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ETHNICITY TRIBALIS AND RACIS A GLO AL CHALLENGE FOR THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH AND ITS MISSION

Introduction

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

Ethnic and racial differences are not the problem. Prejudice and racism inject our differences with the sinful notion that our difference leads to superiority.

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

Tribalism

“Tribalism is the attitude and practice of harboring such a strong feeling of loyalty or bonds to one’s tribe that one excludes or even demonizes those ‘oth-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tribalism and Racism as a Sin Problem

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

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

You said in your heart, "I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself I

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

Another writer, Julian Go (2004), agrees:

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

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

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

Europeans created Hutu-Tutsi tensions if not the categories themselves. The ideological roots of Rwanda's postcolonial ethnic bloodletting stemmed not from primordial ethnic hatreds but from colonial manipulations between 1900 and 1960. Second, the key factor in this colonial manipulation was the Catholic missionaries' racializing of the Hutu-Tutsi distinction. In turning flexible social categories into immutable racial identities, Rwanda's Catholic leaders ensured

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

How Do Tribalism and Racism Affect the Church?

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

Tribalism creates discord among members of the same congregation, community and society. This malaise is spiritually, emotionally and socially crippling religious communities, hence making them unspiritual, unhappy, unloving and unfruitful, leave alone making them lead unfulfilled lives in the Church. Such people’s originality and originality of religious life, at, in, and through the church, is destroyed.

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

How Can the Church Respond to Tribalism and Racism?

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

The disciples of Jesus are called in the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome any divisions that these characteristics may have brought within their own particular cultures before they became Christians. Christians are therefore challenged to experience and live out the much deeper unity . . . through baptism. . . . To be a Christian is to belong and live out the richness of one’s ethnic origin, culture, education, etc., and yet to experience at the same time an even deeper unity with those of other races and cultures, because we have been called to be disciples of Jesus Christ together. (pp. 115-116)

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

Conclusion

Trials and tribulations have always been a part of the Christian life. The only way to overcome them is by relying on the power of God through the Gospel. The church must be cleansed from human prejudice, as it was for the early Christians. This is only possible through the power of God, through the Gospel. The church must be cleansed from human prejudice, as it was for the early Christians. This is only possible through the power of God, through the Gospel. The church must be cleansed from human prejudice, as it was for the early Christians. This is only possible through the power of God, through the Gospel.

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