

Can We Talk About Skin Colour?

Carmel Page

An Uncomfortable Introduction

I'd like you to imagine a room full of Christadelphians. It's a fraternal and so people there don't all know each other. Someone who knows you, needs to introduce themselves to Sister Anne, they have not met Sister Anne before and they ask you to point her out. You can't see Sister Anne but you spoke to her earlier, you know she is a black woman wearing an orange blouse. She is the only black person attending the event. How would you describe sister Anne?

You could say, "She is black." If you are white, as I am, that might feel awkward. It would be easier for us to say, "The woman in the orange blouse."

Let's face the facts: many white people are embarrassed about black skin. It can make us uncomfortable. For those of us who are lighter-skinned, 'racist' is a huge insult, and I think that is why dark skin is problematic for us. If we mention blackness, we might be called racist and that would be upsetting. We often manage this by not mentioning skin colour. We fear causing racial offence.

I presume that the existence of lighter skin can also be awkward for people who have darker skin because they are likely to have experienced racism from lighter-skinned people. If darker-skinned people mention our lighter skin they risk upsetting us. I suspect black people also manage this by not discussing skin colour when white people are present.

How can we claim to be brothers and sisters, of the same family when we are not even comfortable discussing our skin colour?

Can we try a thought experiment?

You might like to use paper and a pen but it's not essential.

I'm going to say a word and I want you to write down (or just think about) the first few words that come into your head.

French ...?

Syrian ...?

Chinese ...?

Nigerian ...?

Here, in the UK, people associate *French* with food and drink: French bread, French Fries, French wine. Also, French holidays, or the Eiffel tower.

Syrian we associate with refugees and war, not much else.

In the UK, a *Chinese* normally means a take-away meal.

Nigerian is a word we have less connections to. We hear that Nigerian school children are abducted by Boko Haram kidnappers. We may also have heard of the 'Nigerian Scam.' Our associations with Nigerians may be based on horrific child abuse and fraud.

Whatever you thought of, I'm guessing you had different ideas for each word. It is worth noting that our thoughts about other nations are based largely on what the media has told us about them. Then we apply this to individuals... We become biased. It happens to all of us. If the things we have been told about a group of people are derogatory, we tend to have derogatory thoughts about every individual in the group.

I've been told that black people all have a chip on their shoulder because of their history of slavery. Black people feel hard done by when they should be thankful that they now have equality. So, from childhood, I've had this clear message that black people's complaints are not worth listening to. Some black people have successful lives which "proves all black people could achieve, if they tried," and "Black people need to solve their own problems." I used to believe that. I no longer do.

A Survey

Prejudiced ideas started to make me feel uncomfortable. I noticed them in my work life and my social life. My church life too. In the summer of 2021, I created a survey asking Christadelphians two questions:

1. Do you think there is racism in the Christadelphian Community?
2. Do you think there is antiracism in the Christadelphian Community?

I posted the survey on a few Christadelphian Facebook groups and soon had 100 replies from worldwide. I read all of the comments. I wrote a report. If you want to read the full report you can find it below but what it showed is this: most respondents reported racism in our community, and two thirds thought there was also antiracism (I defined antiracism as making a conscious effort and taking deliberate actions, intended to challenge and defeat racism.)

The majority of respondents were white, but the People of Colour who replied gave examples of being socially excluded, such as having white members stare at them aggressively.

Many white members had witnessed similar things. For example, “I have heard a few make remarks such as ‘Don’t talk to them’ meaning don’t talk the Gospel to ‘coloured’ people who attended a preaching presentation.”

There were also positive examples such as the way that Iranian refugees have been welcomed in the UK.

Many members had heard racist jokes and racist language. There were also a few examples of people challenging racist language.

A lot of people reported stereotypes in our community, such as lower expectations of darker people. A UK member wrote, “Growing up, the black boys were treated unfairly and had assumptions upon their behaviour before they even spoke or entered a setting.”

Our preaching caused concern. People reported a tendency for white missionaries overseas to hold on to power rather than share it with locals. Also, to have better accommodation than the locals. In our own countries a preference for preaching in white areas was noted.

Our committees and organising groups are predominantly staffed by white members. We are not very flexible at accommodating diversity. As one person explained, “White Christadelphians expect everyone to sit in rows, sing from the green hymn book, and conform to a Sunday morning format that is not reflective of cultural diversity.”

The issue which concerned me most was what was said about how some people interpret certain Bible verses. We need to discuss this.

Noah’s Family

We read in Genesis 9 that, after the flood, Noah and his sons were blessed by God. We are told Ham is the father of Canaan, but no other grandchildren are named. Everyone settles down. Noah grows a vineyard and makes wine. He drinks too much wine and lies naked in his tent.

Ham sees him (Gen 9:22). It is very hard to know from a different culture and, for me, a different sex, how to judge this, but clearly it was a big deal. Ham tells his brothers. Was he shocked? Did he need advice? Was it in jest? We don't know. But his brothers respond by covering Noah without seeing his nakedness. They solved the problem. Ham did not.

Once Noah was sober, he realised what had happened. He was not happy. Perhaps he felt ashamed of his own behaviour. Scripture doesn't say Ham did wrong, but it's implied that he did.

Noah then says, "Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be to his brethren." Ham's son Canaan is cursed by Noah. Then Noah says, "God will enlarge Japheth and he will dwell in the tents of Shem and Canaan will be his servant." So Japheth is going to be looked after by Shem and Canaan (although not Ham.)

What happened next? Did Canaan take this as a command and start to serve his uncles? Was it a prophecy? Did Canaan say, "I'm not going to let that happen." But then it did? We don't know. Why wasn't Ham the one to be cursed? We don't know. Why weren't all of Ham's children cursed? We don't know. Was Canaan complicit in his father's wrongdoing? We don't know.

In the next chapter the descendants of Noah are listed. It is known as the Table of Nations. We are told that these descendants then spread out and repopulated the earth.

There is a theory that the sons of Ham formed the African nations and were black, the sons of Shem became the Middle and Far-Eastern nations and were brown, and the sons of Japheth became the European nations and were white. There is a belief (which answers to my survey reported some of our members hold) that the curse of Canaan continues to this day. This belief encompasses the idea that the black descendants of Ham are meant to be the servants of brown and white people. That, because of the curse of Canaan, black people are not equal to white people. They are a different race. The mass enslavement of black people was what God wanted.

I do not believe that the curse of Canaan continues to this day. Nor that it has anything to do with Africans. The idea that anyone believes this sickens me. God blessed all of the sons of Noah. Is Noah's curse of Canaan more important than God's blessing?

The curse was not to the descendants of Canaan, only to Canaan. Ham had four sons, and Canaan did not live in Africa He lived in the land Bible readers know of as Canaan. Africans are not recorded in the Bible as being the descendants of Canaan, so even if the curse was for all descendants in all future millennia, it would not apply to black people now.

Does the idea that one group of people should be the servants of another group fit with the rest of scripture?

Are Africans a different race from everyone else?

*From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth.
(Acts 17:26)*

Does the curse of Canaan mean God sees Africans differently from other ethnic groups?

I looked and saw a multitude too large to count, from every nation and tribe and people and tongue, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. (Rev 7:9)

Should we judge people by their skin colour?

Stop judging by mere appearances. (John 7:24)

Is the curse of Canaan a prophecy that the offspring of Canaan will be servants of the others for all time?

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)

The Curse of Canaan theory of blackness is unfounded and abhorrent. It was used by white Christians to salve their conscience about slavery. They were wrong to do this.

The Geography of Skin Tone

So why do people have different skin colours?

The sun shines brighter around the equator than at the poles. Sunlight can be damaging to skin causing sunburn and skin cancer. Darker hair and skin provide more protection from the sun. Darker people live around the world's equator or their families originated from there.

Humans need Vitamin D and skin can make it from sunlight. But as you travel from the equator, dark skin becomes less able to manufacture vitamin D. Lighter skin is better for making vitamin D. Further from the equator there is less risk of sunburn and cancer and people have lighter skin.

A person's skin colour signifies whether their ancestors lived nearer to the equator or the poles. Nothing else.

Christianity and Antiracism

How good are you at admitting you get things wrong? I hate being wrong. Even worse I hate being found out to be wrong. Sometimes I do get things wrong. In the past I have got it wrong about People of Colour.

The way I see it, the whole point of Christianity is that we get things wrong. We mess up. If we don't get anything wrong, we don't need Christ. We don't need to be Christians.

It would make sense to me, for Christians to always be ready to admit to making mistakes, like jumping to conclusions, or not checking all the facts first. We have all made mistakes, a lot of them, it's nothing to be ashamed of — if we can admit to it.

My survey shows that we are a racist community. It's a bad feeling isn't it!?

There is a name for the horrid feeling white people have when we are told that we have been racist: White Fragility. The horror, vulnerability, and shock of being accused of this crime. It is also possible to be black and racist, but for me, as a white person, the name for the shame of being called a racist is White Fragility.

I think most racism is because we presume what we have heard about a group is right. Perhaps we do not get to know some people, because we presume they are not worth spending time with. Maybe what you have witnessed seems to confirm what you have been told. I think many stereotyped ideas are not proof that racism is right, they are evidence that racism damages and holds whole communities back.

You might be thinking that the charge of racism doesn't apply to you. Perhaps you are white and convinced you have never been racist. Yes, the Christadelphian community has racism in it. If you are part of the Christadelphian community you are part of racism. You are not exempt. If you do not engage in racist behaviours, if you do not have racist attitudes, but you allow racism to continue within our community, then you are complicit in racism.

The opposite of racism is antiracism. It is about making a conscious effort and taking deliberate actions intended to challenge and defeat racism. It is not enough to say, "I'm not racist." That is like witnessing a fight and saying, "I didn't punch anyone." If you make no effort to stop the fight, nor get someone else to stop the fight, nor look after those who are frightened or injured, you are complicit in the harm caused by the fight. You are like the priest and the Levite who passed the injured man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Antiracism is a set of habits which can be acquired, a set of attitudes which can be developed and a set of skills which can be learnt. Here are some ideas to get you started:

In Sunday school:

- Look through the books you use to teach Sunday School. Check if they depict Bible characters as having white, brown or black skin. Most of the characters in Bible stories had brown skin. If they do not, replace your books with more accurate ones or, repeatedly remind your class that Bible characters were darker-skinned and apologise for the books being wrong. It will provide you with a good opportunity to discuss other racial issues.
- Check Sunday school prize books for illustrations which depict Bible characters appropriately.
- Provide brown colouring pencils. When your Sunday school are drawing remind them that most Bible characters were probably brown.
- We have all been fed ideas that black people behave worse than white people. Because of this, it is common for black children to be disciplined more harshly. Note whether this happens and discuss this in teacher's meetings.

In services:

- Choose images with all skin tones. Bible characters especially, should be portrayed as brown. If you can't find appropriate images apologise for the inaccuracy.
- Be open and honest about the fact that our church was established by racist men. Do not shy away from this issue but state clearly that they were wrong.
- Pray for the end of racism and guidance towards antiracism.

In positions of responsibility:

- Consider everyone for leadership positions. Don't presume candidates will put themselves forward – invite people to apply. If someone lacks skills, offer training and support. Don't rule anyone out.
- Hold Antiracism or Diversity Awareness training.
- Buy books about race, racism and antiracism. Loan them to members. Hold a coffee morning to chat about the issues they raise.
- Support black businesses. If you need repairs to the church roof or support with a legal problem choose a business run by someone black. This is not racist. It is just redressing the balance. Educate yourself about racism and this attitude will start to make sense.

- Invite black Africans to preach to white churches. We fund white members to go to Africa, why not fund black members to travel from Africa?
- Check if the land your church is built on was owned by indigenous people. If so, announce this before services. Make contact and offer use of your facilities.
- Make sure your first aid training includes care for people with dark skin.
- Buy pink, brown and black sticking plasters for the first aid box.
- If you have more than one language spoken in your church, hold bilingual services. Many UK ecclesias now do this every week.
- Don't expect People of Colour to solve racism. You can request advice but always give permission not to be involved. Racism is traumatic to discuss for those who have experienced it.
- Make sure anyone entering the mission field has total respect for the people there. Ensure missionaries understand they must not take power away from anyone. Their role is to facilitate and empower the host communities so they can organise themselves to worship in culturally appropriate ways.

In conversations and discussions:

- If someone makes a stereotyping comment suggest, another way of thinking about the situation. "In my experience ...," or "Do you think it might be that ...?"
- Talk to people who are different from you. Whether it is colour, age, wealth, class or disability try to get to know everyone better.
- If someone darker than you speaks, listen. If anyone interrupts politely tell them they have and ask the speaker to continue. Take all ideas seriously.
- When people say, "All Lives Matter," point out that whilst all lives do matter, white people can generally take it for granted that their life will be valued. Black people cannot. This is what Black Lives Matter means. In the same way, "children matter" doesn't mean adults don't matter. It means children's needs should not get overlooked.
- Don't talk about us and them. There is only us. For example, "There are those of us who have secure accommodation and those of us who don't have secure accommodation."
"There are those of us who speak English and those of us who have not yet learnt English."
What you thought of as two separate groups is one group which can be divided in different ways.

- Describe white people as white. For example, “What does he look like?” “He’s a white brother with dark curly hair.” If you don’t, white is presumed to be the default. In reality less than 10% of the world’s population are white.

In your own time:

- If you are white, read up on White Privilege and White Fragility. It will change you for the better.
- Join a charity which actively works to better the lives of people of other ethnicities.
- Become attuned to language. If you hear news reports of a black criminal, notice if white criminals are described as white.
- Share posts about antiracism on social media.
- Examine the origin of your beliefs about other people and whether you have evidence. Remember, what you see may be the result of racism, not the reason for it. For example, does a poor education mean people are not clever, or that they experienced racism in education?
- Sign up to the weekly emails from UK Persian Preaching News¹. They are full of wisdom aimed at helping members in the UK support our Iranian Persian contacts and members. Much of the advice could be applied to anyone wanting to understand the needs of asylum seekers and refugees.
- If you hear of a major racist incident contact People of Colour you know. They may be feeling vulnerable. Ask how they are, and express your concern for them.
- If you encounter a racist incident, talk to the victim not the abuser. Ask them if they need support and how they want to be helped. Speaking to the victim gives a clear message, to both them and the abuser, that you don’t accept racist behaviour.

If we can all start doing some of these things you will soon find that our attitudes to many groups and individuals change and then, Yes! we can talk about skin colour.

Thank you for listening and especially to everyone who responded to my Racism-Antiracism survey. Also, to the members of the Christadelphians Standing Against Racism

¹ Contact ukpersianpn@gmail.com and request to subscribe.

Facebook group who proof-read this talk for me and made many helpful and supportive comments.

Additional Material

Report on my survey into Racism and Antiracism in the Christadelphian Community can be viewed at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BFUCWrBrWSap0NP9tdyqjYov3-MtYNnz>.

More thoughts about the inheritance of skin colour:

If all of Ham's children were black how would this have worked in practice? Imagine Ham and his wife were black, Shem and his wife were brown and Japheth and his wife were white. They would produce children with very similar skin colours to themselves. But what about their grandchildren? Presuming the next generation were from intermarrying with cousins then the three distinct skin tones would be merged in a few generations.

It is possible that the first few generations were from intermarrying with siblings? If this is the case, if Ham and his wife were black then all Africans and all Canaanites would be black. It has been suggested by some (although I have not heard this in our community) that black skin was a part of the curse of Canaan. If this was the case, Canaanites would be black, but not Africans.