



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Gregory of Nyssa and the Culture of Oppression
(*Racism*, pp. 26-36)

Suggested Article:

📖 Smelling Fires of Racism
(*Racism*, pp. 70-74)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Gregory of Nyssa and the Culture of Oppression

In the late fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa spoke out against the institution of slavery in a way that none had before, vilifying it as incompatible with Christianity. What can we learn from this Cappadocian Father about seeing beyond the veil of oppression?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Genesis 1:26-27

Meditation¹

Each person is not just to be respected but to be revered as one created in God's image. To treat a child of God as if he or she was less than this is not just wrong, which it is; it is not just evil, as it often is; not just painful, as it often must be for the victim; it is veritably blasphemous, for it is to spit in the face of God.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Reflection

The true offense of slavery, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-394) argued in his fourth homily on the book of Ecclesiastes, is that God created humans to be free. Commenting on the Teacher's proud claim "I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house" (Ecclesiastes 2:7), Gregory wrote:

If man is in the likeness of God, and rules the whole earth, and has been granted authority over everything on earth from God, who is his buyer, tell me? Who is his seller? To God alone belongs this power; or rather, not even to God himself. For *his gracious gifts*, it says, *are irrevocable* (Romans 11:29). God would not therefore reduce the human race to slavery, since he himself, when we had been enslaved to sin, spontaneously recalled us to freedom. But if God does not enslave what is free, who is he that sets his own power above God's?²

Kimberly Flint-Hamilton emphasizes how extraordinary Gregory's view was in late antiquity. "Even though Gregory was not alone in his compassion for the lot of the slaves, his conclusion to attack the very institution was unique," she notes. "Before Gregory, slave owners had been urged to treat their slaves with dignity and not abuse them. They had even been urged to manumit those servants that had proven themselves worthy. Yet only Gregory suggested that slavery, as an institution, was sinful."

Gregory interpreted Scripture intertextually, allowing key passages to shape his understanding of other passages. Here he views Ecclesiastes through the lens of the *imago Dei*. While his contemporaries agreed that God created human beings equal, they usually viewed slavery as a "sinful distinction" — an aspect of our fallen condition that we must accept. Gregory, however, taught that every human being — past, present, and future — is part of God's grand design in creation. He understood Genesis 1:26-27 to be about not just the first humans, but "the fullness of humankind, comprehended by God's



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‘foresight,’” David Bentley Hart writes. “Adam and Eve, however superlatively endowed with the gifts of grace at their origin, constitute in Gregory’s eyes only the first increments (so to speak) of that concrete community that, as a whole, reflects the beauty of its creator.”³ Gregory names this fullness of humankind, which contains people of all eras, the *pleroma*. The beauty of the *pleroma* is marred by enslaving one portion of humanity to another.

Flint-Hamilton sums up Gregory’s view: “Only in universal freedom can the fullness of *pleroma* unfold, with each individual human being contributing. Slavery, racism, and oppression in general, are completely incompatible with the will of God.”

Study Questions

1. What does Gregory of Nyssa mean by the *pleroma*, the “fullness,” of humankind? How does this concept shape his understanding of the image of God in Genesis 1:26-27?
2. Discuss how the word *pleroma* is used to describe the Church and our discipleship in Ephesians 1:8b-10, 22-23 and Colossians 2:9-10? How does this usage shape your understanding of Gregory of Nyssa’s argument?
3. Treating anyone as less than a child of God, according to Archbishop Tutu, is always “wrong,” often “evil,” always “painful... for the victim,” and “veritably blasphemous.” What does Tutu mean by each of these concepts? How does each one help us understand the nature of racialized actions?
4. “Racism likes compliant companions,” Joseph Parker notes in *Smelling Fires of Racism*. He warns, “God’s people should have in place a ‘spiritual detector’ – someone who is wise in the ways of God; someone who, like a carbon monoxide detector, can identify the poisonous, colorless, and odorless fumes that will kill us.” What would this look like in your congregation, or in the Church at large?

Departing Hymn: “O God of Creation, We See All around Us” (v. 1)

O God of creation, we see all around us:
how richly diverse are the people you’ve made!
In all of our neighbors who daily surround us,
your love for your children is ever displayed.
We’re made in your image, we’re equal before you;
yet often injustice and hatred abound.
Forgive us the ways that we sin and ignore you,
accepting the structures that push others down.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2010)

Tune: ASH GROVE

1. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Image Books, 1999), 197.
2. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes with Supporting Studies*, edited by Stuart George Hall (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1993), 74.
3. D. Bentley Hart, “The ‘Whole Humanity’: Gregory of Nyssa’s Critique of Slavery in Light of His Eschatology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 54:1 (February 2001): 51-69, here citing 57.

Gregory of Nyssa and the Culture of Oppression

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand Gregory of Nyssa's pioneering argument against the institution of slavery and to use it to critique oppression more generally.
2. To discuss how racism is not only wrong, painful, and often evil, but is blasphemous.
3. To consider why God's people need a "spiritual detector" for racism.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Racism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested article before the group meeting. The departing hymn "O God of Creation, We See All around Us" is sung to the familiar melody ASH GROVE, which can be found in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

In "Smelling Fires of Racism," Joseph Parker uses the metaphor of smoke to describe the culture of racist oppression – its stench chokes people and blinds them to what they are doing. Parker was a young boy in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. "I was not yet eleven years old when the following scenes were indelibly burned into my memory," he writes. "I accompanied my father – a Baptist pastor and leader in the Alabama civil rights movement – to a bombing scene. The home of Reverend A. D. King, the younger brother of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been bombed. Smoke was still rising.... That day we also went to the A. G. Gaston Motel, where another bombing had taken place. Four people were injured. Three house trailers were damaged heavily. I smelled racism's smoke a second time.

"In September, I accompanied my father to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in downtown Birmingham, the scene of another bombing. Four girls near my age, attending Sunday School classes at the church, were killed. Twenty-three other people were hurt. I smelled smoke from a fire of racism the third time....

"Those fires of racism changed me. I can still smell racism's smoke. Though its smell is different and more subdued, my memory is triggered. The smell is emitted from racially dominated systems and individual actions – even inadvertent – that continue to legitimize bigotry and discrimination. This legitimization can be found in attitudes, behaviors, social structures, ideologies, and the power to impose these on a less dominant race..." (*Racism*, 70-71).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for grace to see clearly with Gregory of Nyssa through the smoke of racialized oppression.

Scripture Reading

Ask a three group members to read Genesis 1:26-27 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

How can we learn to see beyond what Kimberly Flint-Hamilton calls “the veil of institutionalized oppression,” the pattern of racialized beliefs, practices, and institutional arrangements that unconsciously shape our perception and understanding? She finds an important model in Gregory of Nyssa’s interpretation of the image of God as the unfolding *pleroma* (PLAY-ro-mah), or fullness, of humankind. Gregory was (to borrow Joseph Parker’s term) a “spiritual detector” for oppression in late antiquity. Consider how God’s people continue to need spiritual detectors to identify the sources of oppression today.

Study Questions

1. Gregory of Nyssa uses *pleroma* (Greek for “fullness”) to refer to humankind as an unfolding community that expresses the beauty of God. While each individual is created in God’s image, the fullness of God’s beauty is revealed through humanity in every place and all eras. Gregory understands “Let us make humankind in our image” as referring to more than just the first humans, but to the community of human beings. This stands as a corrective to another interpretation – that the image of God was fully present only in Adam and Eve, but now is marred in fallen humanity – which permits one to accept the social institution of slavery as a fitting punishment that we must endure in our fallen state.
2. Assign two groups to review the use of *pleroma* (usually translated “fullness”) in Ephesians and Colossians. Ephesians 1:8b-10, 22-23 refers to the goal or end of God’s unfolding creation as the “fullness of time”; the Church is described as “[Christ’s] body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” In each case, the *pleroma* extends through time as God’s unfolding creative and redeeming activity. According to Colossians 2:9-10, disciples “have come to fullness in [Christ]” in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells.” The emphasis is on completeness.
3. Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s judgments are not repetitive because they highlight different aspects of oppression in general, and racialized actions in particular. Assign groups to brainstorm each of these concepts. First, “wrongness” points to the injustice, unfairness, or (more generally) the immoral nature of every action that demeans a person as less than a child of God – even if that person is a guilty offender. Second, when Tutu says such actions are often (but not always) “evil,” perhaps he means that the person who does the racialized action is often malicious, or intends to cause unjustified pain and suffering. Third, Tutu says that such actions always cause pain and suffering for the victims, even if they do not see themselves as God’s children; perhaps he means that each one is diminished in this way, whether he or she realizes it or not. Finally, he suggests that God is blasphemed in that God’s image is abused.
4. In Nebuchadnezzar’s oppression of Jewish exiles in Babylon, Joseph Parker discovers what Flint-Hamilton calls “the veil of institutionalized oppression” at work. Neither the king nor those who helped him oppress the Jews would have seen themselves as racist. Parker writes, “He saw himself as a king protecting and expanding the legitimate interests of his people and himself. Nebuchadnezzar did not have a compassionate focus on the people he dominated; he focused on them only when they (and their things) advanced his interests. But he did not act alone. He put in place systems and representatives that perpetuated these interests. Those who benefitted from these systems took advantage of what was accessible to them, even if they did not recognize the negative impact on the dominated group.”

Parker believes that a “spiritual detector – someone who is wise in the ways of God” can help us notice how we benefit from oppression. Does the “detector” need to be a victim of oppression? Does this help? What sorts of Godly wisdom must the detector possess to notice oppression, call others’ attention to it, and guide them to escape it and correct it? Encourage members to identify “detectors” in their congregation or the wider Church who helped them to recognize and resist institutionalized oppression.

Departing Hymn

“O God of Creation, We See All around Us” can be found on pp. 37-39 of *Racism*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.