

Disrupted Communion & privilege

“White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.” ~ Peggy McIntosh

1. White Privilege and how it works....

(this section is for reading out. Each paragraph can be read by a different voice)

Just give it a moment's thought. The idea that your abilities, your moral worth and your reliability as a person can all be definitively determined by the shade of your skin is clearly absurd. Yet, throughout the Western world just turning up and looking white means people react differently to you. They cut you slack. They treat you as an individual. They judge you differently. The reason for this is probably historical, because it's not logical. Ever since the European enslavement of Africans for profit took off and there was a need to distinguish who could and who could not be enslaved, skin colour has been a key determinant in how you were treated and what your life prospects might be. And, today, long after the formal abolition of slavery, White privilege still works remorselessly in both trivial and life-threatening ways.

Take, as an example, two stories from Kenosha, Wisconsin, in the summer of 2020. In an encounter with Kenosha police, a black man, Jacob Blake, was shot in the back seven times whilst he was leaning into his car with his kids in the back seat – 'he might have had a knife!' During the protests and unrest that followed, a white 17-year-old, Kyle Rittenhouse, who had just shot and killed two people and injured another, was allowed to walk away by local police whilst openly carrying an assault rifle, even though people were shouting at the police that Kyle had shot people. Yes, that is not the whole of either story, but the contrast in police responses to these two people looks like White privilege in action.

White privilege has huge effects on how society is run and significantly shapes the life experience of everyone, one way or another. Yet, most of the time, it is operated by well-meaning people who aim to be fair. It is unacknowledged. It is 'normal'. Yet it has catastrophic effects that undermine the just operation of our world. Peggy McIntosh, a veteran of the women's movement, began to realise in the 1980s just how all-pervasive White privilege was and how it affected her own life as a white woman in the USA every single day. She was able to list over fifty ways in which she regularly benefited from White privilege.¹ Here, as an example, are but three of the privileges she noted:

- I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race
- I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my colour
- If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it had racial overtones

¹ See an extract from Peggy McIntosh's article here: <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mcintosh.pdf>

Take five minutes to discuss how conscious or unconscious ‘racial’ assumptions by others might be affecting our experience of life every day.
(don’t avoid the issue by just talking about Kenosha)

There are no stories in the Bible about ‘White’ privilege as we experience it. But there are many, many stories that illustrate how ‘privilege’ works. Class privilege, ethnic privilege and gender privilege are woven into many, even most, stories in the Bible. Spoilt for choice, we’ve chosen to look at a puzzling little incident in the church in Corinth where we can watch unacknowledged privilege resulting in a desperate outcome in the life of this Christian community, a community that prided itself in its Spirit-led unity

2. Disrupted Communion and privilege

Let’s begin by reading what Paul says to the church members in Corinth in **1 Corinthians 11.17-28** in the New Revised Standard Version:

Corinthian communion confusion

¹⁷ Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. ²⁰ When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. ²¹ For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²² What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. ²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

What is going on here?

Word has reached Paul about the way the Church in Corinth held its communions. They clearly shared a meal – what we might call a ‘love feast’, but rather than displaying their unity, this demonstrated their disunity. Some of the church people were having such a good time that they were getting drunk, but other church people, at the same celebration, would be left hungry, disrespected and ignored. You can see why Paul is upset. But who is being left hungry and who is getting drunk? We don’t know for sure, but we can have a good guess how this works...

Imagining actors

Let's try to picture two Corinth church members who might be at opposite ends of the spectrum. This is an imaginative leap, but it could help us understand.

a) Junia, an enslaved woman, is a committed member of the fellowship, but she belongs, as a slave, to a non-Christian household. She must complete her evening duties (serving table, settling the children, etc.) before she can slip away to join the fellowship. She has to miss her evening meal to get to the fellowship's love feast. She can't bring her own food and when she gets there the food is all gone. **How do you think Junia might feel about the way communion is run in the church in Corinth?**

b) Demetrius, a prosperous trader, is a committed member of the fellowship and the head of a Christian household. He is doing reasonably well in the import-export trade so besides his family he has a number of household slaves as well as slaves at his trading depot. Demetrius and his wife regularly contribute food to the communion meal (brought over by his household slaves). Demetrius is close to Gaius in whose house the fellowship meets, so they have fallen into a pattern of arriving early on fellowship nights and Gaius and Demetrius and some of their social circle start the evening with a few cups of wine before everyone else arrives. **How do you think Demetrius feels about communion in his church?**

Why are the church leaders not addressing the problem?

To address a problem, you need to see what is happening and recognise it as a problem. Probably, the church leaders either did not notice what was happening or saw it and chose not to see it as a problem. Why might that be?

- **Why might a church leader like Demetrius not see any problem?**
- **Why might Junia feel she could not say anything about the problem?**
- **So, what is Paul's problem with all of this?**

Privilege in action

We could define 'privilege' as a socially accepted code of behaviour that excuses you from trying to imagine how things work for others and allows you to operate comfortably within your own 'in' group without minding the discomfort of others.

Can you think of any social groups you have experienced where those in charge seem to occupy a world in which their privileged position means they don't or won't consider how things work for people who don't share their status?

Privilege is a practical expression of accepted social hierarchies. In some respects, our 21st Century Western experience may be less hierarchical than city life in Corinth and across the Roman Empire in Paul's time, but hierarchies of social importance and unwritten codes of privilege and status still work powerfully today.

- **Are hierarchies and privilege an inevitable part of human society?**
- **What about the church? Is there a place for hierarchies of value and significance within the church?**

Let's see what Paul thinks....

Privilege and 'Christ crucified'

Read verse 17 at the start of our passage, then verse 22 and then verses 27 & 28.

- **What is the root of Paul's unhappiness?**
- **What is his attitude to the sort of privilege that seems to have made the leadership in Corinth blind to what is going on?**

Look, now, at how he puts his position in another letter to another church.

In Galatians 3.28 Paul says:

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

That rather sounds as if he expects that the community of Christ crucified has effectively abolished privilege and hierarchies, making 'all one'. For Paul, there is no place for codes and habits of privilege within the church of Jesus.

Combating privilege, then and now

So what is to be done? Writing to the church in Corinth Paul develops a picture of how the church should work. In the next chapter of 1 Corinthians he talks of the church as being like the diverse limbs and organs of a body, specifically the Body of Christ. Paul declares that all the limbs and organs are equally valuable and necessary. That allows a valued place for Junia as well as Demetrius.

But Paul goes much further than simply stating equality. Maybe it's because he is seeing the failure to live equality in the church in Corinth. He argues for action.

Look up **1 Corinthians 12.21-26**. What is Paul asking for here?

It sounds like a plea for **active anti-privilege work** within the fellowship, to allow church to be church. And the point of active anti-privilege work within the church is to show the world a better way. Paul wants us to work against privilege wherever we find it. **What might that mean for us today? What sorts of privilege should we be actively challenging, dismantling and working against both within the church and in our wider society?**

3. Questions for discussion

1. Who or what in the UK has benefitted from White privilege in the past?
2. In what ways is White privilege still in operation today?
3. Do you benefit from White privilege, and if so, how?
4. How might White privilege operate within the URC today?
5. What could we do to ensure its elimination?

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