



WORD & WORLD
RACE AND JUSTICE
ISSUE 9 · JUNE 2021 / FEBRUARY 2022

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RACE AND JUSTICE

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EDITOR'S NOTE: JUNE 2021

"The world is watching us. If the church is not willing to engage deeply and honestly on these pressing questions, we risk slipping further into irrelevance." – Paula Fuller

A year ago, George Floyd lost his life at the hands of an unjust system, sparking a worldwide outcry for change. As the church in the United States continues to grapple with the consequences, the basic questions of justice raised by Floyd's murder find local echoes in every context of IFES ministry worldwide, as Christians everywhere face other deeply rooted structures of racial injustice.

In this issue of World & World, **Paula Fuller**, the Executive Vice President of People and Culture at InterVarsity USA, reflects on persistent racial divides in the American church and how students should be shaped to be agents of reconciliation. **N.T. Wright**, author and theologian, also shares his perspective on the church as God's worldwide family, and how "racism is a failure of vocation." We also look back at our series of Conexión articles from the past year, with stories of students across IFES regions who are choosing to confront and address injustice in their own contexts.

This issue features illustrations from Vancouver-based artist **Brian Liu**. Brian was born and raised in Hong Kong, and focused his time on creative pursuits as a means to understand and to be understood after moving to Canada in 1993. He currently works as a brand and communication designer and painter, and hopes to use creativity and empathy to live life helping those who are often unheard and misunderstood. Regarding his work for this issue, he says,

Racism is not an easy subject to talk about. At times it may seem easier to stay away from people who are different than us and label them as dangerous or to view their ways as wrong. But this will only lead us to fear and anger. As the body of Christ, we must lead the charge to break these barriers and take down the walls we build within our hearts and our churches.

We are also pleased to announce the appointment of our new editor and Theological Advisory Group chair, **Femi Adeleye**. Femi currently serves as Executive Director for the Institute of Christian Impact, an organization that exists to mentor and equip leaders to meet the needs and challenges of the growing church in Africa, but he will be well-known to many of you thanks to his previous leadership roles within IFES. We are delighted to have him working with IFES again as our editor, and we trust that we will all be enriched in future issues by his deep wisdom and experience.

Join us as we present an issue in which we explore the role of the church—and of students—in addressing these painful and urgent challenges.



Tim Adams, IFES General Secretary

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EDITOR'S UPDATE

Further perspectives on race and justice: February 2022

'If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.'

DESMOND MPIOLO TUTU

When Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Mpilo Tutu died at the end of 2021 aged 90, one of the things most emphasised at his funeral was his passion for racial reconciliation and justice. Delivering the eulogy, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa said Tutu was 'a man of extraordinary intellect, integrity and invincibility against the forces of apartheid', nevertheless being 'also tender and vulnerable in his compassion for those who had suffered oppression, injustice and violence under apartheid, and oppressed and downtrodden people around the world.' He added that 'the most fitting tribute we can pay to him is to take up the cause of social justice for which he tirelessly campaigned throughout his life.'

The world Tutu left behind is still ravaged by a pandemic of multifaceted dividing walls of discrimination and injustice, often along ethnic and racial lines. The world's response to Covid-19 has been hampered by the geopolitics of vaccine production and distribution, and the crisis of the pandemic has overshadowed the ever-present realities of injustice against vulnerable people. Ethnic and racial stereotyping, among other forms of injustice, continue to be manifest in global food and trade systems, and exploitative pharmaceutical industries, for instance. There have been outcries against what some refer to as inequity in medical care, and food apartheid. Christians are not immune to these realities. Nor are our students, graduates or staff workers. Our challenge is what our response will be, both locally and globally.

Launched in June 2021, Issue 9 of *Word & World* challenged us on various aspects of race, justice and injustice and how to engage with or respond to them. The articles by Paula Fuller, N.T. Wright, and Bethany Peevy generated enough conversation to prompt us to follow up with further articles on the same subject. Hence, we offer more perspectives, from some other contexts.

Jasmine Foo, former staff worker from FES Singapore and Assistant Director in Strategic Planning & Training with State Courts of Singapore, is now undertaking doctoral research in Biblical Studies at King's College London. She brings us a perspective on 'Translating Vision into Reality: Normalizing the Biblical Image of Racial Relations' through an Asian lens.

Eleasah Phoenix Louis, a UK-based emerging theologian and consultant with various church and para-church organisations, presents us with her perspectives on preservation and liberation in relation to race and justice issues.

Furthermore **Alejandra Ortiz**, a member of IFES staff in Latin America, brings us perspective from her region on how to live out the epistle of James in contexts of inequality.

I commend these articles to you, not only for reflection but for conversation and action, as we engage God's world and ours with his Word.

Femi B Adeleye
Editor, *Word & World*



LEFT BEHIND? JUSTICE AND THE CHURCH AFTER GEORGE FLOYD

Paula Fuller

In August 2014, the shooting death of Michael Brown, a young, unarmed Black man, by a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, sparked a new level of national discourse in the United States on race, civil rights, and systemic injustice.

So began a [Lausanne Global Analysis](#) that I wrote five years ago. In it I highlighted some of the American church's response—and non-response—to a wave of high-profile killings of unarmed Black men and women. I explored the significance of systemic injustice to global mission and concluded with a call for Christians, individually and corporately, to pursue practical acts of restorative justice. The article was published a few months after a massacre by a white nationalist at a Black church in Charleston SC. This was a moment in which the church could have called for a reckoning on the issue of race and the need for justice on the road to reconciliation. Instead its racial divisions and differences were brought into sharper focus.

2020 was punctuated by another series of high-profile killings. There was a nightmarishly familiar feel to the events of last year: another death, another media wave, and another round of protests. Looking back at that Lausanne piece, it is tempting to think that little has changed, that we are just going in circles, enduring another iteration of atrocity, outcry, attention, and inaction.

SUCH A TIME AS THIS

George Floyd's killing by Officer Derek Chauvin in May 2020 catalyzed the fury, collective pain, and pressures of Black life in the United States. His death came on the heels of two other national stories: the horrific killings of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arberry. The world witnessed massive demonstrations of primarily young adults, in all 50 states, in major cities, suburbs, and rural communities.

Protest amidst the Covid-19 pandemic was noteworthy for two reasons. First, the willingness of protestors to risk catching and spreading Covid-19 reflected the dire need to take a stand against racial injustice. Second, the pandemic further exposed the impact of systemic injustice affecting Black and Brown people: the prevalence of pre-existing medical conditions and lack of access to health care tied to racism and poverty, coupled with higher representation in "essential worker" roles, which carried greater risks of infection and death from Covid-19.

The cumulative impact of these killings, along with the disproportionate deaths of Black and Brown people from Covid-19, pushed me and many other Black folks beyond the customary feelings of racial fatigue into new spaces of racial trauma. At the same time, new segments of the American population awakened to the realities of systemic injustice and white supremacy. As the video of George Floyd's killing went viral, millions were transfixed and horrified by the 8 minutes and 46 seconds that Officer Chauvin knelt on George Floyd's neck.

The response internationally to the Floyd video mirrored what was happening in the streets of Minneapolis and other US cities. People all over the world, already connected in a unique way because of the global battle against Covid-19, joined in affirming the value and dignity of Black lives, demanding policing reform and justice for George Floyd, Ahmaud Arberry and Breonna Taylor. Crowds turned out during a global pandemic, literally risking their lives, to protest events happening in another country.

Historically, the United States has played the role of calling out injustices in other countries and affirming human rights for those living under oppressive conditions. In this instance, the tables turned. America was being challenged to live up to its ideals of life, liberty, and justice for all. These world-wide protests could not have been scripted or orchestrated by an individual or single group. They were a powerful symbol of solidarity signaling that the time for change had come.

Unlike other nationally profiled killings, George Floyd's death has resulted in police reform in cities and states across the country. By June 2020, at least 23 cities completely or partially banned the use of chokeholds, carotid restraints, or both by police.¹ Other policing reforms include duty to intervene when fellow police officers exert excessive force, reductions in police funding with reallocation for youth programs or other community services, increasing transparency, and better training and education.

There is once again a generation in American society that has grown tired of racial injustice. Sustained protests in 2020 have increased awareness of long-standing racial disparities in American society. The government, corporations, universities, and other public institutions have responded, committing funding, creating policies, and developing economic initiatives to address racial injustices. The church has primarily interpreted these events through political and cultural lenses, failing to acknowledge the spiritual significance of systemic injustice or engage in biblical responses. While holding, at best, to familiar historical patterns of response – lament, apologies, and symbolic repentance—the church has been left behind. Its racial divisions have hardened.

¹ "Cities and states across the US announce police reform following demands for change", Karina Zaiets, Janie Haseman, and Jennifer Borresen, USA Today, June 19, 2020.

RECONCILIATION, EXHAUSTION, AND LIBERATION

Prior to 2015, racial reconciliation was a prominent theme at evangelical conferences. Multi-racial congregations, particularly mega-churches, were seeing more Black congregants in their churches. “In 2012, according to a report from the National Congregation Study, more than two-thirds of those attending white-majority churches were worshipping alongside at least some black congregants, a notable increase since a similar survey in 1998. This was more likely to be the case in evangelical churches than in mainline Protestant churches, and more likely in larger ones than in smaller ones.”²

Within American evangelicalism in the last few years, racial reconciliation has become “a road less travelled.” The Trump presidency stoked racial division and white nationalism. For many Black Christians in white evangelical spaces, the endorsement of Donald Trump in 2016 by 81% of white Evangelical voters created a painful breach of trust, which contributed to an exodus of Black members from white evangelical ministries. Michael Emerson, one of the co-authors of *Divided by Faith*, noted, “The election itself was the single most harmful event to the whole movement of reconciliation in at least the past 30 years.”³

That election was one of the starkest visible expressions of the deep differences in understanding between white and Black Christians on matters of race. Subsequent research further elucidated the disconnect between Black and white Christians about race in America. The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) in 2018 examined the perspectives among white Christians (including evangelicals, mainline Protestants and Catholics) compared to whites who are religiously unaffiliated. These trends generally persist even in the wake of the recent protests for racial justice.⁴ The survey revealed:

- White Christians are more likely than whites who are religiously unaffiliated to deny the existence of structural racism.
- White Christians are nearly twice as likely as religiously unaffiliated whites to say the killings of Black men by police are isolated incidents rather than part of a pattern of how police treat African Americans.
- White Christians are about 30 percentage points more likely to say monuments to Confederate soldiers are symbols of Southern pride rather than symbols of racism.
- White Christians are also about 20 percentage points more likely to disagree with this statement: “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class.”

Similarly, in mid-2019, Barna undertook a study with the Racial Justice and Unity Center which highlighted “stark racial contrasts” in perspectives between Black and white American Christians:

- Only two in five white practicing Christians (38%) believe the U.S. has a race problem. This percentage more than doubles, however, among Black practicing Christians (78%).
- Three-quarters of Black practicing Christians (75%) at least somewhat agree that the U.S. has a history of oppressing minorities, while white practicing Christians are less likely to do so (42%).
- Three in five white practicing Christians (61%) take an individualized approach to matters of race, saying these issues largely stem from one’s own beliefs and prejudices causing them to treat people of other races poorly. Meanwhile, two-thirds of Black practicing

² “A Quiet Exodus: Why Black Worshipers Are Leaving White Evangelical Churches”, [Campbell Robertson](#), New York Times, March 9, 2018.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Racism among white Christians is higher than among the nonreligious. That’s no coincidence. Robert P. Jones, THINK, July 27, 2020.

Christians (66%) agree that racial discrimination is historically built into our society and institutions.

- Seven in 10 Black practicing Christians (70%) report being motivated to address racial injustice. Only about one-third of white practicing Christians (35%) says the same.

The disparity in perspectives underscores why there would be frustration in multiracial settings in which Black Christians want a higher level of engagement around issues of systemic racism, while white leaders and congregants would be less likely to acknowledge a problem with racial injustice or have the motivation to address it.⁵ The result has been dissonance and pain, which has taken a toll on the Black Christian community.

The exodus of Black churchgoers from white ministries was described in a 2018 New York Times article as “mostly quiet, more in fatigue and heartbreak than outrage.” For those who have stayed, Christian counsellors have spoken about the psychological toll of remaining in multiracial churches. Others have spoken about the necessity of spending dedicated time with those who have shared experiences, for the purpose of renewal, so Black members can return to multiracial spaces energized and ready to engage across racial differences.⁶

In the post-George Floyd era, the focus has shifted from dialogue on racial reconciliation and efforts to bring together congregations from different racial groups to action that acknowledges systemic injustice and meaningfully increases the equity and inclusion of Black people and other communities of color impacted by racism. For veteran leaders who continue to pursue the ministry of reconciliation, the journey must begin with engaging racial injustice. Brenda Salter-McNeil, an African American woman preacher, author, and professor who has taught, studied, and practiced the work of racial reconciliation for decades, writes,

*“Now more than ever, those who care about the reconciliation command of the cross must speak up and out about injustice and must go about the work of dismantling the structures of this injustice and combating the harmful, even deadly result of this country’s unchecked legacy of systemic inequality and discrimination. The church must talk about justice. I **must** talk about justice. The time is now.”⁷*

Similarly, Chris Rice, Director of the Mennonite Central Committee United Nations Office in New York City and former cofounding Director of the Duke Divinity School Center for Reconciliation, writes,

“Like the comfortable religious leaders in Jesus’ Good Samaritan story, we dare not pass quickly by the murdered body of George Floyd on the other side of the Jericho road. As I wrote elsewhere, you cannot reconcile with someone who has a foot on your neck. We dare not talk about reconciliation without getting feet off

⁵ Black Practicing Christians are Twice as Likely as Their White Peers to See a Race Problem, Barna Research, Articles in Culture and Media in Faith & Christianity, June 17, 2020.

⁶ The Downside of Integration for Black Christians, Jemar Tisby, The Witness, August 21, 2017.

⁷ *Becoming Brave: Finding The Courage to Pursue Racial Justice Now*, Brenda Salter-McNeil, Brazos Press, 2020, p. 20.

*necks. For everything there is a season. In the spirit of Luke 4 and of Amos, this is the season to take down racial disparities. This is the season of liberation.*⁸

CREDIBILITY, COURAGE, AND CHANGE

In that Lausanne piece five years ago, I asked: will the church address systemic injustice on the road to reconciliation? Despite the rich Biblical language commissioning the church as an agent and embodiment of racial justice, the hard truth is that throughout history religion has more often been used to justify division and oppression.

Nonetheless, the call remains. And given the powerful role that students have often had in driving social change in both American and broader global history, we who are engaged in student ministry face a particular responsibility. The students to whom we minister, and the students whom we hope to reach, have tremendous potential as agents of transformation, and the world needs that now. Furthermore, what they learn as students will inevitably shape how they live out their vocations long after they leave campus. How we shape their understanding of the gospel's approach to equity, inclusion, and attention to the marginalized will have lifelong impact on whose voices they hear, whose problems they see, and who they welcome to every dinner table and conference table as they continue in their adult discipleship.

In addition, the world is watching us. If the church is not willing to engage deeply and honestly on these pressing questions, we risk slipping further into irrelevance. We have already lost so much credibility. The church continues to hemorrhage young people, and on matters of racial justice, few are looking to the church or to older generations to lead.

As we enter 2021, we are not merely going in circles on questions of racial justice in the United States. In multiple sectors of society—government, education, philanthropy, the arts—we are seeing efforts by individuals and institutions to understand and address long-standing systemic discrimination. The American church's failure to grapple with a heritage of racism and the consequent inherited inequalities hurts us spiritually, and it destroys our credibility as witnesses before a student generation aching for real change.

As our global society continues to navigate a Covid-19 pandemic, we as individuals, families, institutions, and countries are being forced to embrace change. We've survived major disruptions to life as we know it and finding our "next normal" will require courage, innovation, creativity, and resourcefulness. Within InterVarsity USA, we have embraced a longing for revival and are looking to God to perceive the "new thing" that is unfolding in faculty and student ministry. As I look to the future, one of my greatest sources of hope is this generation of young adults who have already demonstrated a willingness to stand up against systemic injustice, demonstrating courage, resilience, and a commitment to change. As we develop disciples, groom leaders, and plant new student movements, we have the privilege and opportunity to invest in those individuals who will build equitable new systems and structures that render our old ones irrelevant.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paula Fuller is InterVarsity's Executive Vice President of People and Culture. She joined the staff of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in 2005, after serving as a volunteer for seven years. Paula has served in full-time vocational ministry since 1996, first as the Director of Outreach and Community Development at Abundant Life Christian Fellowship in Menlo Park, CA and also as an Associate Pastor. Prior to joining the ministry of Abundant Life Fellowship, Paula worked in the banking and telecommunications industries in the areas of risk management, business development, marketing and strategy. Paula and her husband Philip live in California.

⁸ Racism in America, Post-George Floyd, RECONCILERS with Chris Rice, August 4, 2020.



UNDERMINING RACISM

N.T. Wright

RACISM AND THE VOCATION OF THE CHURCH

As I contemplate the horror both of George Floyd's callous murder and of the rage of angry mobs in America and elsewhere, I am reminded of the day when Martin Luther King was assassinated in April 1968. I was in Toronto at the time, and the day after the killing I stood with tens of thousands of people in a big downtown square singing, '*We shall overcome*'. This had become the anthem of those who, like King, desperately wanted to end racial discrimination peacefully. We all really believed that King's death would stir consciences and that lasting change would come. Half a century later, it seems we were wrong. Unfortunately, grand resolutions don't always lead to deep change.

So how do we read the Bible at this time, and how do we put it into practice? Let me be blunt: it is not enough merely to say that "racism is sinful and we must get rid of it". What we call 'racism' is not simply a failure to obey a moral standard, like loving our neighbours as ourselves. Racism is a failure of vocation.

The church of the anointed Jesus was designed from the start to be a worldwide family: God's new model of humanity. In our own generation, the church has struggled to reimagine something

that was always in the Christian DNA but which we have all but forgotten. The point of being part of Jesus' people was never that we as individuals could get to heaven; the point was that we are supposed to be – in our personal and corporate lives – small working models of the ultimate new creation which God has promised and has launched decisively in raising Jesus from the dead. That has always been our glorious vocation.

Rejecting racism and embracing the diversity of Jesus' family ought to be as obvious as praying the Lord's prayer, celebrating the Eucharist or reading the four gospels. It isn't just an extra rule that we're supposed to keep. It is fundamental to who we are. The irony of the present situation is this: the churches have to a great extent forgotten that this was their vocation and that racism was a denial of it. The phrase 'Christian racist' ought to be heard as a devastating oxymoron.

THE ORIGINAL VISION OF THE UNITED CHURCH: SMALL WORKING MODELS OF THE NEW CREATION

In Colossians 3:11, the apostle Paul insists that in the Jesus-following family there is neither Jew nor Greek, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free. That's what it means to put on the new humanity which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the Creator.

This dream was regularly ignored in Western churches in the Modern period. But it was then picked up on in the secular enlightenment. Today's secular vision of a multicultural global society is at its best a Christian ideal detached from its Christian foundation. When Pope Benedict addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations in April 2008¹, he suggested that the human rights discourse has become a way of trying to get the fruits of the Judeo-Christian tradition while detaching itself from the roots. If you do that, your discourse will collapse into a shrill shouting match of competing special interests. This is where we find ourselves now, with one side of the church saying the others are racists and the other side saying the others are communists. We need to dig down deeper, below the shrill moralism, to our foundational vocation to be the new model of human life.

So what is this 'new humanity' vocation, and how have we drifted so far away from it that we now see it only as a detached ethical imperative? Paul's vision of the church shines out in every letter he writes, perhaps particularly in Ephesians. Actually, his famous doctrine of 'Justification by faith' is expounded only in two letters – Romans and Galatians – and mentioned briefly in the odd verse here and there elsewhere, but his vision of the united church across all the traditional boundary lines, particularly the ethnic ones (with 'Jew and Greek' as the central paradigm) is laid out emphatically in every single letter. Even in little Philemon, where the 'slave or free' point is pushed home with powerful pastoral gentleness. The theological and practical climax of Romans 14 and 15 is precisely what we might call fellowship by faith, 'koinonia'. It is the fleshing out of justification by faith.

Paul insists on the radical mutual welcome that must take place between Jesus' followers of different ethnic backgrounds and the different cultural practices that go with those backgrounds. The whole point of Romans 15:6 is that you may *'with one heart and voice glorify the God and father of our Lord Jesus, the anointed One'*. This is the large-scale application of the point Paul makes sharply in Galatians 2. Paul insists to Peter that uncircumcised Gentiles who have come to faith in Jesus are equal members of Jesus' people along with believing Jews. They don't need to be circumcised since their previous status as Gentile sinners has been erased by Jesus' death, which rescues all his people from the present evil age.

But it's in Ephesians where the picture is spelt out most fully. In chapter 1, Paul declares that God's purpose was to sum up all things in heaven and on earth in the Messiah. This stands solidly over against the normal Western Christian assumption that God's purpose is to snatch believers away from earth so that they can live with him in heaven – something the New Testament never says. The last scene in the Bible (Rev. 21-22) is not about saved souls going up to heaven, it's the new

Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth. God's plan was always to renew the whole creation (Romans 8; 1 Cor. 15), and for God himself to come and dwell with humans in that new world.

So the church is not simply a loose association of people who have had similar spiritual experiences and get together from time to time to encourage one another as they escape the world and look forward to going off somewhere else. The church is the new family of Jesus-followers: those who have died to their old spiritual allegiances and discovered their new identity as Messiah people. Their present flesh-and-blood existence as this extraordinary, even miraculous single family is a sign and foretaste of God's purpose for the whole world. This family in fact is called to be a worship-based, spiritually renewed, multi-ethnic, gender-blind in leadership, polychrome, mutually supportive, outward facing, culturally creative, socially responsible, fictive kinship group. A good brief definition of the church!

So, living in this way is not an optional extra for the followers of Jesus, a kind of added hobby for those who want something different on top of their regular Bible studies or prayer meetings. It is part of the deal.

Now all this is obvious in the New Testament and in early Christianity as a whole, and it chimes completely with Jesus' own emphasis, particularly his high priestly prayer in John 17, that all might be one so that the world might believe. Jesus is implying that if we fail here, we are handing to unbelievers good grounds for denying that he had been sent by God.

The beauty of Pentecost is not the collapse of all languages into one hegemonic tongue, but rather the multiple flowings of the Spirit into all the world creating a single polychrome, polyglot family. Of course, the outworking of this would not always be straightforward: ethnic and linguistic distinctions were already a point of tension in the early church. We must address these with wise and decisive action to preserve continued unity to be the advanced guard of God's new creation.

WHY DID WE GET IT SO WRONG?

So how did we get it so wrong? Why have some of the best educated Christian groups in the world flouted this vision for a polychrome unity, and regard anyone who argues for it as a dangerous subversive? How did we slide into this without even noticing?

No doubt there are many reasons, but I want to highlight two. Firstly, there is the matter of the unintended consequences of right and proper actions. One of the great achievements of the Protestant Reformation was to translate the Scriptures into people's own language so that ordinary Christians could read the Bible for themselves. Along the way, however, it led to ethnically based churches and communities who are no longer worshipping God together across linguistic and ethnic boundaries. When this acceptance of division became the new norm, we even gave it a fancy name: denomination, which sounds quite respectable, like '*justification*' or '*sanctification*', and so it was easy for visibly ethnic divisions to fit into this pattern. Now the whole Protestant project has split into so many fragments that we can't keep track of them all. Nobody seems to have noticed that despite their regular appeal to Scripture, they were ignoring one of Scripture's central injunctions. The racism that is both casual and institutional that we so deplore today is but one outworking of the much deeper failure of Western Protestantism. At the very point where the church should have been a shining light of polychrome unity, the churches themselves were every bit as compromised as the surrounding culture.

This splitting into different ethnic groups was an accidental and unintended consequence of something good that was going on, namely the communication of Scripture and liturgy in local languages. But the second factor we have to note is deeper and I think more disastrous: the almost universal assumption in Western churches that the whole point of Christianity was to go to heaven when we die, so that how things are organised in church life becomes essentially secondary. This is the almost total victory of Platonism, and a denial of the full biblical vision of the church. The trouble is that the great Pauline emphasis on grace and faith rather than works of the law has been heard, over and over again, within a Platonic echo-chamber. Many Protestants, including many

evangelicals, have come to believe implicitly that God is more interested in the non-material world, and the invisible inner life of the individual, than in the material world and the actual and visible life of the church and that has left the door open for the poison of racism to creep in unnoticed. In our present day, many scholars (myself included) have been insisting that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith apart from works of the Jewish law, was both about '*ultimate salvation in the new creation*' (not a 'going to heaven' salvation) and about the '*coming together of Jews and Gentiles into the single family of Abraham*', and that these two belonged tightly together.

Paul would have been horrified by our modern distortions. If you read Romans 14 and 15, you will notice that the mutual welcome across ethnic and cultural boundaries is not a mere distant implication of the gospel; it is the physical, tangible, visible sign of justification by faith itself. In today's increasingly polychrome world, it simply won't do to shelter inside look-alike fellowships. Read Ephesians 3 or Colossians 3 again – how impoverished we have become in our self-enclosed enclaves.

It is important for us to understand why racism has emerged in the forms it has, and how the biblical gospel of Jesus, when allowed free rein, radically undermines it. As well as the two reasons highlighted above, it's important to be aware of the influence of modernism and postmodernism on this phenomenon. Enlightenment modernism has wanted to eliminate racism because of its standpoint that all people should be identical, like a homogeneous 'solidarity'. Postmodernism has wanted to eliminate racism because all people are seen to be different and should be valued and respected as such. Therefore, both modernity and postmodernity have wanted to eliminate racism for opposite reasons, but the ideological confusion seems to fuel the anger rather than checking it, and those who get hurt are often the most vulnerable. The Enlightenment secular project has tried to attain this but without the means to do so, like a moth trying to fly to the moon. Christians ought to have seen racism coming and denounced it at an early stage.

HOW DO WE RESPOND?

In conclusion, I would like to offer three urgent words for this difficult time. Firstly, we need to recognise that the Pauline vision of the church offers what no earthly institution can achieve: the differentiated unity in which multiple human differences, refracted through the prism of new life in the anointed Jesus, form the coherent unity of the body of Christ with its many members. This vision of the church is both a gift and a calling for us to live up to.

Secondly, the present crisis ought to drive a new wave of genuine and urgent ecumenical effort, especially where ethnic difference is visible and obvious. I know how hard this is, but the gospel and Scripture leave us no choice. Church leaders and ministers need to get together across traditional boundaries, get to know one another, pray together, read Scripture together, swap pulpits and so on.

Thirdly, what we need right now, following the necessary recognition of, and repentance for, past evil, is a glorious amnesty of mutual forgiveness. As I said earlier, it won't do simply to wring our hands over racism and say how wicked it is. We need to understand why it has emerged in the form it has, and how the biblical gospel of Jesus in the construction of the family of Jesus-followers radically undermines it. We have failed to live out our calling in the gospel by not living in this differentiated unity, and for this we must repent. This will involve a clear-eyed recognition of the evil that is happening, and a tear-filled repentance both for that evil and for the resentment which it has caused, followed by forgiveness: wiping the slate clean. The gospel of Jesus can pave the way to a fresh start, beginning with the crucified and risen Jesus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

N.T. Wright has held a variety of both academic and chaplaincy posts at Oxford, Cambridge, and McGill University, Montreal. He was Canon of Westminster in 2000, before serving as Bishop of Durham between 2003-2010. He is currently Research Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Early Christianity at St Mary's College in the University of St Andrews and Senior Research Fellow at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.



LET JUSTICE ROLL

Building bridges, pursuing justice

Bethany Peevy

Listening. It is a vital skill, but frustratingly difficult to maintain when the world seems to shout. Right now young Christians worldwide face fracturing social systems, deeply embedded wounds, calls for justice and vastly differing opinions on how to handle it. It is nothing new and it is inescapable – everywhere you turn there are mounting issues that feel overwhelming. In 2020 in the USA, it became impossible to disregard a system of racism when the death of George Floyd rocked the world. Not long after that time we [launched](#) a series of articles diving into the topic of injustice. We wanted to explore the issues students are facing in multiple contexts, recognizing that injustice comes in many ugly shapes and forms. We also acknowledged the fact that many of these issues are nuanced or involve multiple perspectives, making it crucial for Christians to be slow to speak and quick to listen.

As we engaged in these issues, we did not claim to have all the answers, but encouraged students to be bridges in their societies, not staying silent, but becoming agents of understanding, fostering healthy dialogues and inviting their peers into redemptive action. We take a look here at this journey through social issues in society and ministry and invite you to revisit these articles which remain relevant a year later.

MAKING SPACE

“We want to be seen completely for who we are, and our culture and heritage and skin tone are all part of that.”

As Christians, we have so much to learn from each other. That is what Bandile discovered when he moved from South Africa to the United Kingdom for university. Sadly, he drew this conclusion after joining a predominantly white church that showed him love and care but made little effort to understand or appreciate his cultural expression of Christianity. Bandile learned firsthand the value of making space for those who are different in your church or student group. He saw the impact of his student group, which welcomed a diverse group of participants and celebrated each one's unique perspective on the gospel. [In this article](#), we challenge churches and student groups to consider listening to others from different backgrounds in order to gain a richer view of the gospel.

AGRICULTURE IN ACTION

“When you are an orphan, it is more likely that you will be deprived from enjoying certain things in life. Being an uneducated orphan doubles this problem. So, I push to help other orphans to receive education because I want to show them that [...] they can still do great things in life.”

How can we see those who have been forgotten? The only glimmer of hope keeping orphaned children in Zimbabwe from becoming forgotten is education. Still, many do not have the funds to continue their schooling. This did not sit right with Godfrey, a FOCUS staff member, who was inspired to begin a project raising and selling chickens in order to support orphaned students through their education. [Read](#) this prime example of a person paying attention to the needs around them and using their giftings to redeem broken parts of society.

BECAUSE HE IS MY BROTHER

“This is what you do for family. You protect them.”

Arjun and Veer will never forget the day they were beaten up on their way home from class. As Indian international students on a central Asian campus, they were targets for discrimination from classmates, professors, and locals. After months of bearing the prejudice and abuse alone, they finally found allies. Members of the local IFES movement embraced them and stood up for them, demanding justice on their behalf. Though their peers did not understand why they would be kind to “outsiders” these Christians stood up against prejudice and discrimination, setting an example that glorifies God's heart for all nations. The [article](#) asks, how can you stand up for those who are mistreated in your society?

HOW TO QUESTION GOD

“Students don't need to be taught how to incorporate lament into their lives. They need to be told simply to be honest with God, with themselves and with others. What stifles their honesty are misconceptions about what it means to be ‘spiritual.’”

Sometimes it feels like our journey to justice is pointless. How do we react when evil seems to always win? As Christians, finding the right response to injustice can be challenging. Vinoth Ramachandra, IFES Secretary for Dialogue and Engagement, wants Christians to embrace the attitude of lament. Instead of running away from our questions, he encourages us to be honest with God. In a short interview, we asked Vinoth to share some of his wisdom about the topic of lament. We hope it will [inspire](#) readers to look at grief and injustice from a different angle in order to inspire a more intimate walk with Jesus.

ON A JOURNEY OF WONDER

“We don’t try to save the world, but we have hope for Christ and the new creation. That is our hope. It brings comfort. Because the things of this world will decay.”

Sometimes we may not think about caring for the earth as a justice issue. But in such an interconnected world, environmental issues can have both human and nonhuman impacts near and far. Though the issue feels overwhelming, there are simple ways to honor God’s creation in your everyday life. The key is to pursue a sense of wonder at creation. [In this article](#), members of the movement in Singapore outline three ways to begin your own journey with creation care.

NOT ALONE

Though injustice reigns upon the earth, we know the One who is making all things new. As students wrestle with the issues of our time, we pray that they will own their redemptive role as Christ-followers, seeking to listen, engage, reconcile, and stand up for justice. May these articles encourage you to remember that you are not alone, but surrounded by brothers and sisters in Christ who also wish to glorify his gospel through the pursuit of justice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bethany Peevy is the Writer and Content Producer for IFES. She has lived, studied, and worked in three different countries, but she calls the United States her home. Her particular passion is to help others bridge and thrive in intercultural spaces. Over her career she has worked for a translation company in Beijing, China, coordinated international student exchange programs in the United States, and now has the privilege of sharing stories of God’s work around the world through IFES.



TRANSLATING VISION INTO REALITY

Normalizing the biblical image of racial relations

Jasmine Foo

OUR HUMAN PROPENSITY

The media spotlight on the events and corresponding protests in America highlighting the nation's racial divide and injustices have awakened the senses of the rest of the world to issues of racial and ethnic relations and underlying systemic inequalities. From mainstream news and social media to formal and informal conversations, there has been an increasing awareness and willingness to engage with the issue of racism more overtly. This phenomenon has certainly gone beyond the Western world, as Asian countries grapple with their own versions of ethnic inequalities. One difference, though, lies in the underlying reluctance by those in positions of power to 'wash their dirty linen in public'. Despite the prevalence of the issue, one will rarely find this a subject of discussion in any parliamentary or governmental debate. Or if at all, it will be a pretext for rejecting the importation of 'Western' ideas of 'white privilege' into the national discourse.¹ The inclination to is to leave the elephant in the room alone.

However, with the accessibility of social media platforms, it is no longer the national leaders who dictate social discourse. There is increased readiness to call out xenophobia and racism which are becoming less socially acceptable. More of those at the receiving end of such discriminatory attitudes are speaking up. The various dialogues are also revealing the nuanced nature of racism and its intricate relationship with notions of nationalism and classism. In Asia, racism rears its ugly head in different forms such as anti-immigrant nationalistic sentiments; inequitable policies favouring those of the majority ethnic group who also tend to be of higher socio-economic status;

remnants of historical baggage as a result of ethnic/national conflicts or colonial rule; or even ethnic cleansing in the guise of assimilation of minority groups.

That said, I think public discourse on this divisive issue need not be so binary. When we make the issue such an absolute evil, it makes people defensive and closes off any positive discussions. At the heart of it, racist sentiments are rooted in our human propensity to group and categorise, and accordingly to 'Other'. Here, I use the word as a verb reflecting the human tendency to pigeon-hole people into Us and Them. Seen in this light, those who blatantly dismiss the pervasiveness of racism fail to appreciate the fallenness and brokenness of humanity and how that affects not only our private lives, but also permeates the social groups and organisations within which we function. This same tendency to categorise identities may also presuppose an innate hierarchy which effectively means groups will naturally strive to assert control and hegemony over other groups. Therefore, if we are more able to call a spade a spade, we may be less defensive and more contrite about the structural failings we encounter every day. In other words, we will be less afraid of importing language of 'white privilege' into our contexts and more willing to call out unjust partiality and marginalisation.

When the young tennis player, Emma Raducanu, rose to fame overnight, it ironically exposed how much of an enigma ethnic identity is. Her father is Romanian, her name is Romanian and she speaks Romanian. Her mother is Chinese and she also speaks fluent Mandarin. She was born in Canada. But she lived most of her life and trained in the UK. The Romanians, the Chinese and the Brits all wanted to bask in her glory.² But the Chinese are the same people who abhor mixed marriages and the Brits who voted Brexit prefer a UK without Eastern Europeans like Emma and her father.³ Ethnic identity is thus a malleable social construct that can both divide and unite. When we appreciate that ethnic identities are social constructs, it makes us more willing to question our assumptions about who constitutes Them and Us.

THE BIBLICAL VISION OF ETHNIC RELATIONS

When the Bible paints for us the social reality in Genesis 11—of distinct groups with diverse languages scattered across the earth, unable to cooperate in any global project—that was not the end of the story. The finale comes in Revelation 7, with a great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb declaring praises. Not only will diverse people groups with distinct languages be able to utter praises in unison, but we will share in the glory of the new creation as one community. The contrast between human reality and the biblical vision is stark. As people who live in the in-between, the question remains of how we usher the biblical vision into our fallen reality.

This is where the epistles are quite helpful in illustrating the practical outworking of the more abstract concept of salvation and faith. Clearly, the early church struggled with actualising the biblical vision of unity amidst diversity. It was rife with conflicts and divisions. Bad enough to warrant several epistles specifically addressing this problem.

In Ephesians 2, Paul calls to attention the previous state of affairs where Gentiles were excluded as aliens and strangers, from the commonwealth of Israel and the covenants of promise. But Paul declares that Christ is our Peace. This peace is not just some kind of inner consolation or state of tranquillity, but one that is bought with the flesh of Christ which effectively breaks down the *dividing wall* of *hostility* between Jews and Gentiles, Us and Them. Jesus died not only to reconcile God and Humanity, but to reconcile two opposing groups into one body, one humanity. He nailed on the cross not only our individual sins but the hostilities between different entities. Only when the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple are we fit for purpose—to be the dwelling place of God. This is a glorious message, not only because it brings us, Gentiles, the consolation that we are included in God's salvific plan, but because it declares possible a unity that overcomes innate enmities between diverse groups.

Acknowledging the reality of social brokenness need not cripple us into inaction or despair. It is, as Paul has done, diagnosing the problem and challenge. When we awaken our consciousness to the

systemic and structural inequities of our society, we are taking the first steps towards the biblical vision of justice and reconciliation. Such awakenings open up opportunities as we have witnessed across the IFES movements. During the 2019 IFES East Asian Graduate Conference which ran the theme of Reconciliation, the Japanese graduates sought the forgiveness of the Koreans for the historical animosities and wars between them. In the 2017 East Asia Regional Conference, the Indonesian students embraced their Timorese brothers and sisters through conversations and prayers. Students from FES Singapore initiated the Safe Sound Sleeping Place (S3P) project with local churches during the pandemic when the foreign workers dormitories were hard-hit by numerous outbreaks, to help arrange for temporary housing for foreign workers who were made homeless. Similarly, FES Malaysia launched the Jambatan Anak Malaysia (JAM, which literally means bridge of Malaysian people) to actively challenge the official race-based politics that the government then was playing.

When the people of God demonstrate through their lives and actions the biblical vision of unity and reconciliation, we are essentially modelling to the world this biblical possibility. We thus normalise godly ethnic relations and translate what is mere vision into reality. The Body of Christ is to embody a 'new normal'. Beyond the baby steps we take in our individual lives and ministries, we become better able to engage and less overwhelmed by wider systemic issues. Particularly in IFES—with such an international representation involving over 180 countries—we have been given the wonderful opportunity to demonstrate that biblical vision of one humanity working alongside each other. For in Christ, we are no longer Jew or Greek, no longer Asian or African, Caucasian or Latino, no longer from the first, second or third world, but we are all one (see Gal 3:28).

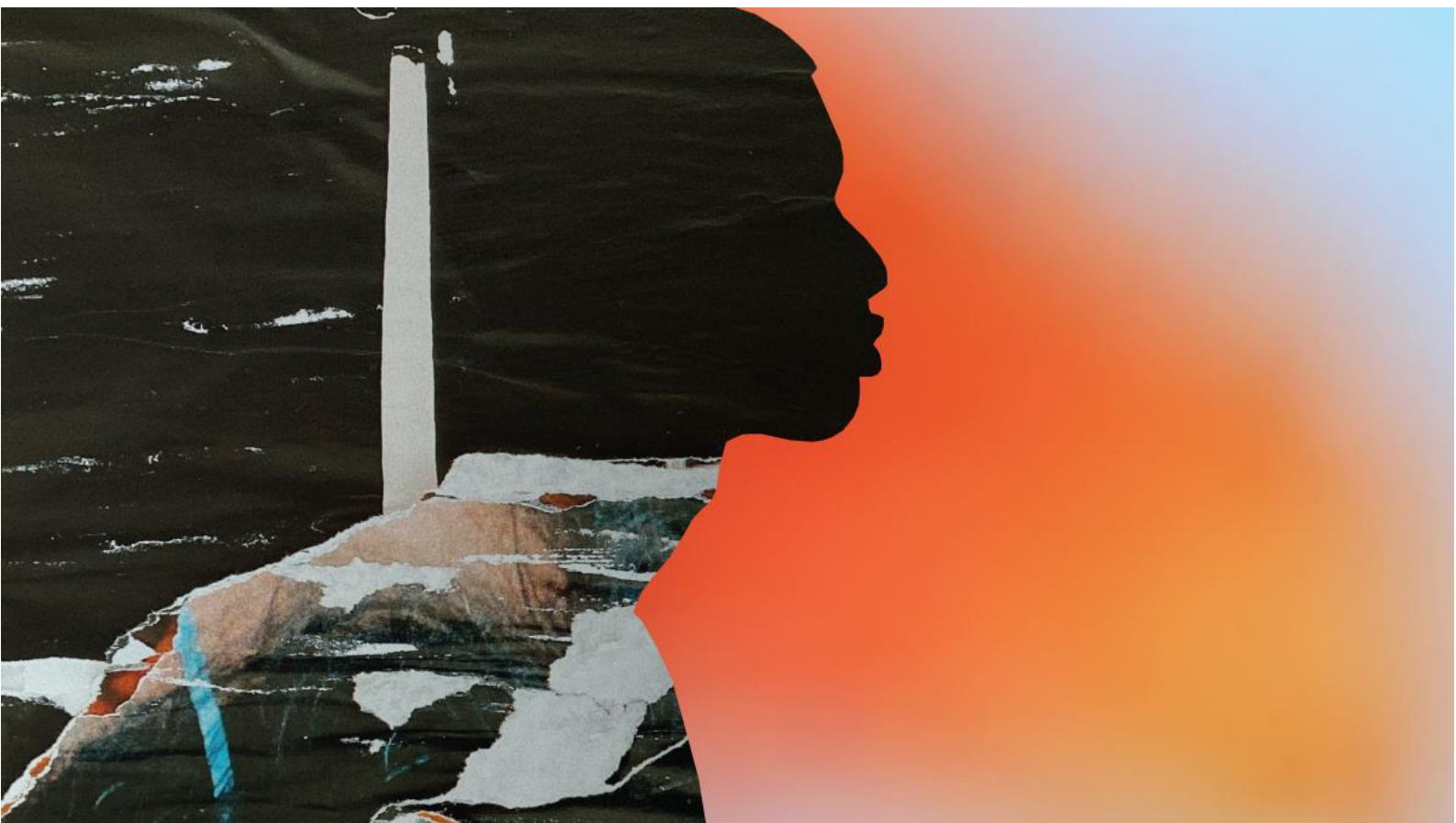
This biblical vision is so beautifully encapsulated by Pope Francis' message on this year's World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 'Towards an Ever Wider "We"', where he said, 'we are all in the same boat and called to work together so that there will be no more walls that separate us, no longer others, but only a single 'we', encompassing all of humanity'.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Foo notes that while Asian countries grapple with their own versions of ethnic inequalities, cultural norms around public shame affect how the conversations are held. Do you see similar dynamics in your own context? What cultural norms create challenges around honest attempts to address racial inequalities?
2. Referring to Genesis 11, Ephesians 2, and Revelation 7, how would you summarise the Biblical vision of racial relations? What other passages further inform our understanding? How do these passages speak to you and to university students about race relations in your context?
3. 'Acknowledging the reality of social brokenness need not cripple us into inaction or despair.' Do you feel this temptation when you think about this issue? How do the practical examples cited in this piece inspire you to action?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jasmine Foo was a staff worker at FES Singapore from the time of her graduation up until 2012. Concurrently, she was also an Adjunct Lecturer in the local polytechnic institute, before joining the State Courts of Singapore as an Assistant Director in Strategic Planning & Training. Since 2014, she has been based in the UK and is currently undertaking doctoral research in Biblical Studies at King's College London. Her research revolves around ideas of ethnic purity and identity in Jewish literature (especially the Dead Sea Scrolls) of the Second Temple period.



PRESERVATION AND LIBERATION

Eleasah Phoenix Louis

We are indeed living in exciting and challenging times; churches and Christian educational institutions face the reality of black and brown liberation fast approaching their doorstep across many nations. Reparative justice is on the agenda of many supporting networks and forums, policy and curriculum alterations demanded by students and lecturing bodies, and independent groups nipping relentlessly at the heels of those defending the status quo. Amid this widespread re-energised movement among mainstream Christian communities, an equally energised movement is happening on the fringes. These movements can be seen fully through the powerful streams of social media and occupy the street corner, impacting ground level. They are an overlooked conversation partner in this broader dialogue about racial justice, the Bible and the Church—yet they are ripe with the insights of the de-churched.

In the last few years, I have been grappling with the question: *‘Why are black people leaving the mainstream church and joining black fringe religious groups?’* As part of my doctoral research, I sought to understand: *where had the church gone wrong? What were the most influential markers of these black religious groups? Moreover, what can we learn from this phenomenon in the broader conversation about racial justice, the Bible and the church globally?* The major challenge throughout this research process has been two-fold, the first being a theology student where western theology, philosophy and method is the standard for credible information and innovative, original and valuable research. The second was a more personal reflection on my theological standing as a conservative evangelical believer wading through progressive and liberal theory, philosophy and politics as the most promising context for developing a workable and liberative framework for my research. In other words, the theological standards were too white, and the

liberative trajectory was too progressive for this black conservative (probably fundamentalist!) Christian.

My postgraduate research journey took place during several critical events for the Black and Brown diasporic community:

- The presidency of Donald J. Trump in the United States
- The Windrush Scandal in the United Kingdom
- The killings of unarmed black men and women becoming regular high-profile news
- And the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement

These are but a few key events I could mention; each of these events reinforced the personal tensions at play, the solutions seemingly found in behaving, voting or thinking either conservatively or progressively. These events knocked on the doors of the churches saying 'whose report will you believe?' The answer could never be the traditional 'we shall believe the report of the Lord' because now even the everyday person is asking the more profound philosophical questions: which are the best interpretations of the report of the Lord? Those that protect and uphold traditional interpretations with systems and doctrines? Or those who see the truth of the gospel in the experiences of the oppressed? Who determines how we identify the truth of God and how does it affect my role in society? And in some cases ... 'Who is the Lord?'

The recent reforms, social adjustments, policy amendments and reparatory initiatives result from the recent wave of black radical political philosophies and protests. These have charged Western society with the sin of systemic and institutional racism that denies black and brown people the ability to flourish in everyday living. I seek not to negate the work done by those considered Black, Brown and conservative - I think more specifically of the black historical churches whose legacy has been justice and reform in society through biblical Christian values- but the flavour of the era is indeed a radical one. It is radical both in that it proposes new forms of society, questioning assumed truths, and in that it sharpens the divide between overt racists, passive participants of racism and anti-racists (the intentionally repentant).

As a black Christian student, I believe it is not uncommon to feel the pull between seemingly opposing spaces in the academy, and it is not easy to navigate the extremes whilst also trying to find one's scholarly footing and unique research path. How do we seek justice for our community with theoretical traditions that exclude our voices? Furthermore, how do we maintain our commitment to Scripture whilst engaging in deconstruction and methodology rooted in suspicion? These were the questions I had to ask of myself, the participants of my research, and the Black, British Bible-reading religions on which I focused.

Afroasiatic diasporic religions such as Rastafari, The Nation of Islam and The Hebrew Israelite communities, decades ahead of the mainstream church in the de-colonisation process, carved out their unique ways of satisfying the previously presented questions. To various degrees, they satisfy both the conservative and liberal tension that I believe many others like myself have come to face. Not only in how they consider Scripture to be authoritative (again to various, yet quite conservative degrees) and through these interpretations then condemn the neo-colonial empire for their ongoing role in the oppression of black and brown peoples. They also outline practical agendas for Black, African or Hebrew self-determination and self-sufficiency, whilst in "Babylon"; through business and economics, secure family structures and diet, derived from models in the Bible.

Although not generally considered adequate conversation partners, not meeting the Western academic markers, these Afroasiatic diasporic religions have succeeded where the mainstream church and academy have not, and they occupy a unique position. Their teachings hold to account the far-right conservatism that we have witnessed surface viciously as racist nationalism during the presidency of Trump and the far-left liberal movements that interrogate our core Christian beliefs as "colonial" and give authority to the diverse lived experiences of the named 'other'. Deeming both extremes as the 'tools of the enemy', Afroasiatic diasporic religions present an opportunity for reflection on this unique position. It allows black evangelical Christian students to step away from

the pull of the extremes and perhaps chart a middle course. This middle course is not a road of compromise; it is a road that draws method from the extremes, which produces a workable framework that can shine a critical torch on the extremes and itself. I call this framework the preservation-liberation framework, whereby one can preserve the authority of Scripture in our theology yet liberate it from its colonial bondage and avert the pull towards a humanist agenda.

Christian educational institutions face the inevitable overlapping of limited human philosophy and the theological task of understanding God but perhaps are not transparent enough about how this imperfect match affects the diverse Christian student body. Both these spaces reach beyond our colleges and universities and are embedded into the political fabric of the world societies, sending clear messages into the current racial justice conversation, and it is time for us to challenge the messages of the opposing extremes. We can re-consider positioning ourselves uniquely and bring the missing components for repair and reconciliation through the imperfect yet profound examples of the marginalised black Bible-reading religious communities.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Louis writes that fringe movements 'are ripe with the insights of the de-churched.' What kinds of insights can we listen for from such movements? What 'fringe movements' are present in your area that might also have these 'insights of the de-churched'?
2. At one point, Louis summarises her dilemma with the question, 'How do we seek justice for our community with theoretical traditions that exclude our voices?' To what extent do you feel this tension within your own discipline or vocation?
3. What does Louis mean by the 'preservation-liberation framework'? What tension does she seek to hold together with this framework? What might such a framework require in your own context?
4. Louis proposes that 'Christian educational institutions face the inevitable overlapping of limited human philosophy and the theological task of understanding God but perhaps are not transparent enough about how this imperfect match affects the diverse Christian student body.' Do you agree? Why or why not? What might greater transparency about this look like in practice?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eleasah Louis has recently completed her PhD. Her research focuses on the presence of Black Nationalist (Afroasiatic) Religions and the influence they have on those on the fringes of the Black British Church body.

She has developed 'Black Consciousness and Christian Faith,' a five-session programme that teaches, at an introductory level, theology and religion in the community. Working with participants, the aim of the programme is to reflect on the traditions, legacies, impact and spiritual meaning of black religious history, critically and theologically.

Currently, Eleasah is consulting with various church and para-church organisations. She is a resource developer, researcher and emerging theologian with a focus on decolonisation and its practical outworkings in everyday Christian living.



THE LETTER OF JAMES IN THE CONTEXT OF INEQUALITY

A Latin American perspective

Alejandra Ortiz

The ministry of IFES in Latin America and the Caribbean has adapted to the reality of the pandemic. Online events have become the norm. But moving the student ministry online in this continent is a privilege. Inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean is also revealed by the amount of people who have access to internet and digital services. While almost 70% of the wealthiest households have internet access, less than 40% of the poorest families have access at home. It is estimated that only about 20% of Latin Americans are able to choose to work from home¹. I became more aware of how privileged we really are when my husband and I were invited to give a talk on the book of James to IFES student leaders in the Andean states (Colombia, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador). As we delved into the book, we recognised our own situation and the many benefits of being able to isolate ourselves at home, with two small children and jobs that continue in the virtual world.

Latin America and the Caribbean are the most unequal regions in the world. Ours is a history of conquest, exploitation and plunder. To this day, transnational agreements and large corporations trample on workers' rights, thousands of people suffer labour or sexual exploitation, and farmers and indigenous people continue to be dispossessed of their lands, either by large landowners or by violence and crime. Latin American and Caribbean countries suffer inequality gaps that are caused by the concentration of power, widespread violence, lack of protection for the most vulnerable and perceptions of inequality itself.² The United Nations Development Programme Report mentions the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic worsens many of the inequalities and primarily affects

access to education, thus having an impact on young people. While gaps in access to basic education have closed, access to and completion of higher education remains a privilege.³ It is estimated that 10%-25% of university students have dropped out or will drop out of university during the pandemic.⁴ There are many different reasons for this, but financial uncertainty, added to the need for internet access, puts the poorest students and those from rural and indigenous communities at a greater disadvantage, and they are unable to continue their studies.

WHAT DOES INEQUALITY HAVE TO DO WITH IFES MOVEMENTS?

Inequality in Latin America is a result of injustice and takes on many forms. Inequality exists when accessing food, housing, social protection, health and education. While some people have no problem meeting their basic needs and have enough to spare to store resources, 20% of Latin Americans do not have enough to eat.⁵ Inequality kills and also causes and spreads violence throughout the region. It is not surprising that Latin America is also the most violent region in the world. IFES movements are no strangers to these dangerous conditions. Some of these situations are studied at university, but students are still vulnerable to inequalities and violence. Many students are unable to stay in university because of their precarious financial situation, despite being the ones who have historically protested against inequality and injustice in their own countries. Education and the university, in essence, must contribute to the common good.

As Christians, our commitment to God's Kingdom also leads us to work towards the common good. As N.T. Wright said in the last issue of Word & World, the Church of Christ "(...) is a sign and foretaste of God's purpose for the whole world".⁶ God, through Jesus, has brought his Kingdom to earth and allows us to take part in it. God's Kingdom has another logic that is very different from that of the kingdoms, powers and empires of this world. It is a kingdom of love, life, justice and peace that is not imposed, but made evident through those who follow Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus further describes the nature of this counter-cultural Kingdom announced by the prophets in the Old Testament and brought forth by Jesus himself. In his letter, James reminds us of many of Jesus' teachings and, like other New Testament letters, helps us to live for God's Kingdom, praying for its coming and looking forward to its fulfilment at the end of time.

So, ignoring the forces that bring death and perpetuate violence and injustice does not allow us to fight for peace, justice and life. If we acknowledge all the grace and privileges that university students and professionals have in Latin America, but we fail to think about the ways God invites us to serve and use what he has given us to promote the well-being of others, we will just be selfish disciples. The gospel is good news for all people, without distinction, and it invites us to live out this good news. In a continent where inequality is rife, which longs for good news for all, sharing the gospel cannot be separated from living it out. Our faith must be accompanied by action. The calling to live out the gospel and God's Kingdom will look different for each person, but it demands our allegiance, to love God above all else, and our neighbour.

WHAT DOES JAMES TELL US?

The letter of James is simple, but it is not easy to read and process. Not surprisingly, it has been a somewhat ignored and despised letter in church history. Its apostolic authority and canonicity were even questioned.⁷ It is a "dangerous" book for those who want to live a life of comfort and privilege, and it is full of challenging warnings and recommendations, particularly for the rich and for those who, despite being Christians, discriminate against the poor and favour the powerful. James gives pastoral recommendations based on the teachings of Jesus and calls for the repentance of those who are replicating the models of the world in their use of power and money, and stripping the poor of their dignity.

In the first-century world that James lived in, violence and uncertainty about the future prevailed. Financial insecurity and political oppression were daily occurrences. The communities of believers were not exempt, and inequality was present in their midst. Some believers were slaves or peasants who barely had enough to eat because they had been dispossessed of their land, while

others served as patrons and could take pride in their status. The problem was discrimination based on economic criteria, appearance and convenience. In the Roman world, it was difficult to think of climbing the social ladder, but it was essential to have a patron or benefactor for legal protection and economic favours.⁸

James' call to repentance for pursuing selfish aspirations makes perfect sense, because the brothers and sisters in the church were more interested in satisfying their own needs and desires than in the welfare of others (James 4:1-3). In his letter, James warns about the deceitfulness of riches and favouritism toward the rich: "*Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?*" (James 2:5-6). James also tells us what true religion is – looking after those who are vulnerable (James 1:26-27). Finally, he leaves us with no excuse when he declares that faith and wisdom without action (compassion, justice and solidarity) are dead (James 2:14-26 and 3:13-18).

HOW CAN OUR FAITH RESPOND TO INEQUALITY?

Christians who start university with aspirations of social advancement, more money, and greater comforts are confronted with this letter. When we talk with Christian students, they normally tell us that their motivation for going to university is the same as everyone else's: mainly personal and family wellbeing. The letter of James calls us to lament and repent.

From my perspective, IFES movements in Latin America and the Caribbean are at risk of not recognising our privilege and therefore not accepting our responsibility. If we fail to do this, we will perpetuate ideas that lead to inequality and discriminatory practices against the weakest and most vulnerable people in our countries. For those with access to university education, it is easy to dismiss or ignore the needs of the poorest members of society. Many mistakenly believe that enrolling in university is the result of family and personal effort, and they lack a clear perspective of the responsibility of such privilege and grace. Ignoring inequality perpetuates injustice.⁹

Many young people do not access university education because they do not aspire to do so. For example, studies show that the inequality gap will widen because of the amount of people dropping out of school due to the pandemic, because the poorest children and young people do not have enough family support to face the challenges of education, basic conditions to study or digital tools to learn from home.¹⁰ Being aware of the reality of our context and the particular stories of the most vulnerable is an antidote to pride and the myth of meritocracy.

James invites us to live counter-culturally, to name, call out and not replicate the structures of inequality we find in the world as we live out our faith in our Lord Jesus. Our work personally and as a community must involve discerning motivations, desires and passions, allowing Scripture to reveal to us our selfishness and friendship with the world. In order to confess, we need to turn to the honesty of lament and repentance in the face of our desires to be, to have and to accumulate which do not lead to love. Prophetic criticism of systems of oppression is the fruit of resistance, individually and as a community, to the forces that oppose life.

The way Christian university students respond will be diverse and creative, if they are dedicated to God's Kingdom and his justice. There are no recipes, but we are inspired to be faithful to God and to love our neighbour in a radical and supportive way. Calling out prophetically does not replace sharing the gospel – these two things go hand in hand. IFES movements, faithful to Scripture and context, will take the proclamation of the good news of Jesus seriously, presenting it as good news for all, especially the most vulnerable. God's Kingdom is present. As Christian university students, professionals and academics, the grace we receive is just that: grace. There is no room for pride because God does not prefer the powerful, successful and rich. God gives grace to the humble.

IFES has many examples of people being creatively faithful to God's Kingdom. As part of the Logos and Cosmos Initiative in Latin America, which seeks to foster dialogue between science and faith, there are university professors and academics, dedicated to God and to the university, who are

being trained in this area. They are an inspiration and a clear example of how you can use your career to serve others. I would like to mention two of them. Sandra, from Mexico, is a university lecturer who is pursuing a PhD in Community Psychology, and her field of research is violence and enforced disappearances in her country. Her work has led her to seek changes in legislation, to accompany search brigades, to encourage the church to provide this type of support, and to work for God's restorative justice, the fruit of which is peace. Johnny, from Guatemala, is studying a Master's degree in Development, Economics and Climate Change and his motivation is to promote sustainable development in his country. Johnny wants to address development issues in rural areas by studying the relationship between poverty relief efforts and the protection of natural resources. His interest lies in both academic dialogue and practice.

To conclude, I would like to leave some questions for reflection, hoping that our faithfulness to the gospel will lead us to respond. **How do we respond to the challenges of the letter of James in our contexts? In what way are our privileges a grace from God? What inequalities do I see around me? What have I received by grace which God invites me to use to serve others?** I hope we are able to find creative answers in our lives to these and other questions, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

ENDNOTES

- 1 "Coronavirus Reveals Inequality in Internet Access and Digital Technology in Latin America: ECLAC," Voice of America, accessed September 29, 2021, https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/america-latina_coronavirus-revela-desigualdad-acceso-internet-tecnologia-digital/6067517.html.
- 2 "REGIONAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2021. Trapped: High Inequality and Low Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean," accessed September 28, 2021, https://www.onu.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/undp-rblac-PNUD_IRDH-2021_ES.pdf, 2.
- 3 Ibid., 38.
- 4 Julie Turkewitz, "Millions Drop Out of College in Latin America Because of Pandemic," The New York Times, September 4, 2020, sec. in Spanish, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2020/09/04/espanol/america-latina/crisis-universidades-coronavirus.html>
- 5 "REGIONAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2021. Trapped: High Inequality and Low Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean", 23.
- 6 N.T. Wright, "Undermining Racism," *IFES Word and World*, Race and Justice, no. 9 (June 2021): 18.
- 7 Samuel Escobar and Eduardo Delás, *Santiago, la fe viva que impulsa a la misión* (Lima: Puma, 2013), 11.
- 8 Maria Luisa Melero, *Letter of James* (Spain: Verbo Divino, 2015), 37.
- 9 "REGIONAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2021. Trapped: High Inequality and Low Growth in Latin America and the Caribbean", 113.
- 10 Ibid., 79-81.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Ortiz details the scope of economic inequality throughout Latin America, and describes some of the impact on university study and student ministry. How do you see this kind of inequality affecting studies and ministry in your area? What might the Letter of James have to say about your response?

2. 'As Christians, our commitment to the Kingdom of God also leads us to contribute to the common good.' How should this conviction shape our approach to student ministry and to the university itself?

3. How is the context in which James first wrote similar to what you see in your region? How is it different? How do these similarities and differences impact your understanding and application of what James teaches?

4. 'For Christians entering college with aspirations of social advancement, more money, and greater comforts, this letter confronts us.' Do you see this in your own life, and/or in the lives of your academic colleagues? How does reading James help us confront and grow beyond these motivations?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alejandra Ortiz lives in Tijuana, Mexico with her husband Abdiel and daughters Erandi and Ayari. She studied History at the University in Tijuana and has a Masters in Theological Studies, specialising in church history from Regent College in Vancouver, Canada. She is currently part of the Engaging the University team for IFES and serves as Co-Coordinator of the Logos and Cosmos Initiative in Latin America, seeking to promote the connection and dialogue of faith and sciences among students, workers and faculty linked to IFES.

