

## Anti-Racism – Why Bother?

Why should I consider anti-racism? Why do I need the aggravation and the frustration of trying to understand people who are so different? Isn't this conversation just meant to make a *white* person like me feel guilty? Why bother? What's wrong with staying with those people who think and look like me? This is what I was asked shortly before I finished writing the article, "White Privilege??" I knew the answer to these questions would require more than a paragraph or two added to the end of the article.

Why bother? First, let me state the obvious. We are all descendants of Adam and Eve. We all share a common humanity. We are all beloved children of God. To most of us this seems obvious. It was not always so. During the years before the Civil War, there was a very real debate among scholars and theologians about the place of Africans in the human family tree. Many argued that black people from Africa were not fully human or were a completely different species. While that argument was a justification for slavery, many of those who rejected slavery still felt that somehow Africans just did not have the ability to be educated or civilized. And they certainly could never hold a position of authority over *white* people.

Thanks to more recent discoveries, like the Human Genome Project, we now know that we all share 99.9% of the same genetic makeup. We are all part of the same human family and every person is a unique, valuable child of God. We learned this in Sunday school: *For God so loved the world!* (John 3:16).

In Acts 10 we read of Peter's conversion regarding who could be included within the new fellowship of believers: *Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right"* (Acts 10:34,35). As the early church struggled to determine how and why Gentiles should be included, we again hear Peter's counsel: *After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith"* (Acts 15:7-9).

We also have the beautiful picture of John's vision of heaven. *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb* (Revelation 7:9).

Second, God loves diversity. No two snowflakes are alike. No two people have the same fingerprints or eye pattern. All of the 28,000 known species of orchids have very unique characteristics, as do the nearly 18,000 different species of birds.

In our school days many of us were taught that there were three human races: Caucasian, African and Mongolian (or Asian). This is flat out wrong. This crude attempt to simplify overlooks the vast variety in the human family. Yes, there are different ethnic and cultural groups. But any attempt to limit these to three basic "types" totally disregards the beautiful tapestry of God's wonderful, diverse humanity.

On a more personal level, my life is infinitely better because of my encounters with persons who look and think differently than me. I was born and raised in the lily-white northeast corner of Bedford County, PA. Before I graduated from high school, I had no real exposure to persons of other skin colors. Following graduation, I worked with Dad in Pittsburgh, where he was a union carpenter. When I signed up with the laborer's union, I was assigned to work at a steel mill, tearing out the old fire brick in preparation for the new brick lining. During that summer, I was one of two Euro-American persons on a crew of forty. The remaining thirty-eight were Afro-Americans. I thoroughly enjoyed the summer.

After college I spent three years in Botswana, Africa as a volunteer with the Mennonite Central Committee. I was blessed by my immersion into a completely different culture. Strangely enough, while I had heard of

culture shock, my cultural shock was to realize that I found the British so much more difficult to understand than the Africans.

My wife Kathy and I started pastoral ministry at the Hatfield Church of the Brethren in Hatfield, PA. While there we were approached by the leaders of a Korean Presbyterian church with a request to share our building as a place of worship. Our 'English' church agreed. Throughout our years in that community, we enjoyed a number of meaningful times of eating and worshipping together.

During the years our family lived in Shippensburg, I led a mission trip to the Dominican Republic to help build a church. I also went on a disaster response trip to help rebuild a black church in Georgia that had been destroyed by an arsonist. During those travels, immersed in two completely different cultures, I was again reminded of the joy of working and serving beside persons who were different from me, yet who were also God's beloved children.

While we were at the Conestoga Church of the Brethren, we sponsored a Hispanic church plant. I still treasure those friends and memories. My niece once encountered some of the members of that Hispanic church who were delighted to hear that she was part of my extended family. They told her how much they appreciated my role in helping to start the church. My niece was aware that I don't speak Spanish; and this couple spoke no English. But when my niece asked about the language barrier, she was told what may be the nicest compliment I have ever received: "We don't need to know the words. We can hear the love expressed in his voice."

I was privileged to attend the 2015 Mennonite World Conference. This remains one of my life's most memorable experiences. In a very tangible way, we were able to catch a glimpse of John's vision of worship around the throne. With believers gathered from many cultures and nations, our worship together felt like a small foretaste of what heaven must be.

So, imagine for a moment that you are part of an orchestra, sharing in God's great gift of music. But the trumpet players believe they are the most important instruments and thus insist that they should be the *only* instruments in the orchestra. As these musicians spend lots of time together, reassuring each other how right, good and important they are, they reinforce their arguments by appealing to archaic rules, ancient history, and intricate theological proofs. Oh yes, and their repertoire never extends beyond "Mary Had a Little Lamb" ...in unison. Would we be puzzled? Would we laugh? Would we shake our heads with pity?

When we gather in our holy white huddles, we are missing out on being part of the complete symphony, the total body of Christ. How can we do God's work well in a hurting, divided world without embracing the entire body of Christ in all of its wonderful, glorious completeness?

Over and over again my life has been touched and blessed by persons whose skin color and ethnic background are completely different from my own. We need each other. We need all the parts of the body. We cannot truly experience the grandeur of being the body of Christ until we are willing to embrace all of God's children in the wonderful, rich diversity that God created.

Alan Miller

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