

IS IT POSSIBLE FOR A WHITE SOUTH AFRICAN MALE TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?

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Introduction

Judging from comments I received since the topic of my lecture was announced, it seems to have touched a sensitive nerve. Some people said they would only attend if I answered the question in the affirmative, and others said the answer had to be “no”! One person wrote, “if you think that is a difficult question, how about ‘can a white male homophobic Dutch Reformed Afrikaner dominee enter the kingdom of God?’” Yet another said it was a stupid question. Yet judging from the number of white, male South Africans present here this evening, it seems as if there is great interest in finding out about how they can be saved from the wrath to come. And, I confess, I also have some personal interest in the subject.

The question is, certainly a personal one and obviously theological as well. But it is also of social and political importance in thinking about the future place and role of white males in South Africa not least as we face a general election next week. But why single out white males as though we are a distinct tribe and have a favoured place in society and unique role to fulfil? Why give us a special status and further inflate our egos? Or, some might say, why pick on us, exposing our faults and failures, accusing us of being part of the problem, and make us feel more guilty? We are not the only ones to blame for what is wrong! Just leave us alone and let us mingle with everyone else, and hopefully lose our white maleness in the crowd!

Of course, we should not generalise, for not all white South African males are the same. Some are English-speaking, others Afrikaans; some are poorer than others, some very rich; some are Christian, others Jewish and yet others secular; some come from good schools others not; some are gay, others not; some come from loving and caring families, others from dysfunctional families. And, as is true of all people whether white males or not, some are born with more gifts and talents than others, some have had greater opportunities, some are shy, and others outgoing. And some have inherited long-life genes, others not. All types and conditions apply to white male South Africans, as they do to others groups.

But, of course, if you are white, male and *gay* you are certainly not part of the white male macho network. In years past you had to stay within the closet whether at school or college, whether in business and the work place, whether on the sports-field or in the club house, in the army and the church. Gay white male South Africans may have been privileged as white males under apartheid, but if they did not play by the homophobic rules of the time they were ridiculed and excluded. In fact, playing by the rules, being part of the old boys’ network, made it very difficult for those who were non-conformists, whether gay or not. Yes, there are

many variables within our tribe, except for the fact that we are all white, male and living in South Africa.

So, let me say four things at the outset about my topic. (1) While my focus is on white, male South Africans, my question is also inclusive, for how can anyone, irrespective of race, gender and nationality enter the kingdom of heaven? If you are not a white male, you can and should still ask the question for yourself and I hope you do. (2) My question is specifically about white males because they were largely responsible for creating and sustaining colonialism and apartheid, and we have done so because we have had a privileged place in society and empowered to do so. (3) It is also specifically about white males because many regard them as as a liability if not an embarrassment in public, business and academic life, rather than an asset. (4) As a reminder that there have been and still are remarkable white male South Africans who have rise above their race, gender and class, and played – as they continue to do – an important role in working for a more just South Africa.

I could add a fifth preliminary comment, of course, because this lecture is in honour of the memory of Steve de Gruchy and he was a white male South African. So I think the topic is appropriate and that he would approve my choice. Undoubtedly, he would also think that he could deliver a better lecture on the subject, but sadly he can't any longer. But did Steve enter the kingdom of heaven? If he did, then it must be possible for any white South African male to do so and we could all have a glass of wine and go home. But there might be an uproar of disapproval in this assembly. Some shouting "no, he didn't!" others, "how can we know for sure?" and yet others, "what does it mean to enter the kingdom of heaven anyway?" I might even be accused of avoiding that question and getting you here under false pretensions on a cold night. So, I must continue.

But this is a difficult lecture to give. How I wish Steve was still alive to do so instead. We do miss him so much! But I must put emotion aside and accept the task with gratitude. For how many fathers are asked to give a lecture in honoured remembrance of their son? How many fathers have had a son who was such an exceptional and talented man, and whose memory has been celebrated in this way for the past eight years by distinguished lecturers? So, despite the emotional challenge I accept the task gratefully because I think Steve would want me to, and I think he would have approved of the topic and if he delivered it he would have done so with that characteristic impish grin on his face that always told his parents that he was up to some mischief. And as he was also a preacher, I begin with a passage from Scripture.

An impossible possibility

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "with mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are impossible." Mark 10:23-27

This interaction between Jesus and his disciples occurred after a rich young man came to Jesus and asked him "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus told him to

keep the commandments. The man replied that he had done so since his youth. Jesus looked at him and, as the gospel tells us, “loved him.” But there was one thing he still had to do. He had to sell all his possessions and give his money to the poor. Downcast, he turned away. That was a bridge too far. The cost of entering the kingdom of heaven was too great.

This story played a decisive role in the conversion of St. Francis of Assisi, for he, too, was the privileged son of a rich businessman. But there came the day when he did what the young man in Jesus’ story did not do, he gave up his inheritance and followed Jesus like a poor beggar. We may admire St. Francis, but few of us follow his example in renouncing privilege to follow Christ and enter the kingdom of heaven. A comparable story is told of Henri Nouwen, the well-known writer of books on spirituality, who left his comfortable position as a university chaplain in Boston to live in solidarity among the poor in Latin America. But once there, he discovered that it was impossible to identify with them fully. Unlike them, he always knew he could escape the daily grind of poverty, and that he always had a way out. Eventually he did so, returning to live in Boston.

We don’t think less of Nouwen for opting out. At least he tried, which is more than most of us manage to do. In fact, most of us who are privileged have diluted Jesus’ teaching to such an extent that Christianity has become “cheap grace” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it. The Christian life has been reduced to being happy, fulfilled, and achieving success. I do not decry these values for to be happy, fulfilled and successful is to be blessed, but they are not specifically Christian. The truth is, Jesus’ teaching goes against the grain of privileged life, whether ancient, or modern. Even if we resist turning Christianity into a “prosperity cult.” we still find it very difficult, if not impossible, to follow Jesus’ path of costly discipleship. His teaching on forgiveness, reconciliation, love for one’s enemies and solidarity in the struggles and suffering of the poor, is very difficult, if not, as some say, impractical in the “real world”.

Steve wrote his doctoral dissertation on the work of the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. And from Niebuhr he learnt that the teaching of Jesus is an impossible possibility. No one can follow Jesus’ teaching fully, Niebuhr says, it is an impossibility because the “ethical demands made by Jesus are incapable of fulfilment” in our world.¹ And yet, by the grace of God, said Niebuhr, the impossible can become possible, and sometimes does. The teaching of Jesus may be an “impossible possibility”, but he would not have invited us to enter the kingdom of heaven if it was not possible to do so. But how many of us who call ourselves Christians actually try to follow Jesus? How many of us are therefore serious about entering the kingdom of heaven whether we are white, male South Africans or not?

The Kingdom of heaven

My question is not only gender and racially specific, or socially and politically significant, it is also theological because it has to do with “entering the kingdom of heaven” – it is not about whether white South African males can obtain a visa to visit the United States or the United Kingdom; it is not about whether they can become Australians and live in Perth, or emigrate to Canada; it is not about whether they can attend the University of Cape Town or Limpopo; it is not about who they can marry, whether they can own property, or should

¹ {Niebuhr :67}

receive the same salary as anybody else. It is not about whether they are better than others at sport or academics. It is specifically about whether they can “enter the kingdom of heaven.” What, then, is the “kingdom of heaven?”

The “kingdom of heaven” as understood in the Bible does not refer to a place called “heaven” to which some, if not all of us, go when we die, whether white or black, male or female. In the Bible the word “heaven” is a synonym for God. Orthodox Jews were forbidden from uttering the word “God” because that would be taking God’s name in vain and breaking the first commandment. So, instead of referring to the kingdom of God, they spoke about the “kingdom of heaven.” If you read the gospels, that when Jesus talks about the kingdom of God or heaven he is talking about how we are to live here and now. When he says his kingdom is not of this world, he is not saying that it has nothing to do with the world. He is saying that it is not subject to the authority of this world, just as he is not.

Let me introduce here a helpful insight here which I have learnt from Bonhoeffer. It is the distinction he makes between the “ultimate” and the “penultimate.” The ultimate is being justified by God, or “being saved” as some would say, with life after death in mind. This is beyond the control of any of us because it is a matter of God’s grace. According to the gospel, nobody, whether white or black, male or female, South African, German, Brit, Brazilian or Burundian can be saved by their good works. The good news of Jesus Christ is that salvation is a gift of amazing grace. That is the ultimate which God alone makes possible. But we do have a say when it comes to the penultimate, that is, the “things before the last things,” by doing what God asks of us here and now. So, if eternal salvation is your concern this evening as a white male, rest assured that is in the hands of God. And fortunately, God’s grace is sufficient even when it comes to us.

God’s amazing grace, then, is the ultimate. The penultimate, by contrast, is about life lived here and now. It is about the way in which we fulfil our responsibility in this world, it is about entering the kingdom of God today in this life not just the next. It is about doing the will of God today, living life responsibly before God. That is clear from the story of the rich man who came to Jesus. He wanted to know how he could live his life in accordance with God’s will. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. That he has done, the man replies. Well and good, says Jesus, you might have kept them literally by not stealing, committing adultery, or coveting your neighbour’s ass or BMW Series 6, but you have failed to keep the intention of God’s commandments. They are not just about what you should “not” do, they are more importantly, about what you “must” do. Love your neighbour as yourself, love even your enemy, seek God’s justice before all else, go the extra mile, forgive seventy-times seventy, and take up your cross.

So, my question: “Can a white South African male enter the kingdom of heaven – or God?” is not about whether we white South African males can be saved and go to heaven when we die, but whether we can do God’s will while we live. Are we able to “seek first God’s kingdom and his justice before everything else?” Can us prodigal sons can get out of the pigsty of male privilege and find a way to join the family back home? Can we who have squandered our inheritance become brothers with the rest of humanity rather than think we are a favoured tribe entitled to inherit the earth? Can a white South African male be liberated from clinging to privilege and power in order to participate with everyone else in making South Africa a country that reflects God’s kingdom of justice, reconciliation and peace? Or

should we throw in the towel, go on a white male binge, or try to save our souls by emigrating to the kingdom of heaven in Trump-land, Brexit Britain, or Wonderland Dubai?

So, my question is this: are white South African males too much trapped in their privileged past, too much part of the problem to be of any use going forward? Will history eventually cast us aside as relics with no role in the present and no place in the future? Would it not be prudent to wash our hands of the problem and walk away, as did the rich young ruler? Do we have a meaningful role to play with everyone else in making this country more just, compassionate, peaceful and beautiful? It may seem an impossibility, but is it perhaps possible? Can a leopard change its spots, probably not? But a fat-cat juicy caterpillar can become a beautiful butterfly unless squashed underfoot. Such a transformation is possible, but it requires rebirth, and a necessary prelude to rebirth is the need to acknowledge our privileged status, for without doing so we will not see the need to change and have the courage and will to do so.

Acknowledging privilege, racism and patriarchy

Being a white South African male meant that Steve, like most of the rest of us in this category, was privileged. The only downside of being a white male under apartheid was that you were liable to be conscripted into the army. As a result, many paid the ultimate price with their lives, many others were physically disabled, and many, many others were psychologically damaged – brutalized by their experiences on the border and in the townships. The psychological and social consequences of that senseless war are still very much part of the problem we face today, not least among those white males who were part of the military machine and the security apparatus. I know this from personal experience in counselling some of them.

Nonetheless, being white and male was a privileged status. We could get a good school and tertiary education, use good sporting facilities and, when we turned eighteen, we had the vote and could more easily rise to positions of power and influence in the public arena. And not least, job reservation meant that we could easily find employment. Yes, apartheid was all about white male economic empowerment. That might no longer be the case, but we, the previously advantaged, haven't done too badly since 1994. In fact, in many ways we are still privileged in a world where racism often reigns and violence against women is rampant.

Being white, black or brown is obviously a matter of skin colour. Apartheid was built on skin colour, on how a person looked, not on intelligence, education, profession, wealth, sporting ability, artistic or musical talent – it was all a matter of skin colour. Being white, black or brown is what mattered, and determined your fate. Apartheid made it impossible to be colour-blind, and even today that is still very difficult to achieve. Racism is deeply ingrained. But while race is real it is not scientific. The notion of “race” – as distinct from ethnicity or culture – was an ancient European invention associated with “darkest Africa,” the mysterious “other.”

Scientifically the pigment of our skins has to do with whether our ancestors had too much or too little sun. It is a matter of evolutionary adaptation. As Desmond Tutu once said, white people are rather “colourless”. Our ancestors had too little sunshine, which may also be why we cannot all sing and dance as well as our compatriots who have benefitted from a

surfeit of Vitamin D. But while race may not be scientific, it is a social and political reality that has serious consequences. It may be a myth created by Europeans over the centuries to justify conquest, slavery and colonialism, but saying so does not get rid of the effects of colonial conquest and slavery. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth put it well:

“When members of the white race all enjoy every possible intellectual and material advantage on the basis of the superiority of one race and the subjection of many other races, and of the use that for centuries our race has made of both... My share in the sin against Africa or Asia for the last hundred or fifty years may be very remote or indirect, but would Europe be what it is, and would I be what I am, if that expansion had never happened...I did not take it from anybody, but simply inherited it by law.....²

Yes, racism is a powerful myth concocted to justify the way things are, just like the caste-system in India, or the class-system in the United Kingdom. It has little to do with ability, but everything to do with birth, inheritance, the way you look and the way you speak. There are those who are born to be servants, and those who are born to rule. This was the ugly lie that fed colonialism and apartheid.

And just as racism is a powerful myth, so is patriarchy, the notion that males should dominate females as a matter of course. And this obviously does not only apply to white males, but to all males, not least in our society which is riddled with violence against women as much in the townships as in the suburbs. It has taken a long while for males to recognize the injustice of the patriarchal myth even in sophisticated European countries. After all, women only got the vote in Switzerland after the Second World War—and Switzerland prides itself on being a modern society and model for democracy! Just like racism, patriarchy is a social construction of reality. And for males to change that reality it has to be deconstructed, and males should be engaged in doing that just as they must be engaged in combatting racism. But can we break the genetic code that makes us white males?

Can we break the genetic code?

Yes, conversions do happen, and the conversion of St. Paul on the Damascus Road is the paradigmatic example most quoted. However, remember this, the narrative of Paul’s conversion was not about how he got to heaven, but how he received new sight and became a changed man. The story is all about a privileged pharisee and persecutor of despised Christians outside the pale of decent society, became an apostle who ended up serving them at great cost to himself. How a bigoted racist and religionist, as well as a male chauvinist, became someone who proclaimed an inclusive gospel which embraced everyone whether they were slaves or freemen, whether they were Jews or Gentiles, whether they were male or female. The persecutor and misogynist entered the kingdom of God because God took him by the scruff of his neck and with the help of a few friends he was given a new set of eyes with which to see reality, and a new set of ears which enabled him to hear differently. But more than that, he not only heard and saw differently he had the courage to act differently. To break the rules that were unjust, unfair and kept others in bondage. And in doing so Paul discovered who he was truly meant to be, free from the bondages of the past.

² {Barth 1981:164-5}

So, can a white male change his genetic code and enter the kingdom of heaven? Or is not everything determined by ancestry and genes?

Many of Steve's ancestors were Vikings, knights, crusaders and one was a one general. His great-grandparents were British settlers and colonists. So how was it that Steve the descendant of war-like macho Vikings became a pacifist, conscientious objector and advocate of gender equality, and how come that he, the descendants of colonialists, was a proponent of post-colonialism? How did this white male South African buck the trend that his genes dictated and made a valiant attempt to enter the kingdom of God?

Virtually from the day he was born, Steve had his own mind. He may have been baptised Stephen, but he decided to be Steve. He did not play rugby and cricket; he played soccer and the guitar. He befriended strangers. He had black friends and gay friends. And he became a conscientious objector; refusing be part of the system. And he was not alone. Like other courageous young white South African males who undermined the dominant white male paradigm, he too broke the stereotype of their tribe and class. They began to see things, as Bonhoeffer once said, "from below", from the perspective of the less privileged and the oppressed. They decided not to follow the crowd of white male South Africans, but rather to seek first God's kingdom of justice and peace. It was difficult, very difficult at times, but not impossible, and the temptation to walk away was always present.

Steve Biko not only taught us that blacks had to liberate themselves, he also said they had to help whites liberate themselves and that when whites are liberated, they become black! By that he meant there were whites who had somehow broken free or been liberated from their "whiteness" by joining in the struggle against apartheid. Among them were people like Ds. Beyers Naude and Advocate Braam Fischer and those brave white women who led the Black Sash. They had consciously broken free from the captivity of their whiteness, at least as far as that was possible.

The question, then, is not *can* a white male South African enter the kingdom of God, but *how* can he do so? If the first step towards white male liberation requires acknowledging guilt for the sins we have perpetrated, rather than feeling sorry for ourselves, making excuses, denying reality, looking for ways to escape., the second is getting rid of the idea that we cannot change, that we are who we are by birth and there is nothing more to be said. But that this is a fallacy is obvious because some have broken free, refused to conform to the patterns imposed by the dominant and prevailing norms and skewed values of society. And Steve was one of them.

The role of mentors and communities

Looking back over the years to the time when Steve was growing up Isobel and I can clearly see how it was that Steve became who he was. I do not mean how he became "perfect", a model son and a pious Christian. Steve was anything but a religious person as that word is normally understood. But he did decide to follow Christ, and in doing so he managed to break with norms that governed white apartheid society, as well as the norms that governed male patriarchal society. He also managed to break with the norms of a very homophobic and patriarchal society. But he did not do so alone in isolation from others. Steve had friends and mentors, and he belonged to communities and groups that enabled, encourage and

empowered him. Who he became did not just happen overnight or in an instant. It was the outcome of a long process of formation.

Whatever influences there may have been in the family, one major factor was that Steve, as a member of this congregation, Rondebosch United, was exposed to an understanding of Christian faith that rejected apartheid and affirmed non-racialism. Steve's journey towards the kingdom heaven was enabled through the ministry of Douglas Bax and the youth ministry of Jim Cochrane. It is tragic that during the apartheid years far too many white churches reinforced racism rather than challenged it. Steve was blessed to be part of a Christian community that did the very opposite, and without that he would never have become who he became. Yes, of course, us Christians will say that transformation is the work of the Spirit in the life of an individual, but the Spirit works through human agency. And above all through communities of committed people who, from one generation to the next, pass on the values, hopes and skills that help people see things differently, break with the dominant norms of unjust, racist and patriarchal societies, and enter God's kingdom of justice. No one changes unless parents, mothers, mentors, colleagues, companions and congregations help make that happen.

Also important in Steve's journey towards the kingdom was his exposure to the teaching of the Bible in a way that not only made sense but also offered an alternative understanding of who he was and what it means to be a Christian living fully in the world. You are not going to break with white, male privilege if you read the Bible in ways that reinforce that understanding. So, you also need good teachers who help you understand what it means to be a Christian and a human being. You also need Christians mentors and icons who embody that different way of being Christian in the world. Icons such as those who influenced Steve - Martin Luther King Jr., Bonhoeffer, Beyers Naude, Desmond Tutu and Joe Wing. All of them were models that played a role in shaping Steve's changing consciousness. So did Steve's exposure when, on a sabbatical with us in the US, to the peace-witness of Mennonite Christians. And his involvement in the Student Union for Christian Action, and the wider life of a denomination that was a majority black church.

Then there was his experience of young black Christians who both befriended and challenged him. as did those who were his companions on the "journey of hope" initiated by Archbishop Tutu, which took Steve to Taizé Community in France where he had his call to the ministry.

But it is often if not only when we hear the truth from the victims of oppression, only when we hear their stories and begin to participate with them in their struggles, that we actually begin to change. White South Africans cannot change in isolation from black South Africans. You cannot become a champion of justice if you are not enabled to see injustice through the eyes of those who experience it; you cannot become a worker for liberation if you do not experience something of the pain of oppression. You cannot really hear the gospel in a life-changing way if you only hear it from white voices. You cannot overcome fear of the other if you never meet and come to know the other.

And, of undoubted importance were youth training programmes that expose young white male South Africans to their black compatriots and do so on an equal footing. Including the Volmoed Youth Leadership Training Programme to which we are inviting you this evening to contribute if you wish.

The next generation

In closing I dedicate this lecture to David de Gruchy, Steve's son and my grandson, as a representative of a new generation of hopeful white South African males who love our country and are already making a contribution to the shaping of a better, more just, compassionate and sustainable South Africa. There are lots of them, young, white male South Africans willing to engage in shaping a better future, and willing to share what they have received for the benefit of us all. This is a sign of hope, for it is so easy to give up, to resign to fate, to fear for the future, and therefore to lose hope – especially if you feel you are, like the white rhino, part of an endangered species. But we all can make a difference, and in the process become better human beings. For in the end it does not matter whether we are white or black, male or female, South African or from elsewhere. What matters is that we are human beings with God-given capacity and gifts to use for the common good of our planet, and in the process also become better human beings.

“To those who have been given much,” Jesus said, “much will be required.” Most, if not all of us here this evening, have been given much. If we hope for a better future, a better South Africa, we have to turn the assets of privilege into authentic acts of hopefulness that make a difference not just to the lives of others, but also set us free to be more truly and fully who we are meant to be. Can a white male South African enter the kingdom of heaven? Yes, we can by the grace of God and with some help from our companions on the journey.