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Review of Jody Miller Shearer's, *Enter the River: Healing Steps from White Privilege Toward Racial Reconciliation* (Scottsdale: PA: Herald Press, 1994).

by Marguerite Spencer

Through a series of stories that draw upon the metaphor of a flowing river including that of the biblical Naaman, Mennonite Jody Miller Shearer shares his journey toward racial healing in *Enter the River: Healing Steps from White Privilege Toward Racial Reconciliation*. The River is the Mississippi and the Jordan, our past and future, the heart of our nation and the soul of our belief, the power of love and redemption, our hope of our past and future, and racial reconciliation (176). While inviting us to cleanse ourselves in it, Shearer examines power, history, relationships, white privilege, the role of structures, and cultural assumptions that maintain religious practice (12). Although he writes primarily for members of Anabaptist churches, his work reaches out to all of those inflicted with the disease of racism and in need of healing (21). Whether readers begin the journey of transformation after reading Shearer's rather weak analysis will depend upon where they are in their understanding of white privilege and their remedial work against racism.

Shearer defines racism as race prejudice plus power (26). He lists various racial disparities to show that the dominant white culture oppresses people of color (28). Both a color-blind position that ignores differences and the use of diminutive terminology such as "minorities" troubles Shearer (35). Unfortunately, he adopts the term "dominant norm" throughout which is equally problematic. Nonetheless, in discussing prejudice, Shearer rightly denounces stereotyping, which essentializes us and ignores our multifaceted natures (46). Children, Samaritans, the woman of Canaan, and Jesus himself, being from Galilee, would all have known prejudice, Shearer argues (51). However, differences are not detrimental to the health of the community, he reminds us (49). We need to accept our ethnic differences, but recognize that Christ is our common denominator (27). Unfortunately, our culture anesthetizes us to both the realities of racism and the beauty of diversity (41-42).

Shearer insists that racism goes beyond prejudice because it is "backed by immense institutions and fueled by often unexamined assumptions (57)." Only whites of European descent hold such power in the United States, he argues (56). After recounting various stories of whites in power accusing blacks or making

decisions over their heads, Shearer admits, “I am prejudiced. I have power. I am a racist (65).” Although it is painful to acknowledge, racism is a sin – the interplay between individual and systematic failures (167). He finds it helpful to think of racism as a disease, like leprosy that no one wants and few actively try to get. It is epidemic, however, in North America and is becoming more obvious.

The first step to healing is to understand that our society gives white people the power to act out their prejudices (67). Whites must acknowledge how racism affects people of color, whether by acts of meanness by individuals, intimidation in white neighborhoods, victimization by the welfare system, exclusion from history textbooks or stigmatization with language that employs black to mean all things negative (73-80). Shearer argues that whites must also recognize that racism afflicts them as well. Not only does it deprive them of the wonders of diversity by keeping them from entering into equal relationships in housing, education, employment and worship (90), racism leads them to assume the lie that whiteness is “normative, neutral, and ideal (92).” On a systemic level, Shearer continues, racism damages the economy, robbing both poor blacks and whites of equal opportunities (95). He describes how legal documents first used the term “white” in 1691 in Virginia as part of an effort to convince poor white European immigrants to side with whites rather than poor blacks (106). As they grow aware of their privilege, Shearer warns whites to avoid feelings of sustained guilt, which only leaves them frustrated and empty (112). Rather, he calls them to make their own lists of afflictions in their passage to the healing river.

According to Shearer, scripture employs many calls to reconciliation (31). Peter proclaims that God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34) and Paul stresses that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ (Gal. 3:26-28). More pointedly, Elisha calls the non-Jew Naaman to wash seven times in the muddy Jordan River to rid him of his leprosy. According to Shearer, although it will take time, “[this] story shows how white people of faith can wash in the river and find healing from racism (44).” Shearer describes three forms of healing: healing from race prejudice, healing for institutions that give tacit power to white people, and healing of assumptions that keep “white equal to right (70).”

As healing takes time, courage, and commitment, whites are not without God’s assistance. Of his own journey, Shearer writes, “[t]he Jesus I know calls me to repentance, covers me in forgiveness, and pours out grace over all (112).” After asking for forgiveness for ignorance of their white privilege, God gives whites new hope that they may end racism in their churches and in the country. Shearer notes that we are only undoing racism if we are working to undo racism, which leads him to ask the eternal question “are we redeemed because we believe or because we act?” He responds, “I suspect that we white people have a lot more work to do on the side of works than faith (132).”

Shearer points out that celebrating our cultures can be a “foretaste of the reconciled community (117).” Like the wedding feast at Cana in Jn 2:1-11,

celebration is important to give expression to culture and glory to God. We can alter racialized relationships across cultures by opening up structures to share power and decision-making (122). Listening to each other's stories can go a long way in these efforts. Interestingly, Shearer argues that it is through the church that we have the best opportunity to effect lasting individual and systemic change – even more so than through political movements, economic theory, or social analysis, though these too are essential (124). He discusses the historical and theological background to the efforts Mennonites have undertaken to achieve diversity within their communities, which includes allowing leadership to emerge from among the nonwhite communities and avoiding too many cultural trappings in worship services (124-128). More importantly, he recognizes the need for church communities to ask how they can change church structures to be more inclusive of the growing number of racial ethnic members; how they can address white privilege and more equitably distribute resources across the church; and how they can discern what is substantive in the tradition and what is mere form or cultural variety (128). These questions are valid, but we could also ask them of the larger society, a step that Shearer seems less prepared to take.

He does, however, offer an anti-colonialistic model of ministry that is adaptable to the social and political arena. He calls it an “Authentic Multicultural Ministry Model” in which we share power to plan, coordinate, and evaluate in a common arena in cross-cultural concert (136-38). Under such a model, we avoid cultural subjugation and all people can find their own sense of place and peoplehood without compromising inclusion (139). At the heart of dismantling racism, Shearer concludes, is commitment to building relationships of equality across cultural and ethnic lines (156). He draws upon the notion of “allies” to describe how we can come to understand the nature of structural oppression; align ourselves with victims of oppression; criticize our patterns of practice without self-blame; recognize the agency of each party to the alliance; and initiate change, especially if we are in a greater position of power and regardless of whether other parties follow suit (158). This type of alliance involves not only a clear belief that the problem of racism is the problem of all people, but that a transfer of power must occur, meaning real change in the lives of those who benefit by the present arrangements (171). Perhaps he chooses to include a rather odd and weakly supported chapter on affirmative action to exemplify this type of power shift, which involves painful decisions that benefit all and move us toward a more inclusive future (141).

Like several of the books we have read in this course on white privilege, this book sneaks up on the reader. As I mentioned earlier, Shearer shows a weakness in analysis, only touching from time to time on the realities of institutional, systemic, and structural racism. For this reason, his work is somewhat unsatisfying to me. However, he does provide bursts of insight that are helpful. His call for us to examine our racism without being paralyzed with guilt is good advice. His emphasis on God's grace assisting us in our work reminds us that we are not alone in our struggle. Raising the question of the

tension between faith and works warns us of a type of resistance that we may encounter in our ongoing work. We can also attempt to extend his notions of becoming allies and adopting an authentic multicultural model beyond the church to the larger society. Finally, his river metaphor has potential, if you like metaphors. Personally, I do not find it helpful, but the underlying truth claim, that we need to deal with the sin of racism, both in our lives and in the structures of our society is critical for us to acknowledge and act upon. I would recommend this book, with the above qualifications, to both those who are just starting to recognize white privilege and those that are searching for additional insight.

Substantive Questions for Discussion:

1. Shearer writes that the he River is the Mississippi and the Jordan, our past and future, the heart of our nation and the soul of our belief, the power of love and redemption, our hope of our past and future, and racial reconciliation. How can we cleanse in this river if white power structures largely delineate and pollute the surrounding culture?
2. Can we agree with Shearer's claim that it is through the church that we have the best opportunity to effect lasting individual and systemic change – even more so than through political movements, economic theory, or social analysis? What insight can we gain by exploring more fully the history of the church's involvement in racial justice? Is the church less equipped today for this work? With devolution, more equipped?
3. The concept of "allies" is a useful one. How might I employ it in my work?
4. If I do not find the river metaphor helpful, how would I engage others in this work of overcoming the sin of racism?