The Perception Gap

Perceptions
When the DA takes over, apartheid will return.
White people still get higher salaries than their black colleagues in South Africa.

Black people only steal from whites.
Only black people are hijacking motor cars.
Especially white people suffer in South Africa from cruel murders.

Facts
These are only a few of the many perceptions continuing to control the minds of people. Time and again perceptions prove to be more trustworthy to South Africans than facts. Because the facts happen to be:
Black people suffer as much because of theft than white people.
Statistics contradict the perception that comparatively more whites are murdered in the country.
The total majority of whites in South Africa are against apartheid. This also applies to DA members.
Few whites will dare to pay their white employees more than their black colleagues. They are just too aware of the ramifications this will have on their company, would it become public.

Voting behaviour
Notwithstanding perceptions keep to dominate South Africans’ thoughts. It also seems to suit politicians when perceptions are determining citizens’ voting behaviour. Politics anyhow don’t cooperate enough to demolish perceptions. The consequence is that the vast majority of South Africans continue to vote according to racial lines.

In the Church
In the church perceptions can also keep us captive. A few years ago an old man told me he donated his ‘bakkie’ to the mission. What he actually meant was that his ‘bakkie’ was stolen and he presumed it was somewhere in the townships now. This is a very extreme example. But let us be honest with ourselves. Don’t many people in the church are of the opinion that black people cannot be trusted with money, even if they are church members? And the same applies to the other side: aren’t we thinking – when it is anyhow possible – that a white man will try to enrich himself at the expense of blacks? Whites will come with nice explanations, principles and structures being very complicating and confusing, just to – with the pretention of being right - at the end of the day cheat the black man. Do you understand how perceptions can undermine the mutual trust in a multi-cultural church federation?
Are we critical enough about ourselves in this regard? Do we perhaps allow too much space for perceptions in our own thoughts? When a Eugene Terreblanche is murdered savagely, then the whites are just angry with all black people. Even although most whites totally disagreed with that man’s thoughts. And the average black man will think: actually good that this fellow was killed, overlooking the fact that murder is totally unacceptable according to the constitution, no matter who is murdered.
And when a Julius Malema has delivered one of his inflammatory speeches again, whites perhaps feel that all blacks are against them. And the average black man thinks: At least Malema dares to stand up for us blacks.

**Antithesis**
Perhaps it is good to go back to an old Reformed word: *antithesis* (think also of the words: *contrast*, or *opposition*). What is the true *antithesis*? The Bible teaches us that the true antithesis is between belief and disbelief. The dominant perception in South Africa however continues to be that the antithesis is between black and white, or between have’s and have not’s. This is a Marxist view, it is not Biblical. Especially in the church we will have to train ourselves to see the dividing line through society that Christ is drawing. Think of Psalm 1. We should not allow perceptions to dominate our thoughts. It is indeed a fact that many blacks cannot manage money properly. But the same applies to many whites. There are also blacks (and whites) who can handle their finances in an honest way. The dividing line is between those honest and those dishonest. This is the true antithesis, not the color line.
Do you know what is so dangerous about perceptions? When you continuously approach someone with the wrong perception, you actually encourage him to become the way you are thinking about him. In the church (and especially on the mission field) this can be very discouraging for young believers. It can make them feel they are not really welcome in the church federation calling itself mult-cultural.

In this dispensation it is unfortunately a fact that the antithesis goes right through the church. The church walls are not the dividing line. Unfortunately in the church there are also those who are unrepented (both black and white). To quote the Belgic Confession: there are “hypocrites, who are mixed in the church along with the good and yet are not part of the church” (art. 29). This should all the more encourage us to support one another. And to embrace those – across the racial lines – who want to remain honest. Fortunately in this way it is possible – in the light of God’s Word – to bridge the perception gap.

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