. Only the power of God, through the Gospel, can cleanse the church from human prejudice as it did for the early Christians (Acts 10:34; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:14-16).

## Conclusion

Tribalism and racism have negatively influenced quite a number of people in the Christian church, leaving their faith and professional ethics compromised. This phenomenon is not only corrupting, it is also eroding the authenticity and mission of the church. Tribalism, racism, and other forms of discrimination are divisive elements to the body of Christ. As a result of the selfish propensities of human nature, tribalism and racism are incompatible with the Christian faith. "Of all people, Christians should be the most active in reaching out to those of other races, instead of accepting the status quo of division and animosity" (Graham, 1993, p. 27).

It is not the church in Africa alone that is challenged by tribalism. The church elsewhere has its share of this issue: in India it is the caste system; in the West it is segregation on the basis of one's race. The church will not become a model of unity and a sign of hope for the world if tribalism and racism within its structures is not bravely addressed and discarded as a sin. What is distinctively Christian lies not so much in doctrinal and theological purity, although this is important; what is distinctively Christian is evidenced in one's personal experience with Jesus Christ, His transforming love, and the ability to share that love with others, even with one's enemies (Matt. 5:43-48). Thus "we are not truly followers of Jesus unless we relinquish the total hold that family and ethnicity [tribalism and racism] would have upon us, and belong in the first instance to Christ" (Hiebert, 2012, p. 72). It is crucial that all Christians become positive witnesses to a tribally and racially divided world by showing the power of God to change hearts towards accepting people of all backgrounds.

## Discussion Questions

1. Genesis 1:26-28 unequivocally states that human beings from all human races were created in the image of God. How can the common ancestry of all in Adam help address ethnic, tribal, and racial issues?
2. John 3:16 asserts that Christ died for the whole world, that is, for all races. What is the implication of this in relation to human prejudice?
3. According to George Knight (1992), "racial prejudice is not totally eradicated in most Christians at conversion, nor are the racial tensions embodied in a culture easy for the churches existing in that culture to overcome" (p. 112). How can a strong emphasis on discipleship help meet this challenge?

4. There are important images of the church in the New Testament: the church as the people of God, body of Christ (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12; and Eph. 4), a family (Matt. 12:48-50; Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 4:17). These metaphors suggest that because all believers stand equal before God, there can be no room for discrimination in the same spiritual family. How can this help church members to live in closer harmony and acceptance of one another?

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