

The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race
Willie Jennings

Introduction

A renowned scholar, Willie Jennings is a graduate of Calvin College who received his MDiv from Fuller Seminary and his PhD from Duke Divinity. As the title indicates, his *Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* explores how theology itself operated as the arena in which race developed as an artificial concept. This is a weighty claim that ECO pastors, leaders, and laypersons should deeply reflect on: it's not just that racism is something "over there" in certain corners of society, or "back then" among colonialists who claimed to be Christians. Rather, deeply racist assumptions continue to feed theological structures within the church in pervasive and overlooked ways. Fortunately, Jennings provides us with two tools to start to dismantle these structures. For one, he provides us with a masterful example of how to analyze individual theologies for faulty and deeply embedded racist assumptions. Second, he gives us concrete ways to respond. By committing ourselves to the community, context, and even the very soil in which God has planted us, we can imagine a world of renewed intimacy between people of all backgrounds through the work of our Messiah: Jesus of Nazareth.

Summary

Jennings begins with a personal story that occurred when he was 12 years old. A pair of ministers from the Reformed Church in his neighborhood approached him and his mother in their yard. They had come to invite them to their church functions using a stiffly rehearsed speech. One bent down to speak with Jennings "like [he] was a kindergartener or someone with little intelligence." Retrospectively, Jennings notes that "The strangeness of this event lay not only in their appearance in our backyard but also in the obliviousness of these men as to whom they were addressing—Mary Jennings, one of the pillars of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. I thought it incredibly odd that they never once asked her if she went to church, if she was a Christian, or even if she believed in God." Jennings' mother eventually interrupted the local missionaries to inform them that she was already an active member of another congregation, but the impression of the exchange remained with him and left him with a lingering question: "Why did they not know us? They should have known us very well."

Jennings answers his own question: these two well-meaning, local white missionaries were unable to imagine the African-American Jennings and his mother as fellow believers who could be engaged with the same intimacy as biological family. They operated out of a broken understanding of how to connect with those around them in the light of the gospel. The roots of that broken understanding go way back.

When the colonialists landed on the shores of the "new" world in the 16th and 17th century, they brought the Christian tradition with them. But they brought a twisted understanding of the gospel message that was undergirded by a backward notion of hospitality. *They* - the colonialists - took over the role of a host and demanded that natives they encountered enter into *their* cultural understandings. This arrogant assumption prevented the colonialists from developing the deep, genuine, and mutual relationships which the gospel invites its listeners to

embrace. Unfortunately, this arrogant assumption got deeply implanted into Christianity in the West, causing what Jennings calls a diseased social imagination. As a sickening result, often the very ways that we teach, spread, and understand the gospel message hinders the deep relationships among diverse communities of people which the gospel is supposed to create.

It's worth pausing to consider how the outline of Jennings' book shapes the exploration he puts on offer. Jennings' work is broken into three parts, each of which centers on a key word that relates to the problematic development of 'race' as a concept. See the glossary below for more on each of these, but in short: the notion of 'race' can only exist once people have been forcibly removed - or *displaced* - from their native land. Once this happens, people can then be artificially identified on a sliding scale value that relies solely on skin color. Jennings' theological examinations helps us see the spread of this faulty social imagination which resists the holistic – not just linguistic - translation the gospel must rely on for its message to be spread, as well as the genuine intimacy it should create between those who spread the gospel and those who receive it.

In the first two parts of his work, Jennings takes a close look at four figures: Gomes Eanes de Azurara (or Zurara), the royal chronicler of Prince Henry of Portugal in 1444 when the monarch received a shipment of captured Africans; José de Acosta Porres (or Acosta), a brilliant Spanish Jesuit who arrived in Peru in 1572; the 19th century English bishop and South African missionary John William Colenso; and the 18th century black slave and published author Olaudah Equiano. It should sober us to realize that the first three white figures were highly theologically educated. Yet despite their knowledge, they imposed deeply faulty theological assumptions on the inhabitants of the lands their nations. The fourth figure - the freed slave of Equiano – Jennings shows us his persistent cry and search for intimacy. This search was consistently refused by white Christians who should have viewed him as a brother. Jennings' choice to select four, well-chosen figures is significant in another respect: he indicates that there is no rising above the details our own history. One of the false assumptions of 'whiteness' is that it possesses an objective, neutral, and 'normal' perspective, one which abstracts people from their context. The very form of Jennings book (note it is not a systematic theology) resists this posture.

In the third and final part of this work, Jennings considers how we can embrace the intimacy promised by the gospel. For a start, we should reclaim our connection with the earth and the land on which we walk. If we want to go farther, we should explore ways to resist capitalistic notions of private property which imagine the land as something to be owned and 'developed' instead of as a gift God gives use to share with others in an interdependent way of life. Ultimately, the seeds of a renewed social imagination in which all people - regardless of skin color or any other falsely construed identity - are seen as intimate family germinates when we remember the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth. He entered our world so that we could be invited into the story of Israel. It is the realization that we are Gentiles - outsiders who have been welcomed in - which equips us to readily enter into the lives of others, rather than demand that they conform to the world we have falsely constructed for ourselves.

Suggested Pastoral and Ministerial Implications:

Preaching and Teaching:

Leaders and speakers may want to consider the following as preaching or teaching points:

- The dangers of supersessionism, explicitly reminding congregants that we are outsiders who - as Gentiles - have been grafted into Israel (e.g. Romans 11:11-31)
- The Jewishness of Jesus (e.g. Matthew 1:1-17)
- Our dependence on God and his provision to us through the land, and our identity as creatures (e.g. Genesis 1-2)
- How the Holy Spirit equips disciples to literally (and figuratively) 'learn the language' of another and enter into their life and context with the reconciling hope of the gospel (e.g. Acts 2:1-13)
- Use and refer to the Old Testament heavily, reminding congregants that the story of Israel is ours only through the work of Jesus Christ

Ecclesial Activity:

Given resources, context, and feasibility, church sessions and leadership may want to consider:

- Promoting events and activities which encourage covenant partners to pay attention to and care for their ecological location and natural environment: e.g. gardening and farming, composting, camping and backpacking, recycling and waste reduction, limiting of economic and material consumption
- Promoting events and activities which directly serve and *learn from* the congregation's immediate neighbors. Specifically, in one of the video links below Jennings recommends that church's directly ask and answer the question: "why do we live where we live?"
- Removing images which portray Jesus as white and favoring those which indicate Jesus' Middle Eastern features and Jewish ancestry
- Exploring ways of creating and encouraging communal, monastic-like ownership of land and living space among covenant partners

Glossary:

Displacement: literally, this word means "the moving of something from its place or position." Jennings points out that someone can only be identified by their "race" after they have been disassociated from their "place". There are two aspects to this. Consider the likely possibility that someone might consider someone from their own city as 'different' and another as 'similar' solely because of a comparison of skin tone. This type of thinking - or imagination (see next definition) - can only exist because historically, the ancestors of one or both were removed from their native land. This type of thinking can also only persist if their shared geographical location is not seen as a common source of identification. In this way, people continue to operate as if they are 'displaced' from the very places on which they share their livelihood with others.

Imagination: For Jennings, the human imagination can be healthy or unhealthy. It can encourage or prevent us from seeing and acting out of the reality of the gospel. "Race" ultimately relies on a faulty - and often hidden - imagination. We are divided by race and over issues of race

because we fail to imagine ourselves as intimately connected to our surroundings and to each other, regardless of skin tone. The overcoming of race and racism is to be found in a renewing of our imagination. This renewed imagination sees the profound opportunity for community and even intimacy across socio-economic and cultural differences (Acts 2).

Intimacy: Jennings makes a significant and powerful choice not to use the word "reconciliation" in his work, and to instead to favor the word intimacy. The problem with the word "reconciliation" is that it has become too abstract and theoretical. (This type of abstract theological thinking is directly related to the notion of "displacement"; see above.) "Reconciliation" gets tangled up in systematic debates over how Christ atones for human sins. This prevents us from wondering how - in Christ Jesus - the door of hostility is broken down between specific people in specific times and places. Jesus paves the way not just for cordial relationships, but deeply close and loving ones.

Translation: Translation does not only take place between two different languages. It also takes place between two different ways of life. Because of this, the act of translation also sheds new light on the material that is being translated. It requires both communication and communion between the one doing the translating and those receiving it. Because of this, translation cannot take place without a type of transformation occurring among those who are taking part in the work of translation. This is a profound implication of the gospel message and the very fact that it demands translation. There is no one culture or language that gets to claim it has the best grasp of the content of the gospel message – only the incarnate Jew from Nazareth who is the Word made flesh.

Supersessionism: the faulty theological assumption - whether implicit or explicit - that the church replaces the people of Israel. (See Romans 11:11-31 for a profound biblical check to supersessionistic thinking.)

Additional resources:

This book is highly recommended. However, it is demanding and assumes the readership is highly theologically trained. The following videos are an excellent resource for continuing to explore the content and implications of Jennings' work in lieu of or alongside reading the full text itself:

- 5 minute visual illustration which summarizes Jennings' work: [Thketch of The Christian Imagination by Jennings](#)
- 20 minute interview (at Calvin College): [Rootedness: Beyond Skin Deep](#)
- 55 minute book lecture for PC(USA) affiliates: ["The Origin of Race" - Dr. Willie Jennings](#)
- 1 hour, 15 minute book discussion with On Script podcast: [Willie Jennings - Race and Christian Theology](#)