



White Privilege?

Recently in a sermon I said that I was not *then* going to wade into the current debate in our country about 'white privilege.' But with this article, I am now entering what some may view as turbulent waters. I am persuaded that what follows is truthful. And rather than being turbulent, my desire is that it will stir us up to love and good works (Heb 10:24).

A while back I was standing in the que at the SAA counter in Mumbai to check in for my flight back home. It was a busy time and I noticed that the counter designated for business class check-in was empty of customers. I also noticed many of my fellow economy class passengers looking longingly in that direction with hope of being served. Though the workers at the counter noticed the passengers, they ignored them. That is until I moved into their line of sight. I was immediately given an inviting smile and beckoned to the counter. It had nothing to do with my looks. Well, actually it did. For you see, I was the only person in the que who was not a person of 'colour.' That is not the first time I have experienced 'passenger privilege' due to my skin colour. It probably won't be the last.

The phrase '*white privilege*' is prevalent in our country. Not a particularly helpful phrase, in my opinion. I would suggest 'white advantaged.' Regardless, too often the concept being communicated is too easily dismissed — by 'whites' who *are* privileged/advantaged.

I have noticed in my travels that regardless of the country, those with lighter skin are on the Billboards. The popular actors and singers are often of a lighter hue. In our own country 'skin lighteners' are still marketed even though much of this is about as helpful as snake oil. Sadly, skin colour is a factor in our society. Sinfully so.

I am aware that socioeconomic matters of 'advantage' and 'disadvantage' are not exclusively related to skin colour. In South Africa there are many amongst the minority suffering from a lack of both opportunities and material goods. But not anywhere near the percentage of those of the majority. Generally speaking, to have grown up in South Africa as a white person, and in many cases as a non-black person, was to have been in a position of advantage. I don't understand how this can be denied. I guess the old saying is correct, '*There are none so blind as those who will not see.*'

White people sometimes argue that when it comes to education, for example, that their black peers had as much opportunity as did they. Perhaps in some cases this was true. But probably not in most cases. Even in cases where they attended the same schools. I wonder how long it took for your black classmate to get to school that morning? I wonder what kind of educational-hindrances she faced when she went home? In fact if your schooling was twenty or more years ago I wonder what hoops your black schoolmates would have had to jump through to even be enrolled at your 'equal opportunity for all students' school?

To cling to the belief that those in the Townships had the same advantages as did the majority of white students in their suburban primary and secondary schools is to deny and defy reality. But this matrix of 'advantage/disadvantage' is not of course limited to educational opportunities; in far too many cases it historically involved employment opportunities, opportunities for upward mobility in many companies, and even in the realm of sports.

In our day the reality remains that there are segments of our society that are far more advantaged than others. It is indisputable that many have advantages and others face stark *disadvantages*. And generally speaking, the first group is far lighter in complexion than the latter. Ignoring this may

make one feel better, at least for a while. The naked emperor also felt fine, at least until an honest bystander told the uncomfortable truth.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the phrase 'white privilege' is not particularly helpful. It too often unjustly alleges a sinister discrimination on the part of those who are more advantaged than others. It is sometimes used to imply that those who are better off materially, academically, etc., have either 'cut corners' to get there, or they have simply 'inherited' what they have. The truth is that in most cases, those who are better off than others have worked hard, *very* hard in order to achieve what they have. Their skin colour was not the *cause* of their achievements and it is unfair and unjust to make such a conclusion. 'Class envy' is always ugly, regardless of where it is found.

But, back to the theses, it is factually indisputable that many in our nation *are* advantaged because of pigmentation. It is undeniable that the lighter have historically had a brighter future. So, how do we face this, biblically? How do we respond as Christians?

First, stop denying it. The 'Scriptures of truth' (Dan 10:21) call upon us to honestly face the facts. To deny the many advantages that we have due to our skin colour merely creates unnecessary and counter-productive barriers to otherwise constructive understanding and dialogue.

Second, if you have been advantaged then don't apologize. Rather, thank God for this kind providence. God ordains where people are born, the families in which they are raised as well as the geographic borders in which we live (Acts 17:26). And if in comparison you are disadvantaged, then thank God that He too ordains this — for the same reasons that that He advantages others — that we might seek Him (Acts 17:27).

Third, if you are among the advantaged then be a good steward of those blessings (Gen 12:1-3; 1 Tim 6:17-19). Don't be like the fool who concludes that he deserves all that he has and that he is the 'self-made' man. Even the Tin Man knew that he needed a heart — perhaps some of us should humble ourselves and ask for one. It was precisely because geo-political Israel failed to humbly live in the light of her advantages that she lost her stewardship of God's blessings (Matt 21:33-44). Those advantages are now held by the Church. Let's remember that we are blessed to be a blessing. As we 'pay it forward' we will have even more blessings to share.

Finally, stop with the 'class envy.' If others have advantages which you do not, then practice Christian love and be glad for them (Rom 12:15; 1 Tim 6:1-2). Practice your faith and trust God that He knows what you need and what you can handle. God *does* make a difference between people; stop criticizing His management of the world.

The idea of egalitarianism (complete equality of giftedness, opportunities, etc.) is not a biblical concept. There is nothing in the Bible that remotely implies that in the eternally glorious state we will all be the same size, that we will all speak only one common language, that we will all be the same colour. It is clear that gender distinctions which God established at creation, male and female, will remain. Even the rewards will vary. Yes, some will receive more than others (Matt 25:14-23; Luke 12:48). And yet everyone will be perfectly happy. There will be no class envy and neither will there be any angst over *privilege*. Rather, there will be joyous contentment and unending praise that in the end we all get far more than we ever deserved — forgiveness of sins, deliverance from the wrath of God, and reconciliation with the Father. We don't call that privilege, we call that *grace*.

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