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GRACISM

THE ART OF INCLUSION

REVISED AND EXPANDED
WITH DAVID HEILIGER



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EVERYONE HAS A DOT

Maybe you have heard of the social experiment in which ten people were to interview at a company. Before they went into the office for the interview, a red dot was painted on one cheek of each interviewee. Each interviewee was to go into the office and sit across the desk from the interviewer. After each interview, the interviewee was debriefed. Each of the ten interviewees stated that the interviewer kept staring at the dot on his or her cheek.

Here is the kicker: Out of the ten who received a painted dot, five—unbeknownst to them—were actually given a clear dot that was not visible on their skin. Yet they still felt as if the interviewer was focusing on their dot. From this experiment we learn that people feel self-conscious about whatever makes them insecure. That insecurity might relate to one's weight, gender, race, or any other distinctive that is viewed as a negative in society. Do you ever feel like people are focusing on your red dot?

When I was pulled over by police officers in the suburbs of Chicago four times within a single day, I knew that my racial dot was bright and noticeable. At first I told myself that I was being self-conscious; I tried to convince myself that race was

not the issue. After the second stop, though, I knew that race was the issue whether or not I could ever prove it.

DOTISM

It's no secret that North America used to be notorious around the world for heinous acts of slavery followed by an era of politically legislated and corporate policy-backed racial discrimination and segregation. Racial prejudice was a proud badge of honor for many in the United States in generations past. There was a time when it was widely accepted to publicly declare that only white was right and everything else, from Native American, to African, to Chinese, to Jewish, was wrong. Now many people remain unaware or in denial of the extent to which the embedded effects of our racialized roots are still at work today. For those that boldly stand behind their racially biased or abusive views, they often attempt to veil it so as not to face the consequences of cancel culture. We have seen over the past decade a new era of racial struggle in which previously dormant issues have come to the forefront. And through the channels of social media and commercial news outlets, masses of people are engaging in seemingly twenty-four-hour access to the unrest. Protests, demonstrations, and uprisings have united changemakers while inflaming those who disagree. We have a war of ideologies in which it feels like one side is fighting to protect their lives while the other is fighting to protect their livelihood.

If we look to generations past, by and large (with the help of the sovereign hand of the Almighty) it was the great struggle of blacks for their freedom, with the help of courageous whites and others, that achieved the major advancements of that day. Today we see the same movement—those in the

minority are doing whatever it takes to elevate the issues that center on their very dignity, which those in the majority have had the privilege to dismiss.

Because the cycle of racialized conflict is so relentless, racial discussions often feel forced and unsafe. Many feel the extremes: these conversations are either overplayed or underaddressed. The layers of this ongoing conflict have affected not just interpersonal relationships, but even a person's self-identity. When you have groups of people in a country who feel like they have dots on their faces and have been made to feel that their dots are ugly, unwanted, and limiting to their success, you will find corresponding behaviors that contribute to those self-perceptions. Many with dots feel as if they must overachieve in order to succeed in society. What is being revealed is that we have people throughout our country who feel unwanted and disfavored, have no reassurance that their lives matter to the collective, and who are not invited to the table of influence. Racially, those in the minority continue to face barriers to achieving the same financial or career success as their racial counterparts, and often that pathway to success is marked by forced submission, assimilation, and not rocking the boat. The message is clear: You can stay as long as you try to hide your dot and attempt to blend in.

Over decades, many dotted people have been wrongly accused and denied employment, promotions, or housing. Many people have been beaten, jailed, and treated as less than human because of their dots. So after a while, dotted persons understandably recognize that others treat them as though their dottedness is a liability. They can no longer ignore the reality that they are being prejudged based on their facial dot.

REAL LIFE

I had just returned home from consulting for a large corporate client in the heartland of the United States. One of the stories I received from an African American woman who works at the company was about her most recent racialized experience on the job. A white coworker placed a cotton plant on her desk and told her to pick it. I'm sure you can imagine how appalled the woman was. The man who did this was confronted about his distasteful act—he explained that he was simply joking.

Having spoken to the woman, it was evident to me that she didn't find the joke humorous. What was most disturbing to the black woman, as she stated it, was that this man felt comfortable with this kind of joking as an acceptable prank in his work environment. After more than ten years with the company, this woman had hoped that her dot of racial distinction was vanishing.

WHITE MALES

While these kinds of racial tensions and offenses still exist, minorities aren't the only ones feeling misjudged and pre-judged. White males are beginning to get frustrated with what inclusion might mean for them in this increasingly multicultural society.

In the case of the dotted interview experiment, imagine the white male as the interviewer. After the interview one of the interviewees states, "He was staring at my dot the whole time"—he is a dotist, in other words. The interviewee didn't realize that there was no dot on her face. How do you think the interviewer feels as he honestly protests that his interaction with the interviewee was not influenced by the presence or absence of a dot? Both persons feel hurt and misunderstood.

America finds itself at a time in history when the white male is becoming a minority figure. For the past number of centuries this majority-ruled country has been under the rule of the white majority. The white man, as he sees the world around him becoming more and more multicultural, realizes that in the times when he used to feel “in,” now he feels “out,” and it’s hard to come to terms with how someone can feel “out” in their own country. The white man has a dot of his own. Some whites may already feel as if they are prejudged and labeled as racists. They may have heard people use phrases like white supremacy, white privilege, or white dominance, and feel condemned before they even have a chance to speak. It feels unconscionable to be told that just because you are white, your opinions on issues of social justice are invalid and you are now excluded from the table of diversity. Whites are beginning to feel accused and victimized by public opinion and labeled as the oppressor. There was a time when the majority of white men enjoyed their positions of power as a privilege that was unchallenged. Now the push for diversity and multiculturalism feels threatening, and many white men are wondering whether they are a part of the inclusion.

Many of my white male brothers do not want to be associated with racism, injustice, or abusive power. They are tired of being prejudged before they are even given a chance to speak. God forbid that they slip and use the wrong terminology as it relates to other races or gender. These men are feeling the squeeze. Some are fully engaged in the cultural shift and welcome the opportunity to include others, while other white men remain resentful and protective of positions of power and privilege. If diversity is done right, everyone—including whites—should feel welcomed at the table of ideas and influence.

I have many white friends who hold a position of trust in my life. They have never launched racial epithets at minorities, they worship at multicultural churches, they don't say "all lives matter," and they don't refer to people of color as "thugs" or "those people." Yet they, and even some of my Asian and Latino friends, have been accused of racism simply for having lighter skin. They have been told that the only access to the conversation is through the door of guilt and shame. I believe strongly, however, that although my white brothers should reflect on how they might be contributing to racial hurt and systems of injustice, self-loathing should not be a prerequisite for inclusion in the journey toward racial healing. What do you think, is this dotism or disagreement?

REVERSE WHITES VERSUS DIVERSE WHITES

What I have learned over the years about some white folks is that the changing demographics in North America are unsettling to them as the population is becoming more brown. Some call it the browning of America. Many of our white brothers and sisters feel like their status of power and control is being threatened by multiculturalism.

Those who I call "reverse" whites have a deep longing to make America what it was before. They desire and even openly fight for an America that is less diverse and more safe. The "more safe" feeling doesn't include black people, brown people, immigrants, women, and the LGBTQ+ community. Safety was, and is, defined by a world where whites do not need to make any adjustments to their social order. It is a world where everyone who is different from them must adjust to their world of privilege, prominence, and power. They contend with the feeling of being replaced by others and are deeply offended by ideas where they cannot control the

narrative. In fact, they are deeply offended by having to make any adjustments.

I talked to one white woman who was absolutely irate because she had to “press 1” for English at the ATM when she wanted to access a banking service. I was amazed by how offended she was because she was so inconvenienced to be required to push an extra button one time. The mere fact of having to be minimally inclusive of people who spoke Spanish was enough to send her over the edge emotionally. For this white woman, it was as if whites were being persecuted and were now suffering at the hands of multiculturalism. This was unbelievable to me!

Reverse whites want to protect their status of systematic advantage and will rigorously do whatever it takes to turn the clock back to a time in history that was best for their period of dominance.

Diverse whites, on the other hand, realize that they are a part of a greater mosaic of people and are called on to live in a world where everyone has equality, opportunity, and dignity. They recognize that their status is based on their humanity, and not on the social construct of superiority of whiteness or inferiority of nonwhiteness.

As a result, diverse whites learn how to adjust, shift, understand, and empathize with others with whom they share the planet. Instead of resenting pressing 1 for English, they recognize that although English is the majority language of North America, our society is inclusive and many languages are spoken. Diverse whites realize that all dots are not created equal and that some people may have more dots than others. They are aware that sometimes people may wrongly accuse them of dotism or racism because of their history and the negative experiences that people of color have endured to

this day. Instead of denying and dismissing the negative experiences of people of color, diverse whites seek to understand and empathize with those who have not enjoyed the in-group majority status of dominance since the beginning of the nation's founding.

I am happy to say that I know, worship with, and have many family members who are diverse whites. I believe that if our nation, churches, campuses, and organizations are going to advance in the work of reconciliation, then we will need more and more diverse whites in our country. We will also need diverse whites to build bridges with reverse whites in ways that people of color may not have access, credibility, or opportunity to.

A SIN PROBLEM

Racism is not reserved for one color or culture of people. The sin of racism is an equal opportunity employer. (Or should I say, an equal opportunity destroyer?) Racism is not simply a skin problem but is a sin problem. While this may sound like a cliché, we must continue to sound the alarm that God hates this sin because he so loves this world. Continual reminders of the spiritual impact that sin has on people, including the sin of racism, are important so that everyone can see the negative consequences that affect many. All have sinned; all can sin, regardless of race. Therefore, it is important to note that blacks and other minorities can be racists too.

While walking down the street one day, I heard a black man using racially pejorative language referring to Mexicans. It made me think about the universality of sin, regardless of race. Even in my own multicultural church we have to disciple people out of racist mindsets. We have heard and confronted negative racial language about Asians, whites, blacks, Arabs,

and Hispanics. This transforming of our mind must reach into how we view those that come across our southern border, those we go to serve on mission trips, and those refugees that have moved into our neighborhood. Wherever there is ethnic difference combined with a societal power imbalance, you have the potential for the destructive sin of racism.

All people struggle with sins rooted in the history of superiority, inferiority, and greed. This includes not only Europeans, Spaniards, and white Americans who perpetrated slavery and colonialism, but also some Africans who sold their brothers and sisters into American slavery hundreds of years ago. It further includes the many aware countries, corporations, and religious denominations that either turned their heads or directly benefited from the horrors of American slavery.

NOT ALL DOTS ARE EQUAL

Does the phrase “Sneetches on Beaches” ring a bell to you? If it does, then you probably remember the Dr. Seuss book in which the fictional characters called Sneetches invent new ways to apply or remove stars from their bellies in order to either gain acceptance to the in-group or to become more exclusive to keep others out. This never-ending cycle of comparison was fueled by one thing—the in-group had the societal power to exclude. The in-group had the leverage to declare what was normal, who was invited, and what qualities were valuable. The in-group was in control.

It might be tempting, as we begin to acknowledge the many layers of racial division, damage, and disparity, to begin to view all discrimination or prejudice equally. However, I want to caution you to not lose sight of how important it is to always ask the question, “Who has the societal power to exclude?” In our majority-ruled country, the power that a

person has by simply being part of a majority group often goes unnoticed by the one who is in that in-group. Dotism might reveal the commonality of exclusion that we all face regardless of color, class, and culture, but racism emerges when we realize that not all dots are equal. The challenges of cultural tension that white majority folks face must not be seen as equivalent to the impact of the historical abuses, near genocide of people groups, and weight of assimilation that ethnic minorities are wrestling with and still attempting to recover from. The complex systems surrounding, supporting, and sustaining racism against people of color are unique among discriminatory divisions. The widespread and deep-rooted racial injustices that have plagued our country require us to move with focused compassion and commitment to heal their deep wounds. Although we are all a part of this healing process, I implore my white brothers and sisters to resist the urge to rush to say, “What about me? I’m discriminated against too,” but instead start with, “If this is important to you, I will make it important to me.”

EVERYONE HAS A DOT

We now live in a country that is standing face-to-face with the challenges of pulling itself out of the muddy waters of racism as an acceptable public practice. While for some this is a journey you have been on for a long time, for others you are just beginning to walk this path. Identifying our shared hardship of dotism helps us to begin to see the very personal presence of discrimination in our world. We know that in North America everyone has some sort of dot of distinction. Whether white, black, Mexican, female, male, gay, straight, disabled, or overweight, we can find much commonality in our experience of feeling the division that comes from dotism.

Everyone has the capability of putting someone else down based on that person's color, culture, class, or other distinction. No matter its form, dotism still exists because sin still exists. And would it not be a tragedy to see people of color turn around and become the most vicious dotists of all against others? Would it not be a terrible cultural shift to see women step on the masculinity of their gender counterparts to gain their liberation? Whether the pendulum of dotism swings to one extreme or the other, it is just as debased and evil. Addressing this dotism can be our shared pathway forward in addressing the deeper, more complex issues of racism that have overwhelmed so many for so long.

There must be an answer to dotism that doesn't leave people feeling left out, judged, and discriminated against. There must be an answer for those in the power position who want to face the harsh realities of our past without being forced into self-loathing and guilt. There must be a theological response to racism in the culture and racial segregation in the church. Right? There is—it's gracism.

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