

A Treatise on Black & White

Everyone and his brother have already weighed in on the current crisis in the land, so I have really hesitated to do so. However, I think my perspective still can add some things into the mix. Just for the record, of all the white people who can read this (*i.e.*, my friends on FB), there are very few (probably none) who have a deeper stake in the African American world than I do. I've lived many years in an African American city, and taught school for a lot of years in 97-99% minority schools (some of them 97-99% black).

There are some key things missing from our debate, so the following article is my attempt to fill in those blanks. Enjoy!

Let me start with a question: Are you racist? Either write down your answer to this, or else say it out loud. But make it official for the record: *Are you racist?*

The current state of our union is greatly distressing to me. We are going through a very difficult time. Hard times come and go, and if we learn something from them, then there is some value to the struggle. I am concerned right now that we aren't learning anything, and this entire dark season will go to waste, leaving us culturally and socially weaker.

The problem we have with the race issue (and this generally applies to any controversial issue), is that most people tend to simplify the problem, and simplify people. We are particularly bad about this regarding race. We paint people in one dimension and fail to see the complexity of the make-up of individuals. We do the same with the issues of the day.

My denomination had a guest speaker at our national convention last year who was a former KKK top gun. He got saved, and then become a pastor and spiritual leader. Though his story is remarkable, I think that our people missed nearly the entire point. I couldn't help thinking that by the end, all of our pastors (90+% white) were so glad that this guy came over from "their" side to "our" side. He had been racist, but now he was one of us! However, that thought did little to address the real issues embedded deep within each of us. This simplistic way of thinking is what I would call "Level One" engagement.

To illustrate, I had scheduled to go to dinner (following this session with Mr. KKK) with a black friend of mine, one of the very few African American pastors in our entire denomination. As we walked to the restaurant, he lamented to me, "Everybody wants to talk to me about reconciliation." He was not happy about it. Everyone was excited about a Level One opportunity, and since they had actually found a person of color, they were just sure they could tap into his time and take care of this most important issue!

The reason I wanted to see him was to pick his brain about a particular ministry. I have great respect for the man and came to him for wisdom. This is the kind of engagement that he clearly desires and deserves. Until the other pastors can see the difference between these two scenarios, we are a long way from getting to where we need to be.

The White Engagement that I am seeing on Facebook and other places is for the most part by those who have limited encounter with “the other side”. They may have limited contact, or lived for awhile among some people of color. Maybe they even have a black friend or two. They get emotional about what they have seen and heard. Nothing wrong with that, but they are now being primarily affected by what others have written or said. But no media source will give you unvarnished truth. They all come with some sort of agenda. Human nature is like that.

But this disconnect, this separation between whites and blacks mediated by others who may or may not have the best of intentions, leads to a lot of Level One thinking, and emotional responses. Far too many have been pontificating out of their emotion with no real stake in the game.

I remember the first church I served at full-time, starting as an associate pastor. Our community was almost entirely old Italians. But just to the south, across a hard-drawn geographic line, was an African American suburb. We had one family that came to our church from that burb, a family with a bunch of kids. They were the first family that Eileen and I invited into our home after we moved there. We had a wonderful time together, and made life-long friends (one of their children is a FB friend of mine, and I hope he’s reading this!). We discussed their perspective as a minority family in a basically white church.

Not long after that, we had a leadership retreat, and there was discussion about how to minister into that African American community. The ideas of our church’s leadership were contradictory to what we had heard around the dinner table that day. We told them so. But we were rebuked and told that we were wrong. They had already decided what the African American community wanted, even though none of them had had any kind of conversation with any of them.

I’m sure they had good sources for their opinions. But I learned a lesson that day. This is a small picture of the ongoing problem. Even those who think they are trying to help are not going to the source, only those who *claim to represent* the source. Many claim to sympathize with a world they know little about.

Let me go back to the opening question. Are you racist? What was your answer? If you said, “No,” you are only operating on Level One. For those us who have embedded ourselves among the African American community, been in their homes, eaten their food, worshiped in their churches, and cried with them at their funerals, we have a different answer. Am I racist? My answer is, “I hope not. But I really don’t know.”

It’s human nature to look at any group of people, find a way to categorize them into two groups, and then to determine ways to find your own group superior. Racism fills this need well, because it’s really easy to identify the two groups. We all do it.

What we need to realize is that racism is not about who is and who isn’t racist. it’s a matter of degree inside each one of us. Very few are 100% racist. But at the same time, no one is 0%, either. Don’t kid yourself, you’re not a zero.

Part of our Level One thinking is that we assume it’s all about color. “You’re black, I’m white, skin color doesn’t mean a thing to me,” so many like to say. But it’s *not* about color. It’s about *culture*. We are scared to death of each other’s culture. Every white kid in America is well-schooled on the horrible things that happen in the Hood. We’ve all seen the pictures of the angry eyes under the hoodies of the offenders dominating the headlines of terrible crimes. And we know—or at least assume— that there

are some “good” black people out there. But in spite of that, we are scared to death of allowing any of *that* world into *our* world.

On two occasions— one a church arson, and another a mass shooting— major Chicago media (the Tribune for the arson, and a TV station for the shooting) sent a lone, white representative to our town to collect a story. On both occasions, that lone person quickly spotted me in the large crowd of black faces and just hung close to me, with obvious fear seeping out from all over. Both even admitted to me that they were scared. (I can’t tell you how much I enjoyed that!)

I’m not going to speak specifically on how the African American views us, because I would come up short. I’m not arrogant enough to assume I would know. But the conditions in the world today show us that there is a massive amount of distrust and fear in them, as well.

Ivory does not understand the world of Ebony. Many years ago, there was a prayer project in Chicago. They enlisted a whole bunch of churches from all over the city to participate. The goal was to place groups on every street corner in the city. But they also wanted to mix it up a little, so they had different churches pray together.

Our church was put together with an African American church from the west side, one of the most violent parts of Chicago. We had a wonderful time praying together, but as we finished, and they prepared to return, the thought hit me, and hit me hard: “Why do they live where they live? Why do you get to go back to your relatively tame and comfortable community, while they have to go back to the violent, drug-infested west side? Do you think they *want* to live in that community? What makes you think they could just leave if they wanted to?”

This was the Lord talking to me, and it was a huge step forward in my spiritual growth and minority awareness as I pondered these questions. I won’t give you the answers to those questions that God gave me. It would do you well to reflect on them for a while as I did and figure it out for yourself. Don’t settle for the quick, short answers.

As time has gone on, spending years in their communities, it is appalling what I have learned that they must endure just in daily, ordinary life. Where my school was located, 25% of the students in that community were classified as homeless. The designation as defined by the city does not mean necessarily that they live on the street, but that they are living with neither biological parent.

What does this do to the psyche of a small child to be abandoned by both parents? How can it be that there are little boys and girl growing up with no one that would even put their picture on a refrigerator? Those of us that have worked in that setting have worked with way too many wonderful young people who had absolutely no one in their lives that cared if they lived or died (other than us). What do you expect to come out of a community like that? And don’t throw up your easy or simplistic answers to the problems we find there.

What is it like to have a designated path through your town for safe passage to school for little kids? And how unsettled would it shake *you* when the gangs violate that rule, and extend their killing fields to the children on the passage? Can you imagine a world where your kids can’t even play in their own yard during the summer because of the danger? Can you imagine a world where every single person has someone they cared deeply about who has been violently murdered? One year, three of my students were shot. One died.

This is so far beyond skin color. We on the Ivory side have separated ourselves so far from Ebony World, we cannot even conceive it. But we do criticize them when they are not happy with the world. We have a long, long way to go in understanding. And it's going to take more than that, "Racism is bad!" and "Skin color doesn't matter." That is all Level One drivel. We need to embrace their world, their pain, their lives. We need to get some skin in the game, no pun intended.

To my African American friends, your Facebook posts have broken my heart. I will never know the pain you are going through, but I can empathize through my limited ability in this heart that has been thoroughly touched by living and working among you. Though I no longer live in Chicago, my heart will always be there. (Trust me, I'm seeking out the African American community here!)

It should be obvious to everyone by now that your well-deserved and necessary national protest has been hijacked by a phantom army that appeared to be waiting in the wings for such an occasion to strike. Please don't ever bow to the idea that violence among the common population is ever acceptable (it's different if you have an invading foreign army!). The temptation to do so is great. It feels good in the moment, making one's point vividly.

But keep the end game in mind. Violence will never lead to reconciliation, understanding, or love. Furthermore, once that door is open, we then have implicitly encouraged any group claiming mistreatment to do the same. At that point, our country would fall into ongoing, violent tribalism. And the winners would not be the most righteous in cause, but the most effective in violence. No one wants to live in that world.

Please know that the great majority of us in the Ivory world want to see you healed and whole (and equal to us on every level, in every way), we're just clueless. Be patient with us, and we will face down the bad guys together.

And some words of wisdom from the Source:

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverb 15.1

How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!

It is like precious oil poured on the head...
For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore. Psalm 133

Your friend and brother

John