

Commentary: A view on racism from South Africa

January 17, 2023

I live in South Africa, the pariah country for racism-based history. Having just reached 80 years of age, I've lived through lots of crazy times and hurt many, especially those who worked under me. I also have lots of time now to wonder about these sorts of things, especially in light of God's revelation.

First, let me confess to being racist still. Despite recognising some of the hurt of our history, part of me still is racist. I was born again more than 75 years ago and still am learning to follow Jesus. Even so, I have to confess the bias still exists.

So do many other of my inherent biases. I don't like alcoholics, for example. But there are many much deeper unidentified biases I have, and the fact is only my Lord can help me deal with these biases.

I truly believe all the focus on sexual preferences and racism have got us sidetracked from our Lord's call to love one another. Racism is just one demonstration of our awful sinfulness—I prefer Paul's definition of falling short—but it is a rather stark demonstration of exactly that shortcoming.

As believers, we are worse than racists in how we fight with one another over theological nuances. We ignore that, however, and want to define racism. I know I'm beginning to notice how far I fall short of demonstrating the agape love of Jesus to everyone who isn't me.

A model for understanding difference

In discovering just one of my biases against the majority population in South Africa, George Lodge, retired professor of business administration at the Harvard Business School, introduced me to an interesting model I believe helps explain your political divide in the United States.

He described two strongly divided political-economic ideologies in America. The old one believes the people decide everything. It believes in individual property rights and small government focused on creating equal opportunities for success. The extreme edge believes the best option is no government at all.

The new ideology, perhaps best illustrated today in Singapore, believes a single leader or chieftain knows what is best for everyone. The group is more important than the individual, and what is best for all is what is best, period. Centralised leadership makes the decisions, plans the economy, and distributes the resources.

These two ideologies operate on unexplored assumptions, one of the saddest aspects of which is dialogue becomes horribly distorted. Opponents who may be close to one another on the spectrum assume the other actually is at the opposite and extreme end.

Here is a practical and cultural example of when two ideologies conflict. One key aspect of our differences in South Africa is how we show respect for our superiors, of whatever kind. The custom of white South Africans is never to sit in a senior's presence without first being offered a seat. The majority, on the other hand, feel looking down on a superior is the ultimate disrespect.

Public differences like this can make working together difficult. In evangelical Christianity, consider some spats over the election-versus-

freewill divide. Indeed, Christians can hold unrecognized assumptions about themselves and others. Our differences cause us to use the same words to mean opposite things and often get in the way of our working together.

Our primary call

I suggest we not waste time seeking to define racism. It means different things to every individual. We are called to be like Jesus. We won't always get it right.

We do need to be much more aware of our inherited biases. Only then can we learn to accept the differences that exist and love one another as Jesus loved us.

We can't change the world, but Jesus is busy changing us. This most exciting fact right now for me is stated by Paul as being changed from one degree of glory to the next (2 Corinthians 3:18). Surely, focusing on anything less than the glory of God can lead us to miss his plan.

At least you have a mix of peoples in the United States. That presents you with a real opportunity for uncovering all sorts of race-related differences in undisclosed assumptions.

Reg Munro is a member of the Pinelands Baptist Church in Cape Town, South Africa. He was a qualified actuary serving a local insurance company for 35 years. He served on the board of the Cape Town Baptist Seminary for several years. The views expressed are those of the author.