



## Neither Black nor White? Zimbabwe 2000

**A**NOTHER EDITORIAL FROM ZIMBABWE. THIS TIME, TERRIBLY AND TERRIFYINGLY, against a backdrop of political intimidation and murder. Neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, says Paul in Galatians—and by implication, surely, neither black nor white. And, heaven help us, that might be right. Political murder in present Zimbabwe knows no color barrier. People, black and white, are dying here, even as I write—issues of color and land, though real and complex, used now as a ruse to crush opposition (black or white) to the present government.

Though the government's "enemies" list consists now primarily of black political opponents (the true danger), it started, this time around, with whites—white commercial farmers (many of them third- and fourth-generation Africans) declared "enemies of the state" and their farms illegally invaded by government-sponsored so-called "war veterans." The real issue, to be sure, is power—more precisely, the fear of its loss—and the present government, recognizing its vulnerability by having lost the recent referendum on a new constitution, has demonstrated that it will do whatever it takes to hold on to the reins (and access to the public trough).

I confess that the daily scapegoating of "whites" as the cause for all the country's ills has had a chilling effect on me and the eight students here with me in the Luther Seminary in Zimbabwe program. Editing the manuscripts on Galatians in this issue, I have rejoiced in Paul's implication that in Christ there is neither black nor white, and I have experienced that happy reality, even in civil life, in previous trips to Zimbabwe. But now, the principalities and powers are working desperately to divide people by race, stirring up hatred as a replacement for policy. In this world, I suddenly know what it feels like to be suspect or even "enemy" simply because of my color (as countless others have known before me). To be sure, Americans have not so far been targeted by the regime, but the daily disparaging of "whites" by the highest party officials and in the government-controlled media must eventually have its effect. Do I really want to stake my life on being recognized as non-British? I have practiced singing "I'm a Yankee Doodle dandy," complete with Jimmy Cagney's dance steps, but I am not confident the point will be understood.

Still, the overall "feel" of our stay has been anything but negative. We have, in

fact, experienced an amazing demonstration of the promise that, finally, the gates of hell cannot prevail against the gospel of God. That became most clear to us on Good Friday, when we attended worship at Martin Luther Church in downtown Harare. It was a powerful and moving experience, filled with African songs, drums, and dance. The sermon reminded us that the title on the cross, labeling Jesus “King,” turns out to be true even in today’s Zimbabwe, despite the fact that the government then thought it was a jest and the one here now thinks the kingship belongs to it alone. Then, singing choruses, we processed outside to a large wooden cross (leaned over to the ground), where, as we sang endless verses of “Were you there...,” people filed by, one by one, to kneel for prayer and intercession with their hands on the cross. It took a long time, and emotions were evident as people brought the present troubled situation “to the cross.” Then the cross was raised “as a sign that it remains valid today for this people and this place.” We processed back inside where the prayers were repeated aloud—petition after petition for peace and reconciliation in Zimbabwe. It was a time of great pain but also a time of significant hope. Eventually, our group was introduced and thanked profusely for coming to be with them, to pray with them, even when tourist visits “are being canceled by the thousands.”

Even if nothing else had happened on this trip for us other than this opportunity to pray together with our African brothers and sisters at the cross of Jesus for peace and unity in Zimbabwe, the trip would have been worthwhile. If we had had to leave that afternoon, our “cross-cultural” experience would have been rich and profound.

It was, of course, more than a cross-cultural experience. It was an experience of the gospel, an experience of Gal 3:28. Here, at least, we had entered a world where there was neither black nor white, neither American nor Zimbabwean. That does not mean there was no difference of opinion, no difference in background, no difference in political orientation, no difference in economic status, indeed, no difference in color among the people gathered that day for worship. Certainly there was—many of those differences raising questions of justice that continue to cry out for resolution. But there was safety and hope in the midst of difference, even in the midst of terror, for we knew one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, and we were at home together in the house of the Lord. Paul’s claim and promise is that precisely those divisions that produce deadly tribalism, in every place and every age, are overcome in the reconciling death of Jesus—and, for some of us, Good Friday 2000 wonderfully made the point.

The missionary enterprise that brought the gospel to Africa was fraught with many an error. But the contact between north and south, between black and white was inevitable; and perhaps, given human nature, the conflicts that came with it were inevitable as well. But, make no mistake, given the encounter, the missionary enterprise also brought the only story large enough to overcome the xenophobia and hatred of both colonialism and tribalism: the gospel of Christ—proclaiming

the destruction of all dividing walls of hostility. In Zimbabwe 2000 this promise is sometimes difficult to believe and, worse, dangerous to enact. But it was palpable in our Good Friday worship and in our subsequent contacts with the Christians of Zimbabwe. It remains a radical and powerful notion: it alone, for example, made us comfortable in worship on the First Sunday after Easter as the only whites in a populous black township on the outskirts of Harare (a “high density suburb” where there has been no small amount of political unrest) and, more recently, far out in the bush, welcomed and fed by villagers totally unaccustomed to white faces—small “protests” helping to undermine the cynical attempts to turn blacks against whites. The promise of the gospel remains the hope for this troubled people, and the Christians of Zimbabwe, living in an increasingly apocalyptic milieu, know well that this is true. In all of this, we discovered anew why we have come—not as tourists, but as Christians. We pray that the Lord Jesus will teach us how to bear his name.

May the Lord rise anew this Easter season, for us and in us and for the people of Zimbabwe. May God’s resurrection victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil become visible in this moment—even, where God sees hearts hard and cold, striking down the evil ones who hold this people hostage.

—F.J.G.  
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