



**THE CHURCH BEING THE CHURCH: ORGANIZING CHRISTIANS
WITH PRIVILEGE**

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**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2015
November, 2015
Grand Rapids, Michigan**

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Abstract

In today's world there are many ways in which people can be oppressed. This paper examines how certain inner roots, deeply embedded in human nature, are at the heart of many of the oppressions we see every day. These roots are things such as dehumanization, individualism and others. The paper examines first the things that seem to hold people back and then, through research and the gospel examining how those barriers can be taken away to form new pathways that enable individuals to combat these forms of oppression. By learning from history/theology, psychology and sociology we may be able to develop more effective programs and campaigns for change in the future.

Keywords: affluence, privilege, vulnerability, fear, dehumanization

Introduction

To many who work with people it is pretty clear from the start that humans are messy. People can seem ridiculous or illogical, and despite all of their best efforts to be unique there are some things that all are searching for and striving after. Most of the time these things are similar in nature though they may take on different forms: for example two people may want to appear wealthy so one spends their money on cars while the other on vacations. Both are essentially going after the same thing but do so through different methods. Though this example is simplistic at best it reflects something that many people often forget, that we are all, at the core, more similar than different.

To a culture that prizes individuality and independence this thought can be a not only uncomfortable, but also a threatening reality as well (Dr. J Johnson, lecture, August 8, 2015). It is natural human tendency to avoid things that are uncomfortable or threatening, look at evolutionary ideals or even to your own life to see this in action. This is an important thing to note because it goes towards almost everything further on in this paper: the problems, the roots, and the solutions. Human beings are both complex and simplistic creatures. Though the brain is incredibly powerful it is also lazy, sticking to heuristics and assumptions making changing one's beliefs incredibly difficult. Advocates and allies have sought change on many levels for centuries and the tension and division between the upper and lower classes has been noted even further back. Marx and Engels in their "Communist Manifesto", make an argument that there are two groups: the self interested bourgeoisie who keep the lower class low by means that benefit themselves and the disenfranchised proletarians who will inevitably rise against this smaller more powerful class (1845). There have been small examples of this dynamic throughout history: civil rights movement,

women's suffrage, French revolution, the Exodus of the Jews; however there always remains the tension because there still always remains an upper and a lower class. If these tensions and realities have been around for so long and brilliant people and movements have not abolished it what could be done differently?

It is not the purpose of this paper to give an answer on how to abolish these tensions and create a utopia. As a Christian I know this to be impossible until Christ comes again, however as a Christian I also know that he gave us tools and abilities to make this world better and to persevere against the relentless tides that sweep back in. What we will see is that what is at the core of the gospel is also what is at the core of what can fight against the roots explored in this paper that lead to oppression. And let me add that it is also not the purpose of this paper to look down upon privilege or American Christians, but to call out the potential that sometimes seems forgotten.

Context

It isn't hard today to see the tides we fight against, one only has to turn the news on today to see episodes of hate, oppression and discrimination. The effect that this rampant display of hurt has on society and society's response to these tragedies will be explored further on in this paper. However, what is often missed from these reports is the truth behind many of these tragedies; and that is often oppression.

When we hear of a massacre in an African American Church in South Carolina and the news reports it as a tragedy, which is true, we must also remember to see it as racism. This extends in to things that don't even make it in to the news, such as the fact that many jobs that allow upward movement operate on what Mills calls "white time", disregarding

the realities and challenges of the population in the lower social economic status (2014). To succeed in a capitalistic, individualistic society one must assimilate the ideals of the “majority” into how they conduct themselves, if not, one may not succeed. Mills talks about this concept extensively; examining how difficult it is for someone whose life has shown them that these ideals and priorities do not help them. For many in a low socioeconomic status, relationships are the capital by which one weighs decisions. This is because relationships remain constant where as jobs come and go, bosses change and so do expectations. Thus, adapting to the pace and ideal set by those in privilege becomes not only difficult, but sometimes impossible (2014). Though Mills was talking more specifically to Racism, others take on explaining these differences to a class arena with much the same result. Western, Sosnaud and Tach look at how economic insecurity, namely those who are just getting by with what they have, are often left behind and thus stratification increases (2012). What becomes clear after just looking at these two arenas: racism and classism, is that these issues we face are often cyclically reinforced. To demonstrate this concept, look at an example: if you are just getting by and making ends meet, perhaps saving just a little bit and your car breaks down completely, you have no money to fix it if you want to pay all the other bills you have, so you try the bus system. The bus system is unreliable at best and you begin to arrive late for work. You get fired and stratification increases because the same thing that got you fired is the same thing that makes one unappealing to new employers (Western, Sosnaud & Tach, 2012). If however you have a good network and someone can let you borrow a car for a little while, or carpool or perhaps watch your kids so you can catch an earlier bus (all made easier with having a partner) you may just keep your job (Western, Sosnaud & Tach, 2012). However to many in privilege the

consequences which we just described can come off as lazy, inconsiderate to timelines, and rude which creates a relationship of tension and misunderstanding that often leads to further discrimination and reinforced stereotypes.

The fact that we can show similarities between the arguments made on two separate discriminations is not surprising. According to some research that has been done there is often a correlation between prejudices, indicating that when a person has one prejudice they are likely to hold more simultaneously (Aosved, Long & Voller, 2009). And though these issues may often seem different it could be that they all stem from similar roots. It would be nice if they could be separated out, if science could tell us how exactly sexism happens or racism, but unfortunately it is not that simple. The similarities between these isms could be because the subjects of the prejudices are similar or because what characteristics get placed on groups that are ostracized that makes it easier to discriminate (Aosved, Long & Voller, 2009; Tam, Hewstone, Cairns, Tausch, Maio, & Kenworthy, 2007). There are mainly two underpinnings that seem to not only to correlate to most prejudices, but are also places of potential progress in these areas. Those underpinnings are dehumanization/infracumanization and lack of vulnerability.

First a look at dehumanization/infracumanization, and we will use the word dehumanization to refer to both bodies of literature on the topic. The first characteristic of dehumanization is that, as its name suggests, it denies full humanness to others (Wilde, Martin & Goff 2014). This is not to say that people who demonstrate dehumanization think that others are animals or some other form of life, but that they deny other people certain characteristics that researchers have wagered to be uniquely human. For example, in one study they found that when a person ranks high in dehumanization towards another group

they often only associate primary emotions with that group, such as sad, mad or happy. Deeper more complex emotions are not associated with the “out-group”, such as regret, shame, or pride (Blatz, Day & Schryer 2013). Some research has distinguished this aspect of dehumanization (lack of complex emotions) from others by calling it infrahumanization, however results can be very similar. This was also looked at extensively when it came to apologies done by an out-group to an oppressed or hurt group. The findings were that apologies were not accepted as completely if the group apologized using emotional wording that included secondary emotions, this was thought to be not genuine and false (Blatz, Day & Schryer 2013). Denying a person’s emotional range can lead to a cycle of oppression. One group treating the other poorly because they believe they can, as they are less than human and not capable of feeling the full effect of their actions. Leading to the oppressed group not forgiving the other group when they try to apologize, as they too do not give them the emotional depth of humans. The groups react in a way that only reinforces the stereotypes of violence, ignorance, irrationality and the cycle continues.

But what is even more damaging are the consequences both politically and socially when dehumanization takes a place at the table. According to Zhang, Chan, Teng, and Zhang when dehumanization is present in a person’s attitudes they are less likely to be empathetic or helpful to that person (2015). This has serious consequences for people in hard situations, as we talked about above with economic insecurity this lack of understanding and empathy can increase stratification and tensions between groups. Even more dangerous is specifically the relationship between black young men and police. A multitude of studies across different methods consistently show that young black men are perceived as older and more dangerous than their white counterparts and thus receive

harsher and more severe actions against them (Wilde, Martin & Goff 2014). This can lead to both deadly consequences and a lack of responsibility, again creating huge chasms of distance, fear and anger between groups.

What can be done about this? The answer is both simple and complicated, groups need to find a common identity. Once groups form a common identity they are able to form their own in-group. This makes it possible for emotions that were once not attributed to them, to now be ascribed to them (Riek, Mania, Gaertner, McDonald, & Lamoreaux, 2010). This common identity can also combat yet another aspect of dehumanization which is perception of threat. Threat can come in many forms: realistic, symbolic and other subset of threat but each one challenges something important to a group. When a group experiences these threats it can drastically increase intergroup bias (Riek, Mania & Gaertner 2006). The correlation between common identity and reduced threat can be understood in terms of ascribed emotions. One is more likely to trust someone they believe can show remorse and regret, both of which are secondary emotions and thus a common identity can reduce dehumanization (Riek et al. 2010; Ensari & Miller 2002). However, some research it was found that just increasing social connection, specifically social connection with an already established in-group, could have the opposite effect and increase dehumanization. It found that increasing interpersonal security had the most impact on dehumanization, that is feeling loved, a sense of belonging, protected and cared for in all social interactions (Zhang, Chan, Teng, & Zhang 2015). Belonging can only come after connection, and connection happens when someone is fully seen, heard and valued. And true belonging does not require disdain, hate or fear of others (Brown, 2012). What

this tells us is that we must not only increase feeling secure in our immediate networks but in our every day lives as well.

However, in an individualistic culture the type of connection described above is rare. In the United States, especially in the upper middle class, and even more specifically in the conservative Christian sphere, all groups we will look at more later: vulnerability is often seen as weakness. This is not to condemn those who come from this background, I myself come from that background, however we must understand that this unwillingness to be vulnerable is a defense mechanism, and though it is learned young and solidified as one ages it keeps many isolated. What this does is it keeps people at a distance and keeps both them and us from being known (Brown, 2012). As we just discussed being known, loved, and cared for are key components to combating a potential underlying root of many issues in our society and yet these same concepts which have been proven to help, also scare many half to death. In her Book “Daring Greatly” Brown talks in depth about the connection of these things, the risks and rewards and the incredible benefits and freedom, living vulnerably and into deep connection has, not only for oneself but for others as well. Brown never ventures to say that vulnerability is easy, in fact she often talks about how difficult it is, how scary and how much work must be put in to unmasking ourselves and being vulnerable really takes.

“If we’re going to find our way out of shame and back to each other, vulnerability is the path and courage is the light.” (Brown, pg. 110 2012).

History

It is both overwhelming and beautiful to understand how the brain, society and background perpetuate the problems we see today. It is overwhelming because it seems so unconscious and pervasive, but it is beautiful because we realize that once a pattern is broken new ones, with equal tenacity and prevalence can start. Looking at how these concepts have played out in the past is enlightening. One movement that has arguably been one of the most influential movements of all time is that of Christianity. Starting off in one of the smallest regions of the world by one of the smallest people groups, it grew to include more people from more nations than almost any other religion or movement. Not only are the sheer numbers incredible, but it is also incredible because so much of Christianity was counter cultural to the religions of it's day and even many cultures today, yet it continues to grow.

First, it is important to note that there were many natural events that enabled the rapid growth of Christianity that may or may not happen in the future. Second, though these natural events enabled the rapid growth of Christianity it is not saying that it was these events that grew this worldview but rather the actions of those holding this world view in the midst of those events. One such example of this was the plagues of the early 1340's. These were tragedies of their time, but while many were fleeing the "infected" areas many Christians went in to the areas tending those who were sick. This tending to basic needs increased the survival chances of many and the relationships that many formed with Christians often converted them when they survived (Stark, 1997). In a study done many years later, it was found that relationships were the number one factor in conversion to a new religion, whether from a different religion or from no religion (Stark, 1997). What this shows us is yet another strong indicator of the importance of belonging, not only on one's

willingness to engage with others but also on ones willingness to believe in others. Christians were counter cultural in that they did not look out for themselves, they put others first and had freedom in the face of despair that many not only admired but desired. Though the natural event facilitated this mass influencing, it was not the circumstances but the courage and compassion in the face of those circumstances that impacted and changed the many (Stark, 1997).

During this time Christianity demonstrated another characteristic that is important: it had answers and the answers made sense. No other religions during the time, or before, could account for suffering in the massive sense, nor could they provide peace or hope in the midst of them. However Christianity did, it was not only the compassion of the Christians themselves but the sense they made and the hope they brought in the beliefs they shared (Stark, 1997). Had Christianity not made sense, or had not provided the answers it did, though many would have survived because of their aid, it is unlikely they would have been convinced or converted to Christianity; because although belief is not the result of assessing truth is the result of some kind of reasoning (Farnell, 2013).

What we have been understanding is how to remove the barriers already in place to our connection, and what this movement tells us is a key element to capitalizing on those connections is logic. This may sound cold or manipulative but it isn't; in many other movements they too did not have momentum until their was a connection: Civil Rights and Martin Luther King JR, Ghani in India, Nelson Mandella in South Africa: these movements like Christianity succeeded not only because they were logical and fighting for people's rights, but because people were able to feel connected to those leading/sharing.

It is hard to say however if all of these movements truly changed someone's worldview because there was no study to prove such a thing. The results were good, though we know from history and the news that many of the prejudices and oppressions they were fighting against are still around today. This in large part due to the fact that there are multiple phases of changing someone's (or society's) mind, as you move through those phases a particular person or event has less impact (Wondergem Eardley, 2010). This is not surprising as worldviews are deeply entrenched in one's unconscious psychology, transmitted through culture and influenced by personal personality (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). What this means is that though during the height of these movements people may have been influenced or even compelled people to act, by these new worldviews, as time goes on and new cultural ideals come in the amount of influence of that previous thought or person decreases. This is what makes Christianity so unique and interesting. No doubt the reality that it is the majority culture in many places impacts its continued prevalence and influence, but beyond that Christianity is a worldview change that begins and ends in relationship, and a relationship that is always present and available which cannot be said for other movements.

Relationships are a form of experience, and experiences are a way of learning which can alter worldviews (Osborne, 1985). Experience and relationship shape much of our thinking and perceptions, on how the world works and our part in it. Logic then concludes that if the perceptions that are products of experience/relationships are indicators of future action it would stand to reason they influence and could change one's worldview (Osborne, 1985). But again, these are not hard and fast rules nor are they sure things. Many families have been torn over differences in worldviews despite being close, and

though there have been hundreds of theories and postulated frameworks they all agree that humans vary (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Therefore though it is easy to simplify and categorize humans we miss vital pieces when we do not approach each person as an individual (Brown, 2013). That is not to say that many of these observations, theories and frameworks can not be applied broadly or that they are unreliable but it is saying that one can never expect things to go perfectly or as planned when dealing with people.

Today

With all this being said, where does that leave us today? It leaves us with a framework of understanding the human psyche and the barriers we are presented with, a framework for societies barriers, understanding how research has shown a change in worldviews to take place, along with what history has shown us. Though this framework is not complete it gives us a good launching pad for understanding of how to approach to people different from us.

Things we know: there are major barriers that keep humans from connecting with, caring for, and standing up to other human beings. These things we have seen can be rooted in dehumanization (which is rooted in fear and lack of vulnerability), and an individualized consumer culture. But another thing that has a huge influence today that must not be over looked is technology. Technology does both wonderful things for efforts of change and terrible things for those efforts. Throughout this study I interviewed people from multiple generations and one thing that many in the older generations mentioned was the idea of empathy fatigue. Prior to technology they mentioned how when their community would hear of a tragedy money, resources and people would flock to where

that was in order to give aid. However, today you turn on the news and hear about a new tragedy every day, “you just get overwhelmed” many would say. This constant bringing of attention to tragedies and injustices can be good, but it also has a dangerous side effect of numbing people to the needs of others.

Despite the fact that there has been a clear numbing effect on the collective conscious of many, there is still evidence that the same things that worked in history can still have an effect today. In research done on American Christian giving it was found that many Christians do not give as generously as they thought they did, and when they did give it was often to a person they knew, cause that was personal or an institution (namely church home) that in some way benefitted them. This again demonstrating the power and influence of connections. This is not saying that American Christians are selfish and uncaring, in fact according to the same research most Americans, even those among the upper middle class, see themselves as just getting by (Smith, Emerson & Snell, 2008). This has huge implications for how this population should be approached. And this group is important to understand as they: both strong Christians as identified and defined by the study and self identified yet not “committed” Christian, comprise 75% of the American population (Smith, Emerson & Snell, 2008)! What is so important to understand is the perception of scarcity and intergroup focus that this group, like many Americans has. So the question becomes about how to you change this mindset and motivate this population. This motivation continues to come more consistently out of concrete experience/relationships than concepts or theories, and that generous giving must be tied to self interest (Smith, Emerson, & Snell, 2008). What we also know from previous research on worldviews and also on dehumanization is that concrete experience, connection and

relationships are crucial to change. We must instead of attacking someone, we must lean in and understand/connect. Dale Carnegie understood this concept of winning others over years ago, he understood that when confronting anyone you must first understand them and have a rapport with them, otherwise your ideas will go nowhere (1981). This is not only because people like to be treated nicely but also because when a person is in the in-group, they receive all sorts of benefits just by being perceived as “one of us” (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). But these relationships take time, and becoming vulnerable enough to connect with someone is no easy task. When approaching this group remember that their perception of what they can afford and what others think they can afford might be different, and that though it may take time to get to know their side of things that connection and rapport will go a long way. Not only does the psychology research, giving research and expertise of those today tell us this but in the example of Christianity and its rise also points to the priceless aspect of relationships and patience.

Despite the evidence for patience and relationships many approach Christians with privilege in a “you should know” type of attitude. Instead of approaching these populations with a mentality of “lagging skills” like social workers often do for other populations, they are approached with disdain and impatience. Wernick, in her work with young adults with wealth, recognized that an understanding privilege and oppression is often not there and must be first addressed in a supportive and patient environment (2012). Another study demonstrated this need for education outside of simply experience, when it looked at how white, Christian students experienced and processed events, in which they were the minority. The study showed that though the youth seemed to have a realization of what it felt like to be a few in a group of a lot, they did not recognize the privilege they still held

(Moran, Lang & Oliver 2007). What is also critical to remember is that worldviews, beliefs, schemas are all subconscious and deeply embedded in a person. To change or alter this requires a great deal of effort, time and energy. This energy is often emotional and for a group of people, often distant from their emotions it, can be scary and uncharted territory.

For many in places of privilege, they maintain that position by keeping their eye on the bottom line and keeping their emotions in check. This too is an adaptive mechanism put in place, taught and continued in order to enable a person to succeed in the system that they live. Rather than seeking to change or challenge this perspective, to understand and craft one's approach to fit in to this framework may have more effective results. Therefore keeping in mind that responsibilities are valued over relationships and self-interested investments are given the most should lead your approach in a very different direction (Carnegie, 1981).

Remembering also that within this group of people you have variance may be in your best interest. One study wanted to understand what were white Christians leanings were toward social justice. What they found was that conservatives had a much more individualistic, pull yourself up, it's a one on one type of leaning than the so-called liberals. The liberals saw things much more systemically and had a bigger leaning toward actions that went more macro than micro (Todd, McConnell & Suffrin, 2014). What this tells us is that within a group there is even variance towards which type of intervention one might lean. Carnegie talks in his book how it is important to recognize how your ideas already fit in to the ideas of the person you are talking with, having it be something they already want to do leads to more results (1981). Rather than adding another thing on to their plate, rather than adding one more thing they should care about and overwhelming or giving

them empathy fatigue one might try energizing them through common connection (Brown, 2012).

Finally let us remember that people all want to be comfortable and this comfort is not a bad thing, and is often associated with a feeling of contentedness and peace; two things that are rare and valuable. However, there can be a down side to being too comfortable. We all like to stay within our spheres and not think about things that are hard. This is often why Sunday mornings are some of the most segregated times of the week (Cleveland, 2015). People search out church often to be uplifted and encouraged and that doesn't happen as easily when inequality, prejudice and stratification are staring you in the face. This type of segregation and warm and fuzzy seeking behavior is not only damaging and dangerous but also wrong. It is dangerous because it doesn't help those with privilege engage "safely" in conversations about hard issues, and it doesn't foster relationships between different groups which we have examined already to sometimes have deadly consequences. When people are continually separated they are not challenged, and all other challenges then become theoretical rather than experiential. These types of pseudo experiences or discussions do not have the same impact on an individual as real experience, learning and relationships do (Osborne, 1985). This takes away all accountability because one is not faced with the injustice. Timothy Keller in his book "Generous Justice" talks specifically to what the reality of justice in a Christian life should look like and why (2010). He talks about what justice means Biblically, what community looks like Biblically, why justice is important and how to do it. But so often today American Christians are so far removed from suffering that they have no idea how to respond when it

faces them. Many believe others will do it or are more equipped to do it, or they themselves aren't capable or responsible and thus they do not activate.

However the Bible is clear that it is in fact those that have, whether that be ability or resources, who are responsible for those that have not (Ruston, 1978). It is also apparent that the culture of individualism, the idea that one is responsible for themselves, is harmful to collective action. These two combined enable many with privilege to have intentional ignorance and to admonish their responsibility. Privilege not only is insulating but cushions development in a lot of ways. It protects, but this protection also leads to certain understandings never developing, and though the "privileged mindset" is often considered to objective what we can clearly see is that people are hardly ever purely objective (Stoubt, Fox & Fine, 2012). This perhaps why it is so important to understand and to influence those underlying roots, that drive perceptions and actions.

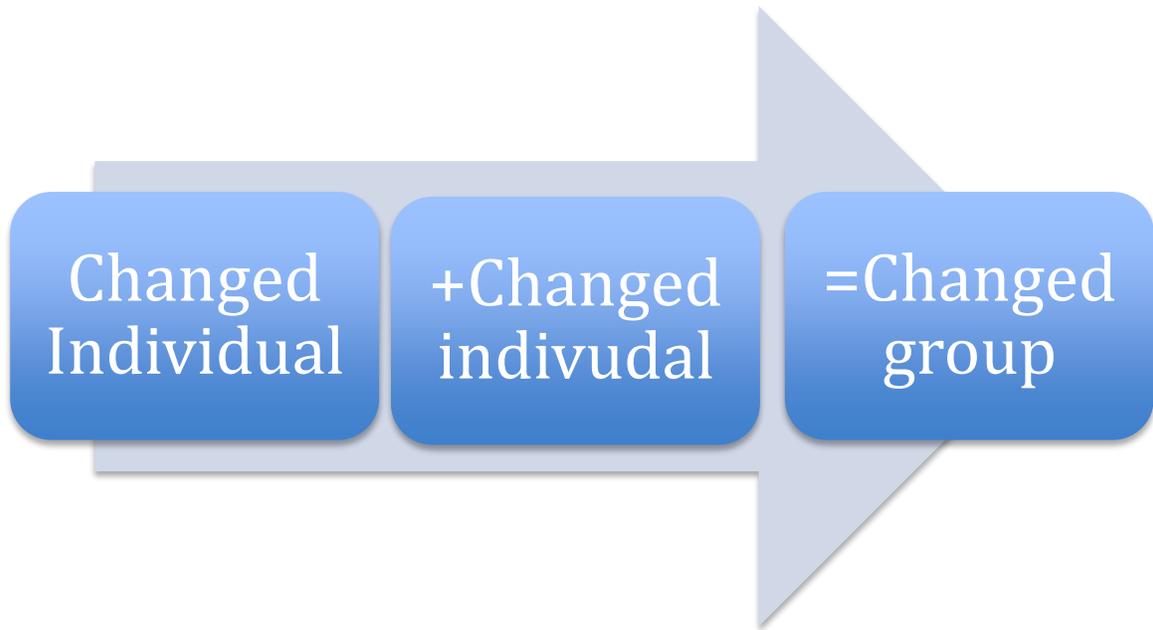
What we are reminded of is that Christians are both vulnerable to falling in to the same patterns that all people are but also that Christians are susceptible to the same kindness, respect and connection that again all other people are. The main difference, not explored above, is that unlike all other people Christians have an underlying belief in not only their responsibility to help those in need but also an avenue in which to do so. What we have explored above is that people in general are "softened" by connection, compassion and respect as well as logic; all of these are aspects of the gospel. These are also key elements of the Christian "movement" we reviewed previously. These were not key elements of the movement because someone thought them up, but because they are the key elements of the gospel. Tim Keller points out that though there are many commands, it is out of a response to God's grace and recognition that what we have is all his to begin with,

that people are capable of doing justice and caring for others (2010). And perhaps as one approaches a Christian, whether holding privilege and influence or not, this is the most important thing to remember. And though science would tell us that we can infer inner states by outer actions humans are not always so predictable. Therefore to remember that it is respect and connection that will build the bridge that is necessary to logically advocate and organize for change.

Future

Looking forward is an important to recognize the limitations of the research above and the impact it could have. In research around measuring if someone's mind has been changed the researchers found that there are different phases that one might go through and that there are different types of measurements for each phase. What the majority of the research above discusses is how to interact with Christians of privilege in phase one. Though this phase can have immediate impact, long term a person can be influenced by many other things and thus the immediate impact that this interaction has can be lessened as time goes on (Wondergem, 2010).

Despite the reality that influence is lessened over time what this theory of connection demonstrates is the impact of relationships and the reality of how that first meeting, if done well, can open up doors in the future. When we do this well we change an individual, and what changing individuals with privilege, especially those in the faith community can do is have impact on those around them. (Wondergem, 2010).



With the idea that we can change and organize groups by impacting one person at a time, we then begin to value those interactions with individuals that much more. When before we may have become agitated and argumentative, trying to prove our point, we now see how important kindness, patience and vulnerability are (Brown, 2012).

It would be prudent for future researchers to do a longitudinal study. Focusing in on leaders of faith communities and looking at their groups long term. What would be important to observe is how that target individual engages with the idea and material, do they do their own investigation afterwards, talk with others and how quickly or often do they share with others. This type of research would most likely require a combination of quantitative measurements and qualitative tools to be a multi-method study. What the Acton Institute noticed in 2010 is how difficult measuring a changed mind can really be and thus this would require a great deal of time and resources. However, what we can see on our own is the impact of our own relationships and that is what is at the heart of this

research. People consider those closer to them in a different way than with those at a distance, to overcome barriers of difference we have to find ways to connect.

Conclusion

All people are vulnerable to the same roots of oppression, whether one is privileged or not does not change that, and these roots are all difficult to get rid of. But what is encouraging about identifying these roots and their relationship to people is that the antidote is not so difficult to find: the gospel. Christ's life, the whole Bible really, though it has some miracles and unexplainable things it is also logical, and exemplifies how grace, vulnerability/connection and logic root out dehumanization, the need for individualization, and ignorance. This is supported by what science and history have shown us to be central to rooting out oppression. Though difficult and often overwhelming, living out the gospel, engaging with people in a respectful and vulnerable manner, is not only possible but also the way in which hearts and minds can be changed. And though there are many out there who do these things without having faith in Christ we are all made in the same image, with the same underlying needs and we often operate out those. So when developing a program or strategy for engaging Christians with privilege one would benefit from keeping in mind that logic, along with the heart, and above all patience are critical elements for success.

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