

# RACIAL IDOLATRY

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Reconciliation between people is a measure of our reconciliation to God. Whatever the fault lines for division, whether race, class, gender, tribal or xenophobia, they all result from a lack of unity between humanity and God. One way to think about the breakdown of relationship between humanity and God is to talk about idolatry. Idolatry is at the core of disunity. The Bible teaches that humans are made by God, for God. Our preferred belief systems cannot alter our created constitution. We are created by God to conform to the image of God, receive the love of God, be encouraged by the promises of God, be saved by God, trust, find refuge and significance in God and to be obedient to God. But when we fail to trust God because of our sinful nature, our internal drives go into autopilot and turn to idols. When we trust idols, we create unique religious systems to worship them, protect them, believe their false promises, expect to be saved by them, find refuge and significance in them, and ultimately reflect their image. But idolatrous behaviour doesn't happen in a vacuum. Our sinful desires are shaped by our social context and the reigning ideologies that pervade our society. The focus for this article is on how the ideologies of race leads to racial idolatry and disunity. Most South Africans desire a more unified nation. This can be realized through the power of the gospel to reconcile people to God and to each other.

## 1. IDOLS ANCIENT AND MODERN

To some, the word idolatry may strike up images of prescientific people superstitiously bowing to a totem pole or some carved image. It may strike modern people as archaic and irrelevant. To others, idolatry is something only really bad people do. The latter group may even feel that it's impossible for Christians to be idolaters. But is this how the Bible describes idolatry?

Evangelical theologians generally describe idolatry as whatever your heart clings to or relies on for ultimate security<sup>1</sup>. Pastor and theologian Tim Keller states that an idol is 'anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give'<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, idolatry takes on various shapes and forms. Anything could be an idol: coffee, money, relationships, family, beauty, fitness, food, the lists goes on. The human heart could make virtually anything an idol. Even as Christians who have been rescued and saved, we still have functional idols that we are slowly learning to see and dethrone. As we grow in the knowledge of God's love for us, our idols are displaced. While we may traverse different paths, the journey of growing in holiness is one that all Christians must take.

The refrain 'works of human hands' reflects the idolatry of choice in the Old Testament<sup>3</sup>. To the prophet Isaiah, the idol was a representation of a false god. But the false god was ultimately a

representation of the human imagination. A work of human hands is therefore something that springs from our own imagination and desire. This is perhaps most clearly seen when Isaiah mocks the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo who 'bow down together' (Isaiah 46.2). Isaiah certainly saw the false gods as separate from their idols. They are distinct from their graven images because the false gods are described as bowing down to stop their idols from falling off the oxcart. The object is a mere representation of the god. The prophet is not stating the obvious, namely that the wooden object is lifeless. That's not what he's getting at. His critique is that a counterfeit god is being represented by the object, but the counterfeit god was a lifeless figment of the imagination. This is why idols always topple before the one true God. The idol of Dagon was situated right next to the ark of the covenant. However, when the people of Ashdod found their idol toppled on the floor next to the ark, they don't conclude that the ark of the covenant was against them, but that the separate and distinct hand of God is 'hard against us and against Dagon our god' (1 Samuel 5.7).

Idolatry in the Old Testament was much more than the delusional worship of lifeless objects. The objects represented something greater. Those who spoke against idolatry are certainly not only speaking against the worship of objects, but deified ideas. The prophets were getting at the powerful ideas turned into fully fledged ideologies that had become value systems which were deeply internalised by society and even worshiped. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul who followed in the Old Testament tradition states: 'See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy' (Colossians 2.8). Philosophy that comes from the human imagination, especially those that function as gods, can be an idol that takes our imaginations captive. Not all philosophy is idolatrous, but this is what race is, and what it's done. Race is a work of human hands, an idol which has racialized society. It should be unsurprising that race could become idolatrous. But the grace of God is able to displace any idol, and race is no different. The very last line of John's first epistle is a warning against idolatry.

*Keep yourselves from idols.*

*1 John 5.21*

John mentions idolatry for the first time in his final sentence. At first glance it seems strange that idolatry is introduced in the conclusion of this letter. Conclusions normally summarize what's been said. Did John conclude haphazardly? Was his concluding comment on idolatry just a throwaway afterthought? Or do his final words indeed summarize his letter?

Throughout his letter he has spoken about the motivations beneath our behaviour. John's last line then is not a divergent appendage to an otherwise masterpiece on human drives and the divine. Rather it provides the literary framework that everything else hangs on. Christian councillor David Powlison captures the meaning well by stating that 'John's last line properly leaves us with that most basic question which God continually poses to each human heart. Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart's trust,

preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight? 4' The answer to what motivates racism is ultimately idolatry.

## 2. EXTERNAL MOTIVATIONS: 'THE WORLD'

*Do not love the world or anything in the world.*

*1 John 2.15*

Not loving the world is central to John's conclusion that Christians ought to 'keep yourselves from idols'. In this context the word 'world' is defined in a negative sense, as something not to be loved. In John's gospel he defines the word 'world' very differently when stating that 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son' (John 3.16). The broader context reveals that 'the world' in this context is a system organized in opposition to God and under the ultimate control of spiritual forces of evil; 'the whole world is under the control of the evil one' (1 John 5.19). This may strike us modern people as strange, since we are not in the habit of attributing human organization to spiritual authorities. But John stresses the necessity of this awareness so that no one would be 'led astray' by the devil (1 John 3.7).

In John's thinking the devil who is the 'prince of this world' (John 12.31) is characterized as a 'thief' (John 10.10) and 'the father of lies' (John 8.44). It should be unsurprising then that the world appeals subtly to our affections; to the 'flesh', the 'eyes', and the 'pride of life' (v.16). The language of loving the world points to an enticing subtle process. While the world is led by hidden forces of evil, it includes human participation. In John's letter 'the world' is now false prophets (4.5) and now broader human society (3.13). The world in this sense is the cooperation between evil spiritual forces and humanity in the creation and preservation of various kinds of evils. Evangelical theologian Daniel Akin defines it as 'an evil organized earthly system controlled by the power of the evil one that has aligned itself against God and his kingdom'<sup>6</sup>. For modern people familiar with sociological language we might say that 'the world' could be described as 'institutions and ideologies that transcend the individual and condition his or her thought and lifestyle'<sup>7</sup>.

Considering all of what John has to say on 'the world', it's clear that his concern is focused on a nuanced relationship to the world. God's attitude, and ours, should be that of 'the holy love of redemption' rather than 'the selfish love of participation' with the world<sup>8</sup>. Christians were chosen from the world, marking a distinction in their relationship with the world (John 17.6). When the church and the Christian resists the strong worldly currents we once freely swam in, we may experience opposition (3.13). We do not respond with the hatred we may receive, but with redemptive love (3.14). Christians are certainly *in the world* and able to be *led astray by the world*, but we should not be *of the world*. But what does idolatry encouraged by worldliness actually look like in practice?

## BIBLICAL CASE STUDIES OF EXTERNAL CONDITIONING

The Bible is filled with case studies detailing how the world conditions societies and individuals. King Manasseh 'led Judah into sin with his idols' (2 Kings 21.11). One of the practices that Manasseh introduced was the demonic practice of child sacrifice (2 Kings 21.6 and see Psalm 106.37 ESV). The text makes it clear that this is an example of the hidden hand of Satan in the affairs of humanity. Manasseh's idolatrous structural policies didn't only affect his generation, but reverberated throughout the centuries. In Jeremiah 15.4 the prophet, who ministered generations after Manasseh, mentions Manasseh as the causal influence to God's judgement on the subsequent generations. Manasseh's idolatrous systems influenced his generation and subsequent generations. Theologian Derek Kidner comments on this verse saying; 'Scripture faces us with the solidarity between the generations, for good or ill. If our minds cavil at this, our instincts are at home with it, in the pride, shame, or desire to make amends, which our predecessors acts may still evoke in us' <sup>9</sup>.

King Jeroboam had a similar impact in Israel. Theologian G.K. Beale notes that the majority of Israel's kings after Jeroboam are described as following his idolatrous sin <sup>10</sup>. This is referenced by the refrain that they 'walked in the way of Jeroboam'. King Jeroboam didn't want Israel traveling to Jerusalem in Judah on pilgrimage for fear that he would lose their political allegiance. So, he built sanctuaries in the opposite direction. He built them in the south and installed golden calves there. He then deceptively labelled the calves 'your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt' (1 Kings 12.28). Theologian Chris Wright summarizes colloquially 'the name at the top of the page still said "YHWA," the table of contents was very much of Jeroboam's own making' <sup>11</sup>. From these examples we see that in practice worldly systems are always disseminated through structural policies and are characterized by deception. If left unchanged, they lead multiple generations astray. In Manasseh and Jeroboam, we are provided with biblical case studies of how worldly systems function. They reveal the hidden hand of spiritual forces, the intergenerational outworking, and the moral legitimizing needed to sanctify idolatry.

Considering the sexualization of modern western societies is a helpful contemporary illustration for the conditioning effect that society has on its inhabitants. Young people, at no fault of their own, are bombarded with sexual images, easy access to pornography, a culture that encourages sexual fulfilment apart from marriage, the deification of autonomy with regard to sexual identity, and theological justification for any sexual preference. Conversion to Christ doesn't equate to automatic liberation from the effects of growing up in this kind of society.

Instead Christians are immensely helped when we perceive the cultural idols of sex and can skillfully dethrone these idols through equipped Christian discipleship. But aren't we to simply preach the gospel? Why should we even bother with analysing cultural idols? Tim Keller provides the answer stating that 'it is impossible to understand a culture without discerning its

idols... There is no way to challenge idols without doing cultural criticism, and there is no way to do cultural criticism without discerning and challenging idols' <sup>12</sup>.

While few would disagree that societies have been sexualized and that we should help Christians dethrone the idols of sex, can we say the same of race? Can we even compare the external pressures to change orthodox sexual ethics to the way ideologies of race have impacted Christians? Is it even reasonable to refer to racism as a form of racial idolatry? To answer these questions, we need to analyse the impact of race on our society. What follows is evidence that no individual or institution has been left unscathed by race and that it continues to have social meaning in our society.

## **THE RACIALIZATION OF SOCIETY**

Race is a social construct, developed from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and perfected by the 19<sup>th</sup> century to legitimize European colonialism<sup>13</sup>. Despite how ingrained racial categories are today, and how hard it may be to conceptualize of a world without race, no one thought of themselves as black or white before European colonialization <sup>14</sup>. As an aside, when I use the term black, I am not referring to a biological group of people. Black and white are not biological or biblical but social constructs. I use the term 'black' as Steve Biko would in a broader philosophical sense for people disaffected by racism. I also sometimes use the broad reference 'people of colour' which includes black African's, Asians, culturally coloured and Indians. In no way do I wish to conflate all ethnicities and cultures with these terms. I personally identify as black, but culturally coloured. I know that some black people do not appreciate being identified as 'people of colour' as this diminishes their blackness. I also respect people who do not identify with any of these categories and I too long for the day when these constructs have lost their social significance. Many so-called coloured people do not identify with either of the categories that I would. As a rule of thumb, I normally ask people how they identify. These references are further complicated as government sources that I quote will make a distinction between 'black African' and 'coloured'. But in this paper, when I refer to 'black' and 'people of colour' they are references to people who have historically been disaffected by racism.

So, back to the point about how race is disseminated through society. The normalization of the worldly ideology of race can be attributed to the racialization of society. A racialized society is 'a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships. A racialized society can also be said to be a society that allocates differential economic, political, social, and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines; lines that are socially constructed' <sup>15</sup>. Societies are racialized by the outworking of the ideologies of race. It's been disseminated throughout society in pervasive and ever-changing ways. This verifiable historic phenomenon affirms John's concern that even the people of God can be conditioned by the world and should therefore keep themselves from idolatry.

## THE RACIALIZATION OF THE ECONOMY

From its inception, the creation of race was motivated by economic exploitation. The broad stages of colonialism reveal the connection between race and economics. The first stage of colonization took place during the sixteenth century as a result of the crisis of feudalism. There was a broad economic shift during this period from a kind of 'commodity economy, controlled and constrained by the power of landowning aristocracies, to another that was being initiated by increasingly independent groups of merchants based in towns' <sup>16</sup>. At the same time there were 'dynastic wars for sovereignty' and the subsequent 'massive costs of continuous military expeditions, the disruption of the agrarian economy, and a series of peasant uprisings' <sup>17</sup>. These factors led to the need to find alternative sources of revenue through a form of conquest by explorers. The wealthier classes commissioned explorers, mercenaries and merchants for 'plunder, trickery, or establishing commercial monopolies' <sup>18</sup>.

The second stage of expansion took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and was characterized by merchants and slavery. The spread of European merchants was fuelled by the development of international trade of raw materials being extracted from the colonies. Large quantities of cheap labour were required in the form of slaves for this enterprise. As global capitalism was developing, the division of labour through the enslavement of millions of Africans meant that capitalism itself took on racial characteristics <sup>19</sup>.

The final stage of colonialism was characterized by the era of industrial capitalism and imperialism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The separation between developed and developing countries was cemented during this period as the process of western industrialization was hurried along by the export of raw materials built on the racialized global division of labour.

The majority of black South Africans continue to live in poverty which reinforces racial stereotypes of cultural inferiority. But when we consider a historical analysis of the contemporary racial inequality it becomes evident that our inequality was systematically created and is not the product of regressive cultures. The institution of slavery developed at the same time as capitalism to provide the cheap labour required to export raw materials at minimal costs. This legacy was continued and further entrenched during apartheid and it remains one of the country's greatest challenges. South Africa's inability to industrialize at the pace of developed countries meant that we still require unskilled cheap labour for the export of raw materials. The question that we now face, is why we have not experienced much change post democracy? Some suggest that our democratic government did not attempt to change the racialized economy and instead have established a neo-colonialism<sup>20</sup>

(Mbeki 2009 63-100). It's noteworthy that the French Economist Thomas Piketty's book *Capital* opens with the Marikana massacre as an example of the problem of inequality <sup>21</sup>. The Farlam Commission, while exonerating President Cyril Ramaphosa, who was a non-executive director

at Lonmin from direct responsibility did however cast dispersion on former police minister Nathi Mthethwa<sup>22</sup>.

In my view, the reasons we have remained an unequal state is a complex question and most certainly implicates developed western countries along with those who currently wield power in democratic South Africa. But the primary point to be made here is that our economy has been racialized. The overlap of colonialism with the development of capitalism has racialized the division of labour. One of the most important aspects to building a non-racial South Africa lies in changing the racialization of our economy, which will include reforming capitalism in its current form.

## **Health Care**

Currently, there's a twenty-year difference in life expectancy between white and black South Africans. One of the factors responsible for the difference in life expectancy is linked to inequality within health care. Approximately half of the national health care budget is used to subsidize the private sector. Only in 2011 for the first time did the expenditure on public health care match that spent on subsidizing private health care<sup>23</sup>. In 2011 the national health budget was 8.3% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It was roughly halved, with 4.1% going to the private sector, and 4.2% to the public sector. The private sector provided health care for 16.2% of the population or 8.2 million people, while the remaining 4.2% was spent on 84% of the population or 42 million people. Part of the reason that public hospitals cannot match the level of health care received in private hospitals is that its resources are so thinly spread. The Human Development Index (HDI) is another expression of the inequality in health care. It's an index put together by the United Nations Development Programme. It measures three things; gross national income (GNI), education and life expectancy. South Africa ranks 113th out of 189 countries<sup>24</sup>. We are roughly in the middle. However, when race is included in the HDI, white South Africans rank 15th in world. That's on par with the UK and Sweden<sup>25</sup>. These statistics represent painful, yet widespread realities. They are fundamentally unjust and result in the underdevelopment, suffering and preventable deaths of countless millions every year. While colonialism and apartheid may have ended, much of our policies remain regressive and continue to oppress the black majority in order to benefit the upper middle class. The racialization of health care is directly linked to colonialism and apartheid and is sustained by those in power.

## **Income Inequality**

Racial inequality is also expressed through our division of labour. We had a Gini inequality coefficient of 0.7 in 2011. We also have one of the highest Wealth Coefficients in the world, with a wealth differential of 0.95. These numbers give expression to debilitating structural inequality. The average income for white South Africans is R36000, compared to R6000 per month for black South Africans. The SALDRU study on *Social stratification, life chances and*

*vulnerability to poverty in South Africa* concludes that 'Africans remain underrepresented in the middle class, and race is still one of the strongest predictors of poverty in South Africa'<sup>26</sup>. According to the World Bank's report on *Overcoming Poverty and Inequality in South Africa* in 2018; 'wages show a distinct racial divide across all job categories. Black South Africans earn much less, on average, than white South Africans, who earned 87 percent higher wages in wave 4'<sup>27</sup>. Income has a direct relation to education. For wave 4 jobs, or jobs that require highly skilled labour, 'a college degree results in a 148 percent increase in wages relative to no education'<sup>28</sup>.

## **Education**

South African universities have seven times as many white South Africans enrolled between the ages of 18-24 compared to black South Africans in the same age group, despite people of colour being the vast majority. A lack of education is one of the primary reasons for inequality. In 2011 approximately 65% of black African and coloured youth did not finish high school<sup>29</sup>. Without equal access to education, young impoverished South Africans will remain stuck in poverty.

The recent Fallist movement was a response to the systemic exclusion of black youth from education. It was not dissimilar to the protest movements of 1957, 1968 and 1976 in their quest for equality. This time the protests were about equal access to university education and the amelioration of institutional racism. During these years I was a student pastor at a church that had two hundred students from the University of Cape Town (UCT). Many of our black students were part of the Fees Must Fall movement. Despite all the facts about our inequality, many South African Christians and Christian leaders vilified the student movement. Students were labelled 'baboons' and 'criminals' in media outlets<sup>30</sup>. In my evangelical leadership circles prayers for peace were offered, but almost none for justice or racial equality. Phrases became common in these interactions 'students should be patient' (gradualism), 'they deserve to be locked up' (accommodationist) and 'we want to support but this is so political' (ambiguous). For an explanation of gradualism, accommodationist and ambiguous responses jump ahead to the section on the racialization of Christianity. This was a rare opportunity for the public to engage in a national conversation about removing one of the biggest causes for inequality, and evangelical Christian leaders communicated very clearly that they are committed to maintain the status quo.

One evening I was called up by a lawyer friend who asked if I could go to the University of the Western Cape. Students had been injured by police and private security but they were hiding in their campus residence and were not being permitted to leave. My lawyer friend asked me if I, as a pastor, could try to negotiate with the police and private security to allow ambulances onto campus. After much negotiation, at about 3am we were successful. I took some students to the hospital and I remembered sitting with a nineteen-year coloured student.

He told me that he had been taken from his room, beaten in a field, and then sent back to his room as an example to other protesting students. We saw the doctor who explained his injuries. He had several broken bones and multiple fractures. But these stories never made the news, nor did they seem to soften the hearts of the people in my circles.

The years that followed the protests were equally as difficult as student suicides and attempted suicides skyrocketed nationally. In the wake of the protests, at the request of the protesting students UCT hosted an *Institutional Reconciliation and Transformation Commission*. Agreed upon officials did an inquiry, received submissions and analysed UCT policies. Their findings were 'that racism does exist at UCT, that it goes beyond attitudes and beliefs and is aided and abetted by poor management systems which administratively result in discrimination on a racial basis. It is worth noting that not a single submission claimed that UCT is not a racist place'<sup>31</sup>.

UCT is one of the best and most progressive universities in South Africa and yet it has been racialized according to these findings. South African universities serve as microcosm of our broader society. What ensued during the years of Fees Must Fall revealed how the unjust status quo had been normalized, internalized and legitimized by South Africans. It revealed a form of idolatry at the heart of our society. Race continues to have social meaning and terms like 'racialization' give expression to the significance of race. Words are important in this discussion. Many would describe the plight of the poor black majority as oppression. Many evangelicals do not agree that black South Africans are oppressed despite the systemic causes of poverty by those in authority. Whatever word we use, it is important to note that the lived experience of South Africans has not changed very much since apartheid. The majority of poor black South Africans continue to be systematically excluded from the economy, from receiving quality health care and education. They continue to experience land dispossession and are radically underpaid. These are not simply legacy issues, but have been deliberately maintained by those in authority. A failure to perceive the ongoing racialization of society will inevitably lead to the rejection of any call for a more just society. It will also lead to the rejection of any suggestion that our society is contributing to racial idolatry. The reason the bulk of this article focuses on proving that our society has been racialized is because evangelicals already possess the theological resources to dethrone racial idolatry. Most of the victory is then located in being able to acknowledge the extent of the problem. The racialization of our society is therefore the cornerstone on which everything else builds or is rejected.

## **THE RACIALIZATION OF THE ACADEMY**

There's a history to institutionalized racism at universities. Even the field of natural science, despite its reliance on proof, rationality and objectivity, was impacted by the ideologies of race. The more science developed, the more it confirmed instead of disproved white

supremacy. Science confirmed stereotypes of savagery and excessive sexuality through biological studies. These studies focused on things like the size of the skull, facial features or genes<sup>32</sup>. Copious tables were developed that measured the purity of one's whiteness. Anthropology followed suit. In 1859 a German Anthropologist Theodor Waitz's said 'if there be various species of mankind, there must be a natural aristocracy among them, a dominant white species as opposed to the lower races who by their origin are destined to serve the nobility of mankind, and be tamed, trained, and used like domestic animals or... fattened or used for psychological or other experiments without any compunction... All wars of extermination, whenever the lower species are in the way of the white man, are justifiable' <sup>33</sup>. In this regard the past is not history. A scientific paper was published in 2019 by Professor Elmarie Terblanche from University of Stellenbosch concluding after surveying only 61 so-called coloured women, that coloured women possessed lower cognitive function. The paper proved that 'Colored women in South Africa have an increased risk for low cognitive functioning, as they present with low education levels and unhealthy lifestyle behaviors'<sup>34</sup>. The methodology of the paper bases this major claim on a small sample size, and incorrectly assumes socio-economic class homogeneity within this ethnic group. What does this reveal about the academy? We could list other aspects of higher education's compromise, from atlases and maps, literature and art, works of history and show how they have been racialized. What it reveals is that even the most objective aspects of society, namely universities have not been left unscathed by racial conditioning. But there is perhaps one other aspect of society that we would deem impenetrable to race. The church should have been an indestructible vanguard of truth. But the infiltration of the church is perhaps the greatest evidence that race is a powerful force and should not be underestimated.

## THE RACIALIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY

As a culturally coloured person from Cape Town, my family history is tied both to the forcible removal of people of colour during Apartheid and to evangelicalism. Surprisingly, when my grandmother was removed from Mowbray, her church was silent. My grandmother loved the Lord Jesus. She was one of those grannies that would quote Scripture even if you didn't ask for it. She preached to me about everything, everything except the injustice she lived through. She went through something violent and yet in all the years of my proximity to her evangelical community, I never heard anyone speak about it. Why did it feel like my granny's spiritual home had normalized injustice?

In 1488 Bartholomew Dias arrived at the Cape. He fought the Khoikhoi and prevailed. As his first act of victory Dias planted a wooden cross in Algoa Bay and Christian historians summarize that 'Christianity was to feature in every stage of the ensuing European colonisation process'<sup>35</sup>. In 1497 Vasco da Gama landed in St Helena Bay and another violent clash with the Khoikhoi ensued. Sailing further to Mossel Bay he setup a cross and in 1501 in da Nova he built a chapel. When Van Riebeeck arrived in 1652 he did two things immediately. He wrote to the Heeren requesting slaves. Then he immediately instituted the Reformed Christian tradition praying at his first Council of Policy meeting that 'true reformed Christian doctrine' be spread among 'these wild insolent people'<sup>36</sup>. By 1806 the British occupied the Cape. By this point there were 9307 slaves, compared to 6435 free inhabitants. Slavery had already become deeply intertwined with Christianity. Slaves, on arrival would receive new Christian names such as; Moses, Abrahams and Daniels. A perverse practice of tithing slaves to the church developed. Young boys would get ripped away from their mothers, while their mothers would be beaten to submission, so that they could get tithed to the church. At this point in the Cape it was certainly the case for some that your father could be your slave owner, who raped your mother, and your deacon at your local reformed church.

Christians responded in three general ways. Firstly, many were ambiguous. Conservative Christian Historian Richard Elphick notes that 'most missionaries in South Africa did not straightforwardly advocate an extension of racial equality from the spiritual to the social realm. Black Christians, to the contrary, tended vigorously to assert that equality in the eyes of God should evolve into social and political equality. The white missionaries' relationship to the doctrine they had introduced was immensely complex – an intricate interplay of advocacy, subversion, and even downright hostility'<sup>37</sup>.

Another popular response was the accommodationist. Missionaries tended to accommodate the powers that be. This is true of the colonial government and the apartheid government in South Africa. The accommodationist missionaries were those who convinced tribal Chiefs not to go to war and rather to assimilate. They convinced them to give up land and in the main, they never joined the fight for liberation. Today many internal documents from the major

missionary organizations remain extant. An example is found in a statement by the South African Missionary Society; 'The board of directors of this society was requested to be mindful of the general duty of all Christians, that it is the Lord's will that all Christians are expected to be obedient and respectful of the Government, and to be very careful to avoid anything which may cause conflict between State and Church interest'<sup>38</sup>. Protestant missionaries, on the whole, did not disrupt, but instead participated in structural racism based on theological reasons. Others were gradualist.

Bishop Colenso who is considered to be an activist for the natives never allowed black people to preach. He felt they would only be ready in a few more generations. This gradualism robbed people of colour of agency. Years later Steve Biko critiqued the white liberal theory of gradualism which was meant to keep 'blacks confused and always hoping that God will step down from heaven to solve their problems'<sup>39</sup>. Slavery ends in the 19th century, but in the 20th Century a team of NG Kerk missionaries begin to perfect the doctrines of Apartheid. And it's a former NG Kerk minister turned politician D.F. Malan that implements Apartheid.

Post democratic evangelicalism rather than doing the expected 180-degree turnabout, did a minor pivot. Anthony Balcolmb sums up the journey of the conservative evangelical position aptly in his paper *From Apartheid to the New Dispensation* 'When Retief was asked to appear before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, his submission demonstrated that he is well aware of the wider Anglican Communion's opinion that CESA is, in his words, 'a recalcitrant, schismatic group of unreasonable right-wing evangelicals'!?' Moreover, he says, 'We have no one to blame for these views but ourselves'. He also admits that on issues of injustice his church had been 'insensitive' and that its identification with the apartheid regime had been based on its belief in the biblical teaching of support for political authorities. 'Our failure to be involved in the political struggles of our land', he says, 'was a major error in both understanding and judgment.' Retief makes it clear, however, that CESA will 'continue to clearly teach and preach the Word of God and that it will not shirk its responsibilities in the socio-political sphere in the future', naming specifically the 'ethical challenges of the day in relation to crime and corruption, abortion, pornography, gambling and the proposed decriminalization of prostitution'.<sup>40</sup>

The evangelical definition for justice in post democratic South Africa continues to ignore race and its outworking and instead focus on 'crime and corruption, abortion, pornography, gambling and the proposed decriminalization of prostitution'. We shouldn't ignore the latter but when will we do the moral audit on the former? Many evangelicals have been consistent in their practice of applying theology to everything except race. Is it possible that we have failed to heed John's warning which was directed to the church? As Christians we are called to keep ourselves from idolatry but does our history reveal a deep syncretism? If it's not syncretism, then why do we not find evangelicalism putting similar levels of effort into the dethroning of racism as it put into its creation? As Christian sociologist Korie Edwards writes in

her analysis of the power of race in contemporary multicultural churches, 'while I can imagine interracial churches where whiteness does not dictate congregational life, these are rare exceptions'<sup>41</sup>. What is certain is that no one is exempt from being led astray by the conditioning power of the world. The Bible is clear about the reality that no individual or institution, not even the church is immune to the deceptive allure of the world. History verifies this.

## **THE CHANGING FORMS OF RACE**

It's not only important to discern the comprehensive reach of racism, as we've done, but also to trace its changing forms. For many post-democratic South Africans of every hue, the goal of non-racialism means being colour-blind. One local sociological study asked South Africans to define non-racialism and summarized their responses; 'now that we are in a post-apartheid dispensation 'race' should no longer be seen as the problem that it was in the past, and that one should follow an imperative not to see colour'<sup>42</sup>. Another variation of this response may be to suggest that since apartheid is over, very few people today hold conscious beliefs of racial superiority. Racism is most certainly on the decline, in fact its altogether dead, this group concludes. 'The real problem today is class', some may say. But the racialization of our economy reveals that we cannot separate race from class in South Africa. While the desire to be colour-blind may be altruistic, it actually functions to take race out of the conversation and off the table. It stems from the failure to pay attention to the changing forms of racism which reveals that race remains socially significant.

South Africa became a racialized society with the arrival of the Dutch and the British. But the racialization changed over the years. Black slave labour was imported shortly after the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck in 1652. The primary shape of the racialization then was slavery. Britain ended the slave trade in 1807 but this did not mean the immediate end of slavery in the colonies. Slavery only officially ended in 1834 in South Africa, but even then 'the flow of colonial produce would not be interrupted'<sup>43</sup>. Part of the vision was that slaves would need to be trained towards 'responsibility' essential for 'free' labour; a form of gradualism<sup>44</sup>. Rules were quickly implemented to govern apprenticeships. The Vagrancy Act of 1834 and the Masters and Servants Ordinance of 1841 ensured 'farmers a regular and cheap labour force'<sup>45</sup>. Offspring to slaves post 1834 were not slaves, but they were 'more indebted to landowners than their apprenticed parents. By threatening to throw the children off their land, 'mothers often indentured their offspring to farmers in contracts extending well beyond 1838'<sup>46</sup>. In 1856 the racialization changed yet again with the introduction of Apartheid. Thus, the racialization of South Africa has gone through various iterations of change from slavery, racial capitalism, colonization, apartheid to our contemporary form of racial inequality.

These examples will suffice to show that racism adapts, because it benefits a group of people. These benefits are not easily given up. Considering the violent history of colonialism and

apartheid in South Africa, or plantation slavery and Jim Crow in America , it's understandable that some would define racism as conscious acts of overt racial aggression. It follows that when our past is taken as the only reference point, then overt acts of racial violence becomes the definition for racism. Many today are very critical of the concepts of micro-aggressions or structural racism. But, is it possible that racist attitudes could be expressed in ways that do not break the law? Those who don't see the covert nature of racism may feel inclined to view our progress rather positively. But we should question whether racism is always disseminated through society as overt racial violence. Could it be embedded in prejudicial attitudes? Could these attitudes lead to continued socio-economic racialized systems and regressive policies?

This is at the heart of why we share so little agreement about the problem of racism and the solution of a non-racialism. One may feel 'analysis paralysis' set in as we wade into the complexity of racism. Ahmed Kathrada once said 'I was never one for major theoretical engagements. For me, practice always took precedence over long discussions and debates'<sup>47</sup>. This is a temptation that we all face. No one wishes to be affected and infected by our legacy. We all long to put the past to rest. In a survey done by the *Institute for Justice and Reconciliation* two thirds of all South Africans want to forget apartheid and move on <sup>48</sup>. It's a sentiment that's shared almost equally by black (63%), and white (69%) South Africans <sup>49</sup>. But pain aversion can sometimes leave wounds untreated and compound the problem. Kathrada went on to say this about his pragmatism: 'that is my own shortcoming, and something of which I am not particularly proud...The challenge of deepening our understanding of what non-racialism means in a post-apartheid South Africa requires deep intellectual and rigorous practical work. We need to refine our understanding of its origins and also its application to everyday life today'<sup>50</sup>.

### 3. THE RESULT OF A RACIALIZED SOCIETY IS RACIAL SOCIALIZATION

In our culture which is influenced by individualism, we are prone to think that we are exceptionally free thinkers, not influenced by groups, history, structures and society. We don't often think too deeply about how the world around us is affecting us. But psychologists have affirmed the role of community in our thinking. Allan Jacobs who is a Christian Psychologist and author of the book *How To Think* states, 'to think independently of other human beings is impossible, and if it were possible it would be undesirable. Thinking is necessarily, thoroughly, and wonderfully social. Everything you think is a response to what someone else has thought and said'<sup>51</sup>. This accounts for why whole groups of people can agree or disagree about the same race, political or moral issues in the exact same manner.

Sociologists don't use the biblical framework of idolatry to describe human motivations. Instead sociologists like Robyn DiAngelo speak about the development of our racial frame saying, 'the frame is deep and extensive, with thousands of stored "bits". These bits are pieces of cultural information – images, stories, interpretations, omissions, silences – that are passed along from one person and group to the next, and from one generation to the next'<sup>52</sup>. Innumerable messages that we receive from our racialized environment are internalized consciously and subconsciously, to shape our perspectives. Nothing about the society we are born into has been left untouched by race. In every context white people are being taught and treated as if they are superior and black people as if they are inferior. These practices are not only normalized because it's our experience from the cradle to the grave, but because legitimization for the status quo has been weaved into our worldviews. Our places of worship and learning espouse truth commingled with racism. It's our socialized attitudes and thoughts that lead us to racial idolatry. The internalized messages that we grow accustomed to, continue to affect our thinking and behaviour long after conversion. They aren't changed automatically. The racial frame is deep and layered and flies under the radar of consciousness. Like every area of sanctification, growing in holiness requires our full attention and engagement.

Christian Psychologist Christena Edmondson describes the result of our racial socialization as implicit bias, which she defines as 'the attitudes and the stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner'<sup>53</sup>. Implicit or subconscious bias is most easily seen in the wholesale participation of governments, businesses, universities even churches with colonialism and apartheid. When my wife and I first got married she gently spoke to me about how I 'stomp' when I walk and that it wakes her up at night. I had no idea I stomped when I walked. So, intent to please my amazing new bride, I set out to change my stomping. I slowly became aware of my stomp and the noise I made on our wooden floors. For a while, I made some progress and started changing my walk. But when I wasn't thinking about it, I would revert back to my stomping. It was very difficult to change something I had

grown up doing, something that had become a subconscious action. I even got upset with her expectation that I could change my walk! This is how implicit bias works in our lives. We may slip in and out of consciousness about how we are relating to people. We can sometimes slip back into learnt behaviours without realizing it. Appreciating this aspect of our socialization helps those who behave in racially problematic ways to acknowledge that their intentions may not always be racist while their behaviour most certainly is. It also helps those on the receiving end to be patient and to understand why someone can be unintentionally racist.

All people, whether Christian or secular, every institution and individual, is influenced by the world and its systems. It's impossible to be unaffected by the ideas and values that we grow up with. The process of Christian discipleship is the lifelong journey of freedom from internalized worldliness. It's a process that no one is exempt from, and that we all must undergo. It's a process that requires humility, patience and grace with each other.

## **CRITICAL RACE THEORY, INTERSECTIONALITY & THE BIBLE**

But before we continue to explore racial socialization as a form of racial idolatry in greater detail, we must briefly deal with a contemporary objection. We need to note that sociological terms are philosophically laden. These terms are 'elements within schemas of value and interpretation'<sup>54</sup>. Any responsible engagement with these concepts must incorporate a theological analysis of their underlying framework.

The underlying framework for DiAngelo's definition of the racial frame, and most other sociologists, is based on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and intersectionality. Critical race theory is 'a set of analytical tools that explain how race has and continues to function in society' and intersectionality is 'the study of how different personal characteristics overlap and inform one's experience'<sup>55</sup>. Christians tend to have three kinds of responses to CRT and intersectionality.

Some, particularly those who are not part of dominant groups, intuitively affirm these social theories because of their lived experiences. CRT is responsible for showing how the standard definition for racism as only prejudice<sup>56</sup> doesn't adequately reflect how ideologies of white supremacy are disseminated through the structures of society and the conditioning effect it has on its inhabitants. I have attempted to show that the definition of racism observed by CRT theorists far from disagreeing with biblical orthodoxy affirms the Bible's description of the captivating power of idols and how they are practically disseminated through society. Many black South Africans who have never heard about CRT will intuitively connect the racial inequality that they experience with the racialization of society. Women and people of colour will intuitively affirm what census information affirms; that white men earn more money than white women, who earn more than coloured men, who earn more than coloured women, who earn more than black men, who earn more than black women<sup>57</sup>.

The same could be said about intersectionality. Many black women know intuitively that they face different challenges than black men or white women despite shared ethnicity and

gender. Most women know instinctively that 'different personal characteristics overlap and inform one's experience'. Most white women know intuitively that despite their racial privilege, nonetheless their long fight for gender equality has not yet concluded. When I speak about race it's often white women who understand the experience of people of colour because they have experienced exclusion because of their gender. Most black women know intuitively that they have a very different lived experience to white women. Despite having the same gender as white women, black women uniquely experience the trifactor of class, race and gender oppression. Even black women who know nothing about intersectionality know that they haven't always been beneficiaries of white feminisms gains. People who are not part of the dominant group may not engage too critically with CRT and intersectionality, or even be aware of these tools, but they cite their experience as corroborating verification for these social tools.

A second response is to view these tools as inconsistent with Christian orthodoxy. Pastor and theologian John MacArthur was one of the lead signers of *The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel* and exemplifies this category. The statement states plainly that 'we deny that the postmodern ideologies derived from intersectionality... and critical race theory are consistent with biblical teaching'<sup>58</sup>. MacArthur and the hundreds of Christians who signed this statement completely reject the use of CRT and intersectionality and most of its findings.

I am writing from a third perspective. A third category exemplified by America's largest protestant denomination, the Southern Baptists, who have a more nuanced approach to CRT and intersectionality. The resolutions of the Southern Baptist Convention of 2019 affirmed that many Baptists 'have employed selective insights from critical race theory and intersectionality to understand multifaceted social dynamics' but caution that 'critical race theory and intersectionality have been appropriated by individuals with worldviews that are contrary to the Christian faith, resulting in ideologies and methods that contradict Scripture'<sup>59</sup>. The caution is not essentially focused on the sociological tools, but how they are used. The problem with the first group of people is that they may not even be conscious of these social tools and therefore not be able to discern when they are used to affirm what the Bible doesn't.

The conflation of responses to justice issues is one way in which these sociological tools are misappropriated. Because intersectionality highlights how minority groups face social exclusion, these theories are used to promote the erasure of all boundaries of exclusion. The Bible doesn't however conflate moral judgements with oppressive exclusion. It's challenging, yet necessary to maintain moral boundaries, while opposing all forms of oppression. Indeed, to remove all boundaries inevitably leads to new forms of oppression. For example, Christians should oppose all forms of bigotry towards those in the LGBTQI+ community. We should be compassionate to people who have experienced horrendous treatment from the dominant culture. South Africa is not only an unfriendly, but unsafe place for people from this community. We cannot begin to understand the lived experiences of people who have

endured bigotry and need to be advocates for their human rights. However, affirming that Christian marriage is reserved for one man and women should not be equated to oppression. The conflation of the historic orthodox view of marriage with the treatment of black people under apartheid is one way in which intersectionality could be misused. Anyone has the right to apply these social tools as they see fit, but Christians also reserve the right to evaluate their arguments. But, to disregard the social tool because of the way someone chooses to use them, is essentially building a strawman argument.

I've noticed that when I discuss the racialization of society, or racial socialization with some evangelicals, it's often dismissed as dangerous social theory. But CRT and intersectionality are social tools that will be used to say different things through different people. They require theological discernment. This is not an overly complex process. They certainly do not warrant wholesale rejection. In any case most black evangelicals oppose racism on biblical grounds and do not employ CRT or intersectionality. Dismissing anti-racism because its CRT can be another way of protecting racial idols. We don't really need CRT, intersectionality or the stats that were quoted earlier about the racialization of society to know that black people continue to be oppressed. We know this intuitively because no one wants to swap places with those in the townships. The protection of idols often requires that we devolve into dangerous foolishness as we seek to defend a lie, with lies from the plain truth.

A final concern raised by this convention was that CRT and intersectionality alone are insufficient to diagnose and redress the root causes of the social ills that they identify. While these theories help us analyse human behaviour, the Bible is the final and sufficient authority. We should then expect to find that the Bible at times affirms much of what sociologists observe, and at times presents perspectives that are absent from the social sciences. So, we return to the Word of God as the authority to help us understand more fully what sociologists observe.

## 4. THE INTERNAL MOTIVATION

There's a second aspect to our motivations and behaviour. The external disordered racialized society wouldn't have much appeal to anyone apart from our internal disordered motivations. The reason we are influenced by malevolent ideas is because we have sinful hearts.

*For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life comes not from the Father but from the world.*

*1 John 2.16*

Keeping ourselves from idols doesn't only depend on not loving the world, but on mastery of our internal desires. External racial socialization is not the whole problem. Therefore, dealing with racism can never be a matter of simply changing the externals like the law, or working for justice, or promoting racial equity programmes, or even holding people accountable on social media. Despite all the external changes that we have already made, racism continues to plague us globally. To be sure, we should make changes to the external society, but that's not all that needs to change. Racism continues because idolatry stems from sinful hearts, and is conditioned by our external social environment.

'Lust of the flesh' and 'lust of the eyes' describes our sinful craving for pleasure and aesthetic beauty. The phrase 'pride of life' describes the desire for status that comes from commodities. All three phrases reflect different aspects of an internal problem; our sinful nature. The human condition is that we desire evil. As shocking as this may sound, to me it's the most intellectually satisfying explanation for human behaviour. Every single person has their own unique bearing towards their own unique brand of evil. Some forms of evil may be more socially acceptable than others, but no one free from the power of sin. We know this to be true, because we affirm it with our colloquial saying 'I'm only human' which is code for 'I will miss the mark sometimes'.

The word translated 'lust' is the Greek word *epithumiai* or desire. Idolatry certainly is conditioned from the external society, but it stems from our internal evil desires. God warns Ezekiel the prophet against any simplistic analysis of human behaviour saying that Israel 'have set up idols in their hearts' (Ezekiel 14.3). The problem of idolatry is not just an external one but one that springs from varied internal desires like 'sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry' (Colossians 3.5). Our racial frame is developed then by both our internal desires and our external racial conditioning.

The Bible attributes our motivations to the interplay between the external world and our internal desires. Politically left leaning people may tend to emphasize external forces as the primary motivation for human behaviour. They may struggle to accept the Bible's emphasis on personal responsibility through repentance. While more conservative people who tend to emphasize individual responsibility may struggle to acknowledge that we are conditioned by external forces. However, what political theory separates, the Bible holds together. We are

conditioned by our society, but this in no way contradicts that human beings are ultimately motivated by their sinful desires.

## **INTERNALIZING RACISM - LUST OF THE FLESH**

The phrase 'lust of the flesh' describes our inordinate sinful desires. Flesh desires are sinful in two ways. They are sinful when they are for evil pleasures or when they are inordinate desires for good. It's easy to see how the former is destructive. Desires for evil like revenge or murder are very obviously destructive to victim and perpetrator alike. The theft of the best land and the subjugation of a people group for cheap labour gives expression to the lust of the flesh.

Colonialism, genocide, ethnic cleansing, concentration camps, the Gulags, xenophobic attacks, all of these spring from inordinately selfish desires and are ultimately expressions of idolatry.

But 'lust of the flesh' describes more than just the desire for evil. What about a morally neutral desire, or a desire for good? Could the enjoyment of a good red wine, or sexual intimacy, or having a healthy expectation of fidelity in a relationship become 'lust of the flesh'? A desire can be described as being from the flesh when our morally neutral desires, or our desires for good become inordinate. An inordinate desire for good red wine could be characterized by drunkenness. When the desire for sexual intimacy has become inordinate it presents as sexual immorality. Even the longing for fidelity can warp into smothering jealousy (Galatians 5.19-20). The reformation theologian John Calvin summarizes the meaning of 1 John 2.16 saying , 'the sum of the whole is, that as soon as the world presents itself, our lusts or desires, when our heart is corrupt, are captivated by it, like unbridled wild beasts; so that various lusts, all which are adverse to God, bear rule in us.'<sup>60</sup> It's a very grand way of saying that good desires, or even morally neutral desires can become unbridled wild beasts that rule us.

Consider the example of food. The desire for food is morally neutral, until it becomes inordinate (Philippians 3.19). When I desire food inordinately, food becomes the sacrifice and my appetite becomes the god. When I do not get food and experience hunger, I may stop acting like a Christian! Grumpiness, silence, irritability ensue. The idolatry may manifest differently in different people. Some may be greedy and never share. Some may use food for refuge instead of God, and overeat for comfort. Others may not express any thankfulness to God for their food. Some may compromise on spiritual disciplines like fasting because of their love for food. When my desire for food becomes inordinate, it's a sign of idolatry.

But my gluttony doesn't only spring from my desires, its socially shaped by the way that culture perceives food. In certain cultures, food may be used for friendship and linked to socializing. Fast pace city cultures may be more utilitarian. Food is just fuel to be consumed as quickly as possible. Some cultures may use food to affirm a social hierarchy. The patriarch gets the best food and the food is served in a particular order, and this has important social meaning. My hometown has a very 'bourgie' culture which places increased social capital on eating

certain kinds of foods, purchased from certain places, made in certain ways. Just have a look at what trends on some Instagram feeds to verify this! My views on food may be shaped by my family's customs or their economic status. We may have grown up without too much food because of poverty. Despite all the external forces on my gluttony, I may still have my own nuanced weakness, say an addiction to Mango Achar inherited from my coloured culture!

Celebrating ethnic and cultural distinctives are good. But race has morphed good desires for ethnic and cultural celebration into an 'unbridled wild beast' so that various lusts, all of which are adverse to God, bear rule in racists. Racism is internalized because we face daily an internal war, battling cravings that don't feel evil but are evil. What's at stake is yielding our moral reasoning to the 'lust of the flesh'. When we are servants of our desires, our ethics are quickly reconfigured in service of the flesh. We quickly believe our own rhetoric, that while the situation is perhaps not ideal, it must be this way for one or the other unbiblical reason. Or perhaps we avoid thinking too deeply about our desires. But those who want to grow in holiness will interrogate the interplay between their internal desires and the conditioning external forces.

## **RACE & POWER - PRIDE OF LIFE**

The word translated 'life' in 1 John 2.16 is not the Greek 'zoe' (eternal life) but the less familiar 'bios'. The same word is translated as 'material possessions' in chapter 3 verse 17. It's often used to describe the relationship between possessions and life. It's used in several other places in this way. Like in Mark 12.44 where the widow put 'all she had to *live on*' into the treasury. Or in Luke 8.14 to describe the weeds that cause the seed to be 'choked by *life's* worries, riches and pleasures'. This word describes the impact that commodities have on our souls.

Pride in our commodities and possessions provides us with status. The pride of life then certainly includes money, because we use money to purchase commodities. Money itself is not the object of our desires, it's the currency that we use to attain the object of our desires. Note again how subtly, but clearly, the Bible describes that it is not the 'use' or 'desire' but the 'love of money' which is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6.10). When our desire for money becomes inordinate, when we love what it provides, it leads to idolatry and all kinds of evil. This may sound simple to manage in theory. We may perhaps too quickly assume that we have a healthy attitude towards money and the self-worth and power it affords us. But South African history and our current economic climate reveal that it is very difficult to stop ourselves from loving money more than God or people.

Note too that money and power are not neutral, despite its inanimate form. They act on us, affect us, affirm us, provide us with a sense of worth that makes us fall in love. Jesus said that 'no one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money' (Matthew 6.24). Either God provides us with security and worth and self-esteem, or money and power

will. Jesus seems to suggest that there is no safe neutral zone. He personifies money, giving it a godlike character. Money wants to rule me, and it wants me in its service like a sovereign god. Those who have lots of money and power need self-awareness to remain masters and not mastered. Here's the conundrum of having money and power. Money and power will inspire the delusional believe that my weakness, which is objectivity, is actually my strength.

Those with power and money should enter into debates about race and justice with this kind of self-awareness. The power that race provides is described as white privilege and it is often associated with paternalism and being dismissive. In one church I helped, all the South African black staff members were of the opinion that the church had a race problem. But the senior white leadership instead of being open to conversation, simply dismissed them. It became clear to me that the senior leadership team had not given any real thought to the Bible's warnings about the effects of power. One of the white leaders said to a black leader who was explaining his experience of racial inequality that his experience was actually redefined by the secular books he was reading. The black leader stopped speaking and assumed the passive posture to listen as the white leader explained what he thought actually happened. Those with proximity to money and power have a truth discerning challenge that those on the peripheries are free from. This doesn't mean that poor people have an inherent natural ability to discern truth. But the poor do not face the same type of amplification of their self-interest caused by money and power. We should be mindful of the Bible's emphasis of the deceitfulness of wealth and power and not allow ourselves to be mastered by money and power but instead to use it for God's glory.

In the movie Lord of the Rings, Frodo Baggins along with every keeper of the ring learns that the ring is no inanimate dead object. The ring has a seductive and destructive force. The seductive power of commodities characterizes racism. What does the long history of conquest, land theft, slavery, apartheid and the contemporary commodification of human lives for financial gain reveal? Racism cannot be defined apart from the power it affords the perpetrators. Race is a normalized form of the 'pride of life' because its only function has been to provide economic and social benefits to so-called white people through the oppression of so-called black people. It is not only historically accurate but theologically true to conclude that race 'comes not from the Father but from the world'.

## A CLUSTER OF IDOLS

Idolatry is another way of conceptualizing the human predicament. We all have an internal bias towards worshiping someone or something other than God. The significance of this fundamental analysis is critical in dealing with human motivations. Because we have varied desires, we have multiple idols. We can even get stuck in a cycle of self-abasement between slave driving idols and comforting idols. Throughout the reign of King Saul, he oscillated between pride and insecurity; the worship of self and the worship of the approval of people. When he performed well, he worshipped himself (1 Samuel 15:12). But when he was outperformed or overwhelmed, jealousy and cowardice characterized his behaviour (1 Samuel 18:7-8). Swapping our idols provides the self-comforting illusion of progress which our self-righteous hearts crave. We could go from refuge in food to refuge in fitness. But if we fail the slave driving idol of fitness, we humbly return to the comforting idol of food. But then guilt and self-preservation might even send us back to our fitness idol which drives us until we give up yet again and return to food in a perpetual cycle of unhappiness.

Race provides people with social power. But the racial power idol can be accompanied by a fear of man idol, or a control idol, or an array of various idols. For example, the individual who worships race and has a fear of man idol will express their racism very differently to the individual who worships race and control. The one will initiate racially problematic behaviour, the other will follow. The one will make the joke, the other will laugh along even when they feel that a line has been crossed. The one will be head strong and reject any counsel about their racially problematic behaviour, the other may listen, even be apologetic but continue to acquiesce to the status quo. There's a relationship between racially problematic behaviours and the idols beneath them. Paternalism is rooted in the desire to control, oppression or retribution from power, ambivalence or greed from comfort and racial solidarity from the worship of approval<sup>61</sup>. Our prejudice commingles with our deep idols of control, power, comfort and approval to produce nuanced expressions of idolatry. The more we understand our particular idols the more success we will have in overcoming the particular ways in which our prejudice is expressed. Black people will have a different road of healing to white people. People with the idol of control will have a different road to those with the idol of approval. The road to healing starts by spotting our idols.

## 5.SPOTTING MY IDOLS

Consider a person stuck in rip tides, trying to swim back to shore. For the swimmer to progress, their efforts need to be opposite and greater than the force of the tide. An accurate estimation of the level of effort is based on the strength of the current. The person may be swimming but will not progress without first making an accurate appraisal of the strength of the tide. An underestimation would lead to discouragement. There's nothing worse than putting effort in, but feeling stuck. An overestimation would lead to feeling overwhelmed and giving up before even trying. Everything depends on an accurate appraisal of the tide.

Overestimating and underestimation could lead to staying stuck. A clue to the strength of the tide is found in thinking about the energy spent on creating and sustaining our racialized society. Another clue is found in considering how universal the racialization of our society. The tide of racism has affected the economy, the academy, Christianity and this is not only germane to South Africa but other parts of the world. Like the swimmer, it's possible that we will not progress without consistent, prioritized and sustained effort.

Another clue to help us assess the strength of the tide is to consider one's individual experience of racism. Here are some helpful questions to ask that could help you assess the tide that you're up against. How much diversity have I grown up with? How diverse was the teaching staff and learner body at my school? How diverse was the neighbourhood I grew up in? If I chose to live in a mono-ethnic neighbourhood as an adult, did I feel a sense of loss about the lack of diversity? How diverse was my family life? How normal was it to have people of colour in authority? How normal was it to have people of colour as friends rather than employees? Did my parents treat people of colour with less respect than white people? How much did I learn about racism? How much of an appetite do I have for books and discussions on race and justice? Was anything about the racialization of society new to me? Do I tend to read books that will stretch my knowledge or affirm what I already believe? How many theological books have I read by black authors and women? Do I have the power to protect myself from direct racism or from conversations about racism? Do I use this power to shield myself from discussions about race? How often do I engage in anti-racist actions? When I see racially problematic decisions or behaviour do I investigate or leave it to someone else? Do I feel afraid to break with the racial solidarity in my group? How much work have I put into learning about South African cultures and languages that are different to my own? How do conversations about changing the unjust systems in South Africa make me feel? How much proximity do I have to the poor? Do I pay my employees a living wage or the bare minimum? How often do I think about my race and its meaning? If I was a beneficiary of apartheid how have I made restitution? Have I considered what role restitution may have for my own spiritual growth? Have I changed much of my personality and accent to fit in? Have I changed

anything else to get ahead? Have I witnessed forced cultural assimilation and contributed to it?

In my experience this is what much of the tension between progressives boil down to; different appraisals of the tide. Few progressives need convincing that race is a problem and that something should be done about it. The argument is about the depth of the problem and the commitment needed for progress. Those who underestimate the tide will not only fail to make progress, but they will not be able to partner with those who have an accurate estimation of the tide. Certain voices will be vilified as they are deemed too radical or extreme. But the final clue is revealed in the progress that you are making. Those who make greater progress towards non-racialism have the more accurate assessment. Our opportunity to make progress then is found in partnering with people who are ahead of us, even if we don't agree with them, especially when we don't agree with them!

## 6. DISPLACING IDOLS

*If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.*

*1 John 2.15*

The contrasts between love for the world and love for God implies that they are mutually exclusive. The one displaces the other. In a negative sense the more we feed our idolatrous affections the greater damage is done to our spirituality. Human beings are constituted to love God or the world. There's nothing in between. Love for a counterfeit god subtly yet inevitably displaces love for the true and living God. When we read this verse, in light of John's concluding remark on idolatry, we can agree with C.H. Spurgeon that 'the love of the world is essentially idolatry'<sup>62</sup>. Or as C.K. Barrett observed that idolatry is 'evil primarily because it robbed the true God of glory due to him alone... but it was evil also because it meant that man, engaged in a spiritual act and directing his worship towards something other than the one true God, was brought into intimate relation with the lower, and evil, spiritual powers'<sup>63</sup>. But the opposite is also true.

Only the love of God is able to displace old affections and transform our desires. Knowledge about the need to change our racialized society is insufficient. Even the desire to uproot our idols through willpower is not enough. In Thomas Chalmers famous sermon *The Expulsive Power Of A New Affection* on this verse he said, 'there are two ways in which a practical moralist may attempt to displace from the human heart its love of the world - either by a demonstration of the world's vanity, so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon simply to withdraw its regards from an object that is not worthy of it; or, by setting forth another object, even God, as more worthy of its attachment, so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon not to resign an old affection, which shall have nothing to succeed it, but to exchange an old affection for a new one'<sup>64</sup>. Real change only happens through applying the grace of God to our shortcomings.

## HOPE

The story of Jonah is a striking example of how God's love displaced Jonah's idols. Throughout the story we see Jonah battling his prejudice towards the Ninevites and overcoming them. How else would we have an account that so accurately mirrors our own tumultuous journeys of transformation unless Jonah, post liberation from his idols, retold it? Jonah is sharing his own story of God's transforming love that displaced his stubborn prejudices. Jonah's healing was full of ups and downs, but he was set free! That's why we have the story.

Keeping a positive mindset about our society is invaluable to our progress. Having hope for change rooted in God's powerful love is not naïve. We may not be who we want to be immediately, but we know that we are not who we used to be. Our ability to vouch that God's love has radically transformed us is powerful. South Africans need to rediscover hope by the 'blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony'!

## FOCUS

We know from 2 Kings 14.25 that Jonah advised king Jeroboam in a manner unlike his contemporaries Amos and Hosea. Amos and Hosea spoke against the idolatry and subsequent injustice of Jeroboam and their nation. But Jonah's ministry to Jeroboam doesn't have any of these contours. Instead we find him encouraging Jeroboam to expand Israel's borders through military conquest. Jonah is filled with nationalistic pride and his ambitions are for Israel's prosperity. This is why Jonah refused to obey God and instead set sail for Tarshish.

But God sent a storm so violent that it threatened everyone's lives on the boat. Jonah's idolatry didn't allow him to repent though. Instead he chose to be thrown overboard. But God graciously sent a fish to swallow him and preserve his life. In chapter 2 Jonah has a turnaround moment because God forces him to focus on grace. Jonah shares his reflections inside the belly of the fish. He describes his predicament as someone who is physically, emotionally and spiritually stuck. He was physically left for dead, being dragged to the ocean floor by the powerful waves and currents (v.3), spiritually banished from the sight of God (v.4), barred in by seaweed and earth (v.5-6) and stuck in the belly of a fish. I think this is somewhat metaphorical because he was ultimately stuck in his idolatry. But in the belly of the fish that rescued him, he is moved by God's grace towards him. The reason he has clung onto worthless idols of Jewish nationalistic pride is because he had lost sight of God's covenant grace (v.8). But his racial pride has begun to be displaced by God's love for him. His mind and heart are quickened by grace as he remembered the Temple, the place of sacrifice for sin and forgiveness for sinners (v.7).

As Christians our focus is on the love of God through Jesus Christ who is our greater Jonah (Matthew 12.41). Jesus like Jonah was sent to rescue an undeserving people. Jesus unlike Jonah lovingly laid down his life for us. Like Jonah he too was hurled into a storm. But unlike

Jonah, it was not a storm of his making, but the storm of God's wrath due to our sin. Freedom from my own idols has often come when I've become aware that I am more stuck than I care to admit, but more loved than I'm able to comprehend. The only power strong enough to loosen my affections that have been nailed onto worldly pleasures is found in beholding Jesus nailed to the cross. In my experience moralism is rendered impotent in light of my powerful desires for evil. But beholding Jesus who like Jonah was physically, emotionally and spiritually stuck moves us. Jesus was stuck to the cross where he became sin who knew no sin so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God and get unstuck. Jesus willingly died by facing the storm that should have ours. This is the love of God that displaces the love of the world. Jonah's final statement which lead to him being freed is 'salvation comes from the Lord' (v.9). Once the penny drops in our souls that we have received unmerited acceptance by God through God's salvation, we are ready to be recommissioned. We may not all battle racism, but we've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God in some unique way. Grace levels the playing field because we are all equally unworthy of his salvation. Its grace that ultimately displaces all forms of pride.

## **PATIENCE**

God's love is able to displace our idols but it's often a process. John has in mind that we would grow in love for God not that we would instantaneously arrive at perfection. Despite Jonah's very real progress chapter 2 the book closes with the return of his prejudice.

*I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.*

*Jonah 4.2-3*

We grow in the love of God and we need to be patient with ourselves and with each other because healing is a process. Mistakes along the way do not mean that we are not making any progress. The love of God, like a stick of dynamite needs to go deep into the bedrock of our souls because our idols are deeply intertwined with our hearts. Some of us will experience more victory than others but we must be patient lest we are immobilized by the pace of change. Be patient with yourself. Be patient with others.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The Apostle John warned that we should not love the world, which he defines as evil earthly systems controlled by the power of the evil one (1 John 2.15-17). The reason we should not love the world, according to John's conclusion, is that it leads us to idolatry (1 John 5.21). Race has been created and used as an evil organized earthly system. It's been disseminated through society for centuries and no institution or individual has been left unscathed by it. Every aspect of society including the economy, the academy, and the Church has been racialized. Our racialized society elevates some South Africans through the oppression of others, and this has been normalized, internalized and legitimized. The reason race appeals to the human heart, is because of our sinful desires. John describes these desires as the lust of the flesh, the eyes and the pride of life (1 John 2.16). All human beings have sinful desires that are shaped by the reigning ideologies of their society which will lead to various forms of idolatry. We are motivated by the impact of our external society on our internal desires. But our idols can be displaced by the love of God. It's not an automatic process though. Racial idols in particular are characterized by deception and appeal to our self-centeredness. So, care should be taken to spot our idols through growing in self-awareness. If we underestimate the tide of the racialized society that has shaped us, we may continue in our deception. Overestimating the tide is equally as damaging and leads to discouragement and immobilization. Once we have discovered our idols, we can apply the resources of the gospel to displace them. The love of God in Jesus Christ is able to displace the clamouring desires within our hearts. The only thing equal to the infinite love of God, is its power to set us free to worship God. Approaching racial unity from this perspective means that we foreground a celebration of God's grace. It's grace that teaches us to say no to ungodliness (Titus 2.11). Unity then is essentially a journey of growing in our knowledge of the love of God. A lack of unity is an opportunity to see hidden false beliefs about ourselves and God. People may not be too thrilled to talk about race and disunity, but every Christian wants to grow in grace. Herein lies the Christian distinctive in this national discourse. It's the gospel of Jesus Christ alone that's able to displace idols and reconcile our nation. This is a life-giving process which will enlarge us as individuals and breath fresh hope into our quest for unity. It does require patience, however. But like the other idols of our hearts, they all eventually topple.

<sup>1</sup> G.K. Beale 2008. We become what we worship: A biblical theology of idolatry. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove. p.17

<sup>2</sup> T. Keller. 2009. Counterfeit Gods: The empty promises of money, sex, and power, and the only hope that matters. Riverhead Books: New York. p. xix

**3 CHRIS WRIGHT REFERENCES THESE TEXTS AS EXAMPLES 2 KINGS 19.17 -19, PS 115.4-8, HOS 8.4, 6, HAB 2.18-19, JER 10.3-5, 9, 14, ISA 40.18-20; 44.9-20. C. WRIGHT 2008. THE MISSION OF GOD: UNLOCKING THE BIBLE'S GRAND NARRATIVE. INTER VARSITY PRESS. P.147**

<sup>4</sup>D. Powlison. 1995. The Journal of Biblical Counseling, Volume 13: Number 2.

<https://cldibillings.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Idols-of-the-Heart-David-Powlison.pdf> p.1

<sup>5</sup>Similarly, the apostle Paul warns that 'Satan is the god of this world' (2 Corinthians 4.4). His forces are the 'elemental spiritual forces of the world' who seek to ruthlessly enslave (Galatians 4.3). Paul warns the church in Galatia that forgoing the grace of God in their doctrine and practice is enslavement to a demonic religious system of legalism. In their case, the idols are false kings who demand sacrifices instead of making them. The appeal that legalism holds is to self-worth, through self-justification, rooted in self-righteousness. It's the very opposite of the salvific gift of God which is by faith in Christ and through grace alone (Ephesians 2.8). A similar warning is issued in St. Paul's letter to the Colossians and the Corinthians. Paul warns the Colossians against the 'relation between the demonic powers and the idolatrous absolutizing of a manmade system' in 2.15-16. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 10.20 Paul cautions the church against idolatry which redirects worship from God to demons.

<sup>6</sup>D.L. Akin 2019. 1, 2, 3 John, vol. 38, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001). Exported from Logos Bible Software, 1:09 AM July 1. p.1

<sup>7</sup>R. Padilla 2013. Mission between the times: Essays on the Kingdom. Langham Monographs: Cumbria. p.73

<sup>8</sup>J.R.W. Stott 1988. The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press) Exported from Logos Bible Software, 1:10 AM July 1, 2019. p.1

<sup>9</sup>Derek Kidner notes other examples of the solidarity between the generations in Exodus 20.5-6; 1 Kings 11.12; 2 Kings 19.34. D. Kidner 2003. The Bible Speaks Today: Commentary on Jeremiah. p.67-68.

<sup>10</sup>G.K. Beale notes the phrase 'he walked in the way of Jeroboam' or that Kings are referenced as imitating the 'sin of Jeroboam' appears often (1 Kings 13.34; 14.16; 15.30, 34; 16.2, 19, 26; 22.52; 2 Kings 3.3; 10.29, 31; 13.2, 6, 11; 14.24; 15.9, 18, 24, 28; 17.21; 23.15) (2008 95)

<sup>11</sup>C. Wright 2008. The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's grand narrative. Inter Varsity Press. p.156

<sup>12</sup>T. Keller. 2009. Counterfeit Gods: The empty promises of money, sex, and power, and the only hope that matters. Riverhead Books: New York. p.166-167

<sup>13</sup>Sociologist and historians are in agreement see Hirschman 2004 392; DiAngelo 2018 17; Tisby 2019 25-39.

C. Hirschman. 2004. "The Origins and Demise of the Concept of Race." Population and Development Review, vol. 30, no. 3, [www.jstor.org/stable/3401408](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3401408). (accessed 24 May 2019)

J. Tisby 2019. The Colour of Compromise: The truth about the American Church's complicity in racism. Zondervan: Grand Rapids.

R. DiAngelo 2018. White Fragility: Why its so hard for white people to talk about racism. Beacon Press: Boston

<sup>14</sup>It is helpful to separate race (which is a social construct) from ethnicity (which is God ordained). In John's vision of the heaven he saw 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation (ethnos), tribe, people and language' (Revelation 7.9). Ethnic distinctives are maintained in heaven. Ethnicity ought to be celebrated. These distinctives are not results of the fall but aspects of the Imago Dei. It is also helpful to see the distinctions and overlap between race and culture. Race is an ideological power structure that influences cultures, yet can be seen as separate from culture. Some aspects of culture are good and will be retained

in heaven. To be sure however, not every aspect of culture is good, some are morally neutral, and others are bad, even demonic.

<sup>15</sup> M.O. Emerson & C. Smith. 2000. *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. Oxford University Press: New York. p.7

<sup>16</sup> T. Allen & A. Thomas 2000. *Poverty and development into the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Oxford University Press: Oxford. p.245

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Allen p.247

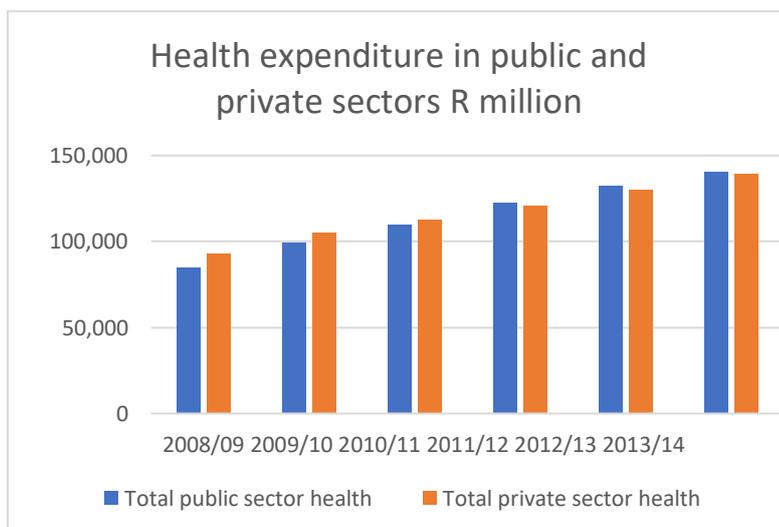
<sup>20</sup> M. Mbeki 2009. *Architects of poverty: Why African capitalism needs changing*. Picador Africa: Johannesburg. p.63-100

<sup>21</sup> T. Piketty 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Massachusetts. p.39-41

<sup>22</sup> 'The decision to move to the tactical phase of the operation to disperse and disarm the mineworkers was taken at an extraordinary meeting of the police national management forum (NMF) and the report refers to evidence from an expert that such a decision would not have been taken without "guidance of the executive". "If guidance of the executive played a role, then it is probable that such guidance was conveyed to the NMF by Minister Mthethwa," it reads. "The commission wishes to emphasise that it is not finding that such 'guidance' was given. It is, however, unable in the light of what has been said above to find positively in Minister Mthethwa's favour on the point." No action was recommended against Mthethwa'.

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-06-26-marikana-report-key-findings-and-recommendations/> [accessed 27 August 2019]

<sup>23</sup> The graph below depicts the amount per year spent on public and private health sector. These stats are taken from Budget Review 2012 National Treasury Republic of South Africa p.82 <http://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/2012/review/FullReview.pdf> [accessed on 14 August 2019]



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<sup>53</sup> C. Edmonson 2019 Understanding Unconscious Bias: Seeing God and God's Image Bearers More Clearly. Formed for Justice conference.

[https://www.redeemer.com/r/formation/formation\\_conference](https://www.redeemer.com/r/formation/formation_conference)

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