



Why Bother with Black History?

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Experience has shown me that a reluctance to engage with black history often stems from the fear that it will stir up racial tension. However, the fact that an issue is challenging should not prevent us from addressing it with tact and maturity, especially if it impacts our capacity to live authentically and live out our Christian faith.

So why highlight black history? W.E.B. Du Bois said, "Without a sense of history, we are like a tree without roots." History not only roots us in the past, it also influences who we are now. Social critic James Baldwin said, "History is not the past, it is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history. We must not pretend otherwise." We must grasp this reality because our history impacts us whether we realise it or not. Numbers 14:18 refers to the iniquity of the fathers being passed on to their children to the third and fourth generation. Iniquity, in this context, refers to a predisposition to distorted thinking and negative behaviour.

Ellen White also refers to "hereditary and cultivated tendencies" (Desire of Ages, 182). Research has shown that we can pass on trauma through what we model and our DNA. According to psychologist Bessel Van De Kolk, "the body keeps the score." As a result of our experiences, we can pass on spiritual, psychological and emotional legacies, including legacies of trauma. Whatever affects people's psychological and emotional health may also adversely affect their capacity to see themselves as princes and princesses of the kingdom and their ability to live as kingdom people.

In her excellent book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, Dr Joy De Gruy presents a compelling argument to support her belief that many descendants of the African diaspora are still suffering from the legacy of unprocessed trauma. She makes the case that it would be reasonable to assume that many enslaved Africans would have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD is a mental health condition in which an individual re-lives a traumatic event as if it is happening in real-time. Dr De Gruy's assertion is reasonable, bearing in mind the horrific and incessant abuses of slavery and the injustices that followed in its train. We would be naïve to presume that such a generational trauma would have no lasting impact upon black individuals and families because slavery was as much an assault on the mind as it was on the body.



Historian Carter G Woodson, who originated the concept of what would become Black History Month in the 1920s, wrote in his book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, "If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told, and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one . . . In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit." Such mindsets illustrate the impact that can result from generational trauma unless something intervenes to break the cycle. Dr De Gruy contends that generational trauma has left a legacy of self-hatred, anger, low expectations, and poor relational skills, often resulting in self-denigrating behaviours.



Healing the legacy of trauma requires that we become aware of how our past may be bleeding into our current attitudes and behaviours. The purpose of studying black history is not to elevate black history over any other ethnicity's history. History is not a competition of one-upmanship, "My history is better than your history." I agree with actor Morgan Freeman's assessment of Black History Month when he asked, "Why do you want to relegate my history to a month?" In an ideal world, black history would be part of a balanced curriculum and dialogue that is less concerned with perpetuating a Eurocentric bias and more concerned with teaching truth that is culturally relevant to practical living today. We need to teach black history because black history is an important facet of British and human history.

Studying black history is important because people do not experience Christianity in a vacuum. They experience it within the context of their culture, and the more they understand their culture, the more effectively they can contextualise their faith. Black history opens up an understanding of the Bible and illuminates the role black people in salvation history. In the process, we can give children and young people a broader spectrum of positive role models to inspire their aspirations.

It is important to study black history because, in the words of a great leader, "The farther backwards you can look, the farther forward you will see." Studying black history is not an end in itself. When Jesus said, "the truth shall set you free" (John 8:33), He was not referring to a mental assent to the truth but reception of Himself as the way, the truth and the life (John 4:6). Without a knowledge of the truth-Giver, intellectual truth will make us bitter not better. When God liberated Israel from Egypt, their physical freedom was not His priority. He commanded, "Let my people go, that they may serve me" (Exodus 5:16).



The correct teaching of black history can be an effective tool for promoting hope through adversity, highlighting the resiliency of the human spirit and the role God plays in inspiring hope for a better tomorrow that springs from the harsh lessons of the past. It is a hope that grows from understanding, truth, and the power of love. It is vitally essential for all of us to realise that nobody needs to be a prisoner of a traumatic history. The words of the Apostle assure us that we can transcend our history. Paul states, "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).

