

RACISM: TRIBALISM AND ETHNICITY AS CANKER WORM¹

Abstract

This paper focuses on racism: tribalism and ethnicity. It is understood that tribalism and ethnicity are more destructive today in our context than racism. Tribalism and ethnicity destroys the church and trust for one another. Some churches seceded because of tribalism and ethnicity. It is seen that the remedy is to uproot tribalism and ethnicity that serves as canker worm in the church.

Introduction

Racism, tribalism and ethnicity have been used as weapons of growth or destruction. It is important to look at the issues critically in order to proffer the way out for the church. Most of the early missionaries to Africa were whites. They have crossed many borders before reaching the place of their assignments. They met different people, tribes and cultures. Because mission always involves the crossing of ethnic and cultural boundaries, it is important that the issues related to ethnicity, tribalism, and racism be addressed and put into the biblical perspective.¹

There was no difference between the missionaries and the colonial masters as seen by the locals. Both are of the same colour. In some cases, colonialism was seen as oppression or exploitation by the locals. Colonialism is the imposition of foreign rule by an external power, which culminates in the control and exploitation of the conquered people. Foreign rule can be imposed through political deception and propaganda.² While on the other hand, white missionaries were not seen as oppressors by the locals until they left. It was discovered in some cases that the white missionaries were agents of colonialism. They were working for the interest of their government at the same time sharing the gospel, building schools, hospitals, roads and providing water. That was why early missionaries in our context were never taken to be racists.

For this reason there is need to understand the terms: Racism, Ethnicity and Tribalism in order to understand their contributions or effects to the growth of the church.

There are many definitions of racism, tribalism and ethnicity. However, I will use definitions that best suit my context. I may not be speaking for Africa but within my context in Nigeria.

Race “A social construct that artificially divides people into distinct groups based on certain characteristics such as physical appearance (particularly skin color) ancestral heritage, cultural affiliation, cultural history, ethnic classification...Racial categories subsume ethnic groups.”³

Racism: Racism is defined as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capabilities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race. This is usually coupled with the belief that the superior race has a right to dominion over others. Racism thus insinuates that all human beings do not

¹ There are references in the Bible that talks about Canker-Worm Joel 1:4, 2:25, Nahum 3:15,16, Psalm 105:34, Jeremiah 51:14,27. Canker-worm- the caterpillar of a North American moth that has wingless females. Canker worms consume the buds and leaves of trees and can be a major pest based on Oxford languages. The paper is presented to the Summer School participants organized by Mission 21, Geneva, Switzerland by Associate Professor Dauda A. Gava, Provost of Kulp Theological Seminary, Kwarhi-Mubi, Adamawa State, Nigeria

necessarily have the same intrinsic value. Racial discrimination is not confined to any single race.⁴

Therefore, Racism is rooted in the European history of expansion and colonialism and, consequently, in the history of colonized continents. It is a combination of prejudice and power. Racism represents contextually determined modes of exclusion, subordination, inferiorization, exploitation and repression. Today, it widely recognized that ‘races’ are a social construct, and that humanity belongs just to one race: the human race.⁵ In a normal circumstance, humanity is not to be understood or treated based on colour of skin, rather on the basis of being in the image of God. I have seen an illustration given to children elsewhere that despite differences in colour of egg shells, the yolk inside is same. There are different kinds of racism that are worth mentioning:

Individual Racism “The beliefs, attitudes, and actions of individual that support or perpetuate racism.

Active Racism “Actions which have as their stated or explicit goal the maintenance of the system of racism and the oppression of those in targeted racial groups.

Passive Racism Beliefs, attitudes and actions that contribute to the maintenance of racism, without openly advocating violence or oppression.

Cultural Racism (Racism at the Cultural Level) “Those aspects of society that overtly and covertly attribute value and normality to white people and Whiteness, and devalue, stereotype, and label People of Color as “other,” different, less than, or render them invisible.”⁶

Contemporary approaches to racism centre on explaining the well-documented persistence of racial inequality and racial discrimination in an era of declining overtly racist attitudes.⁷

Tribe: A tribe is defined as “a social division in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by social, economic, and kinship.”⁸ In Nigeria alone, there are about 371 tribes. Though this gives us strength but it has its challenges in the aspect of segregation and preferential treatment.

Tribalism: Tribalism is the attitude and practice of harboring such a strong feeling of loyalty or bonds to one’s tribe that one excludes or even demonizes those ‘others’ who do not belong to that group” Tribalism thus prompts one to have a positive attitude towards those who are connected to him or her through kinship, family and clan, and it alienates one from people of other tribes who are not related to him or her by blood, kinship, family or clan.⁹

Tribalism has societal and individual benefits as well as costs. In terms of benefits, tribalism gives us a sense of belonging and trust. Group affiliation can bring cohesion to communities and inspire individuals to act on behalf of others. Psychologically, humans find comfort and security from feeling that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Tribalism can have very negative consequences when it is used to exclude individuals or groups or to take away their rights, status, and/or independence. The good news is that the negative aspects of tribalism are not irreversible. We actually have a great deal of control over how we categorize different groups, and the categories tend to be quite flexible.¹⁰

Ethnicity: “Ethnicity may be defined as a social group or category of the population . . . set apart and bound together by common ties of race, language, nationality. Ethnicity is the outcome of the establishment of social boundaries. As a boundary marker that separates one group of people from another. Ethnicity is therefore an expression of group consciousness.¹¹

Ethnicity is also a “social construct that artificially divides people into smaller social groups based on characteristics such as shared sense of group membership, values, behavioral patterns, language, political and economic interests, history, and ancestral geographical base.”¹²

Factors Contributing to Racism, Tribalism and Ethnicity

What Are Some Contributing Factors to Ethnicity, Tribalism and Racism? Several factors may contribute to the suggestion that some people are inherently superior or inferior. Some people have already categorized themselves as better than others because of the advantages they have in terms of structural or physical development. Being better than others is not only about colour of skin, but ideology too. People of same colour of skin also have differences. Some see themselves as better than others. There is also difference in terms of country. Even in Africa, some countries see themselves better than others and feel superior. Human sinful nature generally contributes to racism, tribalism and ethnicity. Racism is more than a social problem. It is a sin, a moral and spiritual issue. Racism is a sin because it prevents Christians who harbour it in their attitudes and actions from obeying Christ’s command to love our neighbour (Matt. 22:39). And our neighbour is any other human being despite colour of skin (Luke 10:25-37). Racism is also a sin because it has its roots in pride and arrogance (Prov. 13:10; 16:18; Isa. 2:17).

David Livingstone was perhaps the greatest advocate for Africans in the nineteenth century. He regarded himself as the channel of Divine Power, a divinely appointed agent for Africa’s betterment.¹³ He believed that evangelization and commerce were the two hinges of civilization which should never be sundered. He wrote his travel accounts to persuade Europeans to come to redeem Africans either through commerce or Christianity. Although he admired and respected Africans, he nevertheless played to the pride and prejudice of his white compatriots in order to win their benevolence. Hence he was able to write: We come among them as members of a superior race and servants of a government that desires to elevate the more degraded portions of the human family.¹⁴

His contribution to Africa’s future has been associated with colonial rule. It was considered important for the civilized countries, in his case the British government, to shoulder, for humanitarian reasons, the responsibility of giving the Africans a lifestyle worthy of human beings.¹⁵

The potential of tribalism to destroy the church cannot be ignored. The church is always affected by the socio-economical political issues that are raised by the specific community from which it operates.¹⁶ Racism and tribalism certainly destroy the church. We are supposed to see ourselves as part of one body in the church, but it is not so. Even the way we sit in the church sometimes causes or shows the difference. It means that tribalism creates discord among members of the same congregation, community and society. This malaise is spiritually, emotionally and socially crippling religious communities, hence making them unspiritual, unhappy, unloving and unfruitful, making them lead unfulfilled lives in the church. Such people’s original inspiration and

admiration of religious life, at the time when they joined it, has been tragically lost, leaving them spiritually dry, unproductive and bitter towards themselves and others.¹⁷

The fact that churches operate in a particular society makes it difficult, if not impossible, to avert the consequences of racism and tribalism. While some churches deteriorated, others were completely destroyed. The biblical concepts of truth, mercy, peace and justice play a pivotal role in fostering unity and reconciliation for a previously fragmented society. It is the calling of the church to ensure that unity, peace and justice is fought for. No church should turn a blind eye when injustice is being fuelled either by racism or tribalism.¹⁸

All these can be a result of racism, tribalism and ethnicity, which selfishly teaches people not to think of the others in positive terms. 'It is the African sense of belonging that can conquer fears and uncertainty which can be brought by tribal tensions.' The church needs to be mindful of the unity in diversity in which the values of various cultures and traditions blend effectively to enrich the universal church. It becomes impossible to deny that tribal affiliation.

Current Challenges

Accommodation: In the early days white missionaries occupy the best houses and even if they are not around for a year, the house will remain vacant. This is because colonialism and racism were the order of the day. No one is allowed to use accommodation being kept purposely for the foreign missionaries or foreign partners as we refer to them today. This is applicable even today as seen in many places in our context.

Vehicles: Best of vehicles used while others do not have what to use. And no one is allowed to use the vehicle in their absence. This is because others are seen as inferior.

Security: Making sure that nothing touches them as against others in the community. This is understood since they are foreign partners. They could be vulnerable to attacks since their colour will indicate that they are foreigners.

Feeding: The locals most times stay hungry. The little that the locals have, they make sure that foreign partners are taken care of properly, while locals starve. Sometimes it is called hospitality but to the detriment of the locals.

Education of Children: Choice schools are provided since their children cannot fit in our local schools. This is also understood because their children have to be meet foreign standard. The locals think that as a missionary, it is expected that they will fit in to the simple and ordinary life of the locals.

Service: House helps. This is not only peculiar to early or white missionaries. Even the locals have house helps.

Superiority and inferiority: The partners or foreign missionaries made the locals to understand that they are inferior. They could not be compared with the foreign partners. The locals accepted that position. We see the foreign partners as special because of our mindset. They are given preferential treatment. There are instances that the foreign missionaries are not even qualified to work in our environment, but because of their colour giving them advantage, they are seen as if they know everything. As a local person in the environment, even if you are more enlightened and educated than the foreign partner, you will still be seen as inferior.

Tribalism and Ethnicity

Tribalism and racism have become a canker-worm today in the church. Tribalism has divided the church. Everyone is looking at their tribal interest. It has become a problem in terms of choosing leaders, appointments, where to site important structures for the church such as educational institutions, hospitals, Agricultural sectors etc. Every tribe wants these to be sited in their locality.

People also become happy when there are more pastors or church leaders from their tribes, in order to use the numerical strength for vying for positions through elections. This is destroying the church that is supposed to be the body of Christ. The issue of tribalism has been in the church for so many years. There are churches that seceded based on tribal lines.

Ethnicity in the aspect of gender, culture, language, rich and poor, elite and non elite, and tradition is causing havoc in the church. They are dividing factors in the church more than racism. People with common interest usually align together to fight a common cause. In such situation, the interest of the church is not looked at. Personal desires and benefits become major calls. The church is seen as business venture to serve others, especially those tribes that claim to be majority. It has prevented the church from fighting corruption, god-fatherism, politics of division and distrust. For that reason, racism, tribalism and ethnicity are dangerous to the growth and development of the church.

Conclusion

Today, the church cannot claim that the problem of racism is the only thing affecting her. The issue now is not about racism though it has sown the seed of hatred among people. The major problem facing the church today is tribalism and ethnicity. Missionaries have long gone, they left the natives in charge of the church leadership. What is happening today in the church causes more division than racism. The church always claims that the gates of hell cannot prevail. But the destruction of the church is not coming from the outside but within. The discord of tribalism and ethnicity is the one destroying the church, where everyone claims to be a believer. Therefore, tribalism and ethnicity should be uprooted through deliberate efforts if victory is to be won in order to remain one in the body of Christ.

¹ Boubakar Sanou, Ethnicity, Tribalism and Racism: A Global Challenge for the Christian Church and Its Mission. *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*.

² Etim E. Christian Missions And Colonial Rule In Africa: Objective And Contemporary Analysis. *European Scientific Journal*. June 2014 edition vol.10, No.17 ISSN: 1857 – 7881 (Print) P.2

³ Wijeyasinghe, C. L., Griffin, P, and Love, B. (1997). Racism Curriculum Design. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, & P. Griffin (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook* (pp. 82-109). New York: Routledge.

⁴ Racism, *Sociology of Matthew Clair*, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA Jeffrey S Denis, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved. This article is a revision of the previous edition article by P.L. Van Den Berghe, volume 19, pp. 12720–12723, 2001, Elsevier Ltd.859

⁵ *Understanding Racism Today: A Dossier*. The Dossier, along with a WCC Central Committee 2002 document *Being Church and Overcoming Racism: It's Time for Transformative Justice* are the two major outcomes of the Ecumenical Study on Racism.

⁶ Wijeyasinghe, C. L., Griffin, P, and Love, B. (1997). Racism Curriculum Design. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, & P. Griffin (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook* (pp. 82-109). New York: Routledge.

⁷ Racism, Sociology of Matthew Clair, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA Jeffrey S Denis, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON, Canada 2015.volume 19, pp. 12720–12723, 2001, Elsevier Ltd.859.

⁸ Why We Hate: Tribalism Activity (Us vs. Them) <https://www.discovery.com/shows/why-we-hate>. Accessed 08/08/2021.

⁹ Why We Hate: Tribalism Activity (Us vs. Them) <https://www.discovery.com/shows/why-we-hate>. Accessed 08/08/2021.

¹⁰ Why We Hate: Tribalism Activity (Us vs. Them) <https://www.discovery.com/shows/why-we-hate>. Accessed 08/08/2021.

¹¹ Boubakar Sanou, Ethnicity, Tribalism and Racism: A Global Challenge for the Christian Church and Its Mission. *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*.

¹² Boubakar Sanou, Ethnicity, Tribalism and Racism: A Global Challenge for the Christian Church and Its Mission. *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*.

¹³ Boubakar Sanou, Ethnicity, Tribalism and Racism: A Global Challenge for the Christian Church and Its Mission. *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*.

¹⁴ Luke Mbefo, C.S.Sp.Catholic Social Thought and Racism in Africa.

¹⁵ Luke Mbefo, C.S.Sp.Catholic Social Thought and Racism in Africa.

¹⁶ Baloyi, E.M., 2018, 'Tribalism: Thorny issue towards reconciliation in South Africa – A practical theological appraisal', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(2), 4772. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i2.4772>.

¹⁷ Baloyi, E.M., 2018, 'Tribalism: Thorny issue towards reconciliation in South Africa – A practical theological appraisal', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(2), 4772. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i2.4772>.

¹⁸ Baloyi, E.M., 2018, 'Tribalism: Thorny issue towards reconciliation in South Africa – A practical theological appraisal', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(2), 4772. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i2.4772>