

Studies for Black History Month

October 2007

1

STUDIES FOR BLACK HISTORY
MONTH

OCTOBER 2007

Studies for Black History Month

October 2007

2

Introduction

Over the past year there have been events and studies that have considered the bicentenary from a variety of perspectives. Black History month gives us another opportunity to continue this exploration. Some may be tired of considering this issue. They may ask, "Why should I bother? How much longer do we have to persist with these studies and explorations?" I once heard that the longest and most difficult journey is from the head to the heart. That has been abundantly clear with respect to the bicentenary during which we have been ever hearing but not understanding and seeing but not perceiving for our hearts are calloused.

Therefore we must continue to prayerfully consider these issues in the hope that some time soon the Holy Spirit will enable us truly understand this heinous crime against humanity and empower us to respond appropriately.

I pray that the following studies will help you to take such steps on this journey.

Studies for Black History Month

October 2007

3

STUDY 1 – The Foundation Stones for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

The source material for this study is David Goldenberg's book, *The Curse of Ham – Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. It is well worth reading. I have also used material by Professor Bernard Lewis, emeritus professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University.

Opening Exercise

Jacques Nicolas Paillot de Montabert, a painter and theorist, wrote the following in 1837. It was written in a manual for artists.

Read it as a liturgical response with black and other non-Caucasians people reading the faint type and white people reading the bold type.

White is the symbol of Divinity or God;

Black is the symbol of evil spirit or demon.

White is the symbol of light...

Black is the symbol of darkness and darkness expresses all evils.

White is the emblem of harmony;

Black is the emblem of chaos.

White signifies supreme beauty;

Black ugliness.

White signifies perfection;

Black signifies vice.

White is the symbol of innocence;

Black that of guilt, sin, and moral degradation.

White, a positive colour, indicates happiness;

Black, a negative colour, indicates misfortune.

The battle between good and evils is symbolically expressed

By the opposition of white and black.

Share with one another how this reading affects you.

Why does it affect you in these ways ?

Goldenberg observes that it shows "how deeply and in varied ways black-white symbolism is part of Western culture."

He goes on to state, "By the beginning of Atlantic slave trade in the fifteenth century Black and slave were inextricably joined in the Christian mindset."

How did this situation develop ?

Studies for Black History Month

October 2007

4

Goldenberg makes the following key points:

FACING FACTS

1. No negative evaluations of real Blacks were found in either biblical or post-biblical sources.
2. Negative symbolism of the colour black does not lead to antipathy toward black Africans.
3. Most, but not all, Black Africans in Arabia, Greece, Rome and Israel were slaves. In the lighter-skinned environment this created a ready association of Black and slave.
4. The association of Black with slave led to changes in exegesis of texts. Also the erroneous assumption that the word Ham was derived from a root meaning dark, brown, and black, led to wrong exegesis.
5. Black was introduced into the retelling of the biblical story. Syriac Christian writings imply that Canaan cursed with slavery was an ancestor of dark-skinned people. The curse of Ham is relied on more and more as Black slaves increase in number.
6. Arab conquests led to skin colour moving from a description of complexion to a designation of ethnic groups. In the 16th century the English also did this as they encountered non-whites; it was a way to distinguish between 'us' and 'them.' This ethnic designation by colour is forced back into the biblical text.
7. From the 16th century white Europeans began to conquer and subjugate people of colour. The very act of conquering others led them to justify their "economic, political and cultural domination and exploitation" of the 'other' who have a different colour.

Q. Reflecting on these points, can you think of anything that is worthy of thanksgiving ?

A. *Biblical text and post-biblical writings do not contain anti-black sentiments.*

Studies for Black History Month

October 2007

5

Professor Bernard Lewis outlines the following reasons for the rise of White Western racism.

1. After the Spanish re-conquered the Iberian peninsula, during the inquisition they presented the Jews with the option of conversion to Christianity, expulsion or death.
2. Those who converted came under even greater suspicion, because it was felt that such people would join and pollute the establishment.
3. So they moved the goal posts away from religious purity to ethnic purity.
4. This change makes it impossible for the outsider, be they Jews or any other ethnic group, to ever become a part of the establishment, because they were intrinsically different.
5. This mindset was played out in the conquest of people of other complexions, particularly Africans, who could never be accepted on equal terms with their conquerors because they were not white.
6. Racism, ethnic purity, ECONOMICS and white European conquest of people with darker skin led to a sense of one's superiority over those of darker skin colour, which further reinforced erroneous biblical exegesis and justification of Black slavery.

From the above facts it is clear that economics played a critical role in reading personal prejudice and bias back into the biblical text.

Racist ideology and economic greed have been the driving forces behind both the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade and Western imperial expansion of the 19th and early 20th century. The mindset for such endeavours, were shaped by people reading into the text what they wanted it to mean, which is known as eisegesis.

Ignatius Sancho an African who worked for the abolition of the slave trade wrote...

It is with reluctance that I must observe your country's conduct has been uniformly wicked in the East – West Indies – and even on the coast of Guinea. The grand object of English navigators – indeed of all Christian navigators – is money-money-money.

Confession

For reading back into the text assumptions that link Black people with slavery for selfish economic reasons.

While Christians have been eager to emphasise Christian endeavours to abolish the trade, few have been willing to acknowledge the Christian underpinning of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, which is undeniable.

Let us confess this failure to own and acknowledge this truth.

Studies for Black History Month
October 2007

6

For Further Exploration

Q. Can you think of other events in world history that have been shaped by the racist prejudices outlined above ?

A. Apartheid South Africa; Segregation in the US; Nazi Holocaust; Abuse of Australian Aborigines, Maoris of New Zealand, Indigenous peoples of Canada and American Indians.

Also some of the arrogant Christian missionary endeavours of the 19th and 20th century arise out of such prejudices towards people of different colour and culture.

Questions For Today

1. What forms of eisegesis are we perpetrating today that others will look back and question ?
2. Why have we forsaken the call to a simple lifestyle and embraced consumerism lock stock and barrel?
3. Should we delete Acts 2 vs. 42-47 and Acts 4 vs. 32-37 as unworkable utopian ideals ?
4. If these principles were implemented what effect may it have on world poverty ?
5. Will the superpowers of tomorrow also rely on slave labour for their growth ? How can we act to curb such exploitation ?

Prayers & Action Points

Allow prayer to flow out of your examination of the above issues.

What changes can you make as individuals and as a fellowship to address poverty in your church and/or community ?

Studies for Black History Month

October 2007

7

STUDY 2 – The Absence of Truth & Its Consequences

Why, 200 years after the passing of the act to abolish the slave trade, is there still a lack of peace and closure on the subject ?

Opening Exercise

Get everyone to read this story as individuals.

A woman was in physically abusive relationship for over 10 years. During that time she fought against her partner, but his strength always enabled him to subdue her. She often reported her plight to the authorities, but the policemen did not act, because it was not in their interests to do so. Later one or two of the policeman listened and challenged her partner. Eventually the policeman's challenges and the woman's opposition to his treatment led him to stop his abusive behaviour.

In later years her partner and some of the policeman would remind her of their noble actions in ending the abusive behaviour. They even celebrated and flaunted their actions. Her efforts were brushed aside.

In pairs ask people to reflect on the different people's behaviour and to discuss how the woman would have felt about the men's behaviour before and after her abuse ended.

Feedback and consider how this story translates to the bicentenary to abolish the slave trade act.

How do you think people feel about always being beholden to others for their well-being ?

What effect will this have on the sense of self-worth and self-confidence of the different parties ?

Facing Facts

Please visit www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/2006/setallfree.shtml to view statistics of people's knowledge about the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. For a longer report please visit www.setallfree.net/downloads/mori_report.pdf

Q. Name 3 Africans who were involved in efforts to abolish the slave trade.

A. *Olaudah Equiano; Ignatius Sancho; Ottobah Cugoana.*

Please visit www.bloomsbury.org.uk/living/media/ANTI-SLAVE.ppt where you'll find a power point presentation about the forgotten heroines and heroes of the slave trade abolition.

Studies for Black History Month

October 2007

8

Confession

For failing to acknowledge the significant roles played by Africans in the abolition of the slave trade.

For consistently ignoring the citizens of the two-thirds world who have made invaluable contributions to humanity.

For Further Exploration & Consideration

Q. Do you know the name of the black equivalent of Florence Nightingale?

A. Mary Seacole. (You can search for more information on the web.)

Q. Do you know who pioneered non-violence as a method for resisting oppression in the 1930s ? Who used it in the 1950s and 1960s ?

A. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Martin Luther King

Q. Can you name a 19th century Jamaican BMS missionary who served in the Cameroon ?

A. Joseph Jackson Fuller

Questions For Today

Use the web to compare the biography of David Lammy MP and Tony Blair the former prime minister.

What does this teach us ?

Q. Why do you think it is important to have Black History month and to learn about the lives of non-European contributions to humanity ?

A. Many non-Caucasians living in Britain have made significant advances and achievements despite having the ball and chain of racism round their legs. People who have been dehumanised over centuries because of the colour of their skin, have overcome their stereotyping and made huge gains. Such achievements deserve to be celebrated and affirmed.

Prayer & Action Points

Allow prayer to flow out of your examination of the above issues.

Q. How do you think you could affirm, celebrate and learn from the achievements of different groups in your church ?

Use the web to explore the role of Black Africans in the biblical and post-biblical era.

Studies for Black History Month
October 2007

9

Study 3 & 4 – Do We Know the Way of Peace ?

All crave peace, but we seem to be ignorant of what will lead to peace, and when we do discover the ways of peace, we are reluctant to take the steps needed for true peace.

Opening Exercise

Read Isaiah 59 vs. 1-15 and identify the key factors that will ensure true peace. Please refer to the address "Breaking Chains...Making Peace" given at the London Event on 23rd June 2007 based on Isaiah 59 vs. 1-15. It can be found at www.londonbaptist.org.uk/lbaleadd07.pdf

Truth and justice are the key steps to achieving true peace.

To meaningfully explore these issues please also visit:
www2.wcc-coe.org/ccdocuments.nsf/index/plen-4-en.html

The link will bring up World Council of Churches article, "Being church and overcoming racism: It's time for transformative justice."

The article outlines the rationale for transformative justice, steps towards transformative justice and includes case studies from around the world.

As you read through the article please reflect on how the steps outlined and case studies can help British Baptists to come to terms with the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade.

Also consider how this paper can help us address the fact that in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s Africans and Caribbeans were either turned away from many Baptist churches or faced appalling racist prejudices within our churches.

Questions For Today

1. In the light of your considerations what steps do you need to take as individuals and as a church with respect to these issues ?
2. What steps do we need take as British Baptists ?
3. What positive and creative steps can we take to overcome some of the painful legacies that the Caribbean community encounters ?

e.g. Would a scholarship fund to help poor but able Caribbean children to attend universities be a way of overcoming the painful legacy ?

Prayer & Action Points

Allow prayer, including confession to flow out of your examination of the above issues.

Studies for Black History Month

October 2007

10

In the light of these studies what does the Lord require of you – individually and corporately - immediately, in the next 6 months, year and 3 to 5 years?