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The Church's Divisive Color Line:

An Introductory Look at the Biggest Challenge for the Multicultural Church in America

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Abstract

Although the Civil Rights Movement addressed racial discrimination, it did not eradicate it. Numerous traces of racial discrimination and injustice remain untouched. The American church remains among the most prominent areas in which the division of the color line is still evident. This division prevents Biblical unity and limits multiculturalism in the body of Christ. Through study of significant biblical passages in the area of race and multiculturalism, it is evident that the church is called to be a multicultural entity and address racism and prejudices within the Christian community. There is indispensable truth regarding the equality of mankind that is not being lived out among the church as evidenced by study of race relations between Christians. This conclusion points to fundamental steps both the White and Black communities can take to begin to challenge the racial divide in the American church. Celebrating cultures, advocating for that which may not pertain to one directly, and realigning to biblical standards will allow the color line divide to begin to close.

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“I have a dream...” Since 1963, this phrase has been a notable proclamation of passion and change to all Americans. To some, it has been a beacon of hope, history and heart. Found in one of the most well-known and highly-regarded speeches in American history, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. proclaims this dream to challenge Americans to embrace the indispensable truth of the equality of man. “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but the content of their character,” says King (1963). Is this not the gospel the church preaches? Is it not said that Christ died so that all men could come to know him no matter the outward appearance? The church holds to the beliefs that God examines the internal nature of a person and exposes the motives of the heart. Yet 2000 years after Jesus walked the earth to fulfill this gospel reality, W.E.B. Dubois noted that the color line would be the problem of the upcoming century, and little did he know, that the problem would persist well into the twenty-first century (Richards, 2018, “The Color Line” section, para. 1). Thus, race and religion are not mutually exclusive (Adams, 2017, p. 101). The unembellished truth remains that the problem of the color line has hindered the gospel as it is preached and the opportunity to experience the church as Christ intended.

The church of heaven exemplifies an undivided body. Thematically, a unity of cultures interlaces all throughout the Scriptures. Yet in America, many say that Sundays continue to be the most segregated day of the week. Many churches all over the country are beginning to recognize this tragic phenomenon that continues to remain despite the legal end to segregation. Racial barriers must be addressed in the church to make way for the emergence of authentic multiculturalism in the hearts and gatherings of the people of Christ. When intentional focus is

given to this issue in American culture, specifically within churches, the church will be able to not only demonstrate the reconciliation Christ provided for in His life and death but also defeat the enemy in one of his greatest schemes against the church of Christ. As Michael Todd, the pastor of a thriving multicultural church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, said, “There’s a generational and cultural divide that’s happening. There’s a lot of stuff going around right now that is causing the enemy’s greatest plan—division” (Unite My City, 2017).

The Multicultural Church in Scripture

Scriptures stand as the final, authoritative doctrine for the Christian church. Churches claim to preach the full Word of God, yet many biblical truths remain overlooked and surrounded by apathy. A major certainty that has been lethargically addressed in churches across America is that of the Bible’s attention to multiculturalism within Christian gatherings. The church has become accustomed to applying their cultural paradigms to their way of corporate worship. A negative outcome does not always result when this is done. However, regarding multiculturalism, one must question if Christians have chosen to look at Scripture to confirm what they individually believe rather than realizing the instrumental part the multicultural church played in the spreading of the gospel in the first-century (Maurer, 2010, p. 28). Although multiculturalism weaves all throughout the Word of God, some scriptural analysis will benefit the argument presented in this paper.

In the first-century, two identifiers for people groups revealing a racial divide existed (Maurer, 2010, p. 29). There were Jews, and there were Gentiles—every person, no matter ethnicity or skin color, that was not born into a Jewish family. According to Galatians 3:28 (New International Version) though, “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul spends a significant amount of

time in his letter to the church of Galatia to address the issue of what it means to be “in Christ.” Preceding this verse, Paul broke down the argument of the law coming against one’s positional faith in Christ. He notes that heirs to Abraham, the father of all nations (Gen. 18:18), became justified through their faith, not their ethnic upbringing or religious propensity. Hence, when the Apostle Paul writes verse 28 of this letter, he then asserts that the impediment of race must topple when people claim to be in Christ (Himaya, 2016). New Testament commentator, Alan Cole notes that this scripture reveals that, “there is no longer any place for the traditional distinctions that divide mankind – cultural, linguistic, religious (for Greek, opposed to Jew, conveys all of these) or even sexual” (1989).

Some have argued that Galatians 3 interpreted this way will cause churches to begin to strip people of their cultural identity. However, Paul is not defending a cultural lifestyle over another but rather is recognizing that the new humanity founded in Christ, and no longer the Torah, is not defined by cultural elements and therefore does not seek to impose traditions on those of other cultures (Patten, 2013). Being a Christian, thus does not cause one to lose their cultural identity, but it does mean that since followers are one in Christ, there no longer stands any distinction to be made based on the color of one’s skin, upbringing, or gender. This idea of being “one in Christ” thus breaks down this racial divide between Jew and Gentile that appears during biblical times.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians is not the only place in which he addresses cultural partiality and a Christian’s positional relationship “in Christ.” In Romans 10:12 (New International Version), Paul states, “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him.” As he numerously does in his writings, Paul attempts to impart that Jesus is Lord over all nations, and salvation is for anyone who calls on

His name. Therefore, there remains no partiality due to cultural background. Dehner Maurer, the pastor of a growing multicultural church, notes, regarding this scripture, that a racist Christian, knowing Christ's standard, is then a contradiction (2010, p. 44). Thus, if the church's standard aligns with the Word of God then, without racial distinction, all men are on equal ground when they call upon the name of Jesus. Subsequently, even when racially diverse people come into relationship with Christ, they are a part of the body of Christ—"whether Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free" (1 Corinthians 12:13, New International Version).

The extent to which a unity problem, so corresponding to the division of America, existed has yet to be fully explored here. The first-century world was saturated with racism, sexism, division, injustice, and oppression (Gray, 2016, p. 106). This sounds like a familiar world. Apostle Paul reveals the depth of this racial divide in noting the hostility and lack of reconciliation of the Jews and Gentiles.

For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. (Ephesians 2:14-16, New Living Translation)

Paul revealed the greatest cause of division in the body of Christ (Foulkes, 1989). He dropped a truth into the scheme of racism that allows for the church to be an apologetic sign of God's existence and love. Jesus became our peace. In a world lacking peace, in the form of hatred, hostility, racism, and division, the person of Christ causes former enemies to become a part of

the same body and family (Gray, 2016, p. 106). This multicultural truth became the first Christian church.

The book of Acts is woven with, not only the narrative of the birth of the first Christian church, but also with the multicultural nature of the body of Christ. The upper room experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 became the inaugurating moment for an international, interracial, and intergenerational church as prophesied and awaited in the Old Testament and into the gospels (Patten, 2013, p. 206). This outpouring occurrence discloses God's all-inclusive heart for every nation, tribe, and tongue. Acts 13:1-3 reveals that the church God anointed in Antioch was multicultural in leadership and congregation. It is notable, for the sake of choosing to assess one's own propensity regarding a multicultural church, that the missionaries, sent out to spread the Gospel, were sent from this church in Antioch, not the church of Jerusalem—as they were too tied to their traditions and what they have always done (Maurer, 2010, pp. 30-31).

What does the Bible say the church should look like? It was here in the multicultural church of Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). Also, in the Book of Acts, Peter had a vision that changed the trajectory of prejudiced hearts, and this must predominate as the proclamation not only said but lived out in the church today. In Acts 10:34-35 (New Living Translation), “Peter replied, ‘I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right.’” Peter's revelation became an integral part of the process of a growing awareness of God's heart for the early church in terms of its cultural dimension (Patten, 2013, p. 206). Acts 17:26 reveals that all of mankind, every nation and tongue, were created by God in Christ with common ancestry. Thus, “neither in nature, nor in the old creation, nor in the new is there any room for any ideas of racial

superiority,” says commentator F. F. Bruce (as cited in Maurer, 2010). The first-century church exposes the foundation, and expectation, of Christianity as a multicultural entity.

The Word of God not only reveals the cultural appearance of the early church, but it also prophesies revealing what the church of heaven looks like. In David A. Anderson's book on multicultural ministry, he asks the question, “Could it be that we cannot understand what the kingdom of God on earth is supposed to look like because we don't have a clear view of what the kingdom of God in heaven looks like” (2004, p. 21)? An understood objective of the Christian church should be to exemplify heaven. With this in mind, notice the phrasing John uses in Revelation 7:9-10 (New International Version):

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

John does not simply say a multitude while digressing into what the people were wearing before the Lord. Rather, John takes the time to identify its multiethnic and multicultural presentation. Nations alone could encompass all representatives within humankind. Within a nation, there will be a presence of many races. This passage speaks to a universal and all-inclusive church (Maurer, 2010, pp. 47-48). Regarding the church in heaven, this sequential pattern of identifying phrasing is found all throughout Revelation (5:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). God's agenda for the church stands as all-encompassing of differing races and cultures (Rajagopalan, 2015, p. 187). As the church of Jesus Christ, bought by the price of His red blood, resonates the sound of believers of all races joining together in corporate worship and fellowship, the world will see a

testimony of unity. Anderson, stating how non-Christians can perceive a heaven-reflecting, multicultural Christian church, notes, "They will read the church as a relevant book of God's love—a unified almanac with one unending story of God's grace and peace" (Anderson, 2004, pp. 24-25).

The afore-mentioned passages do not but scantily address the multicultural dimensions of the Word of God. "Our Western individualistic gospel is obsessed with sending people to heaven when they die, yet Jesus and the apostle Paul were more interested in building a church that would bring heaven to earth through reconciled, redeemed, Spirit-sealed people," says Derwin Gray (2016, p.103). Although, the unfortunate reality remains that many Christians in America know these scriptural truths, and yet they still must ask why their earthly churches differ so greatly from the congregations seen in Scripture (Maurer, 2010, pp. 50-51). Jesus made way for heaven on earth, but frequently with deep seeds of prejudice, many churches appear to be choosing to wait until heaven to understand the beauty and power of a reconciled church on earth. In an authentic assessment of American churches to those of the first-century, it must be noted that "the multicultural dimensions of the Bible demonstrates that the biblical world never existed in a mono-cultural bubble but was always challenged and enriched by the ethnicities of those around or within" (Patten, 2013, p. 210). All these things considered, there remains a much deeper root to address in the American church that limits this biblical perspective.

The Racial Divide in the American Church

Many believe the 1960s civil rights laws and policies took care of racial discrimination issues within the country (Maurer, 2010, p. 110). However, a change in law does not imply a change in heart. There had been 400 years of hurts built into Black culture and 400 years of prejudice in the hearts of the White community within our country (T. Newton, personal

communication, March 9, 2018). To some it felt that during the Civil Rights Movement, the American church fell silent and even succumbing to the struggles of Jim Crowism and other unbiblical drudgeries of discrimination (Thomas & Sweeny, 2005). The African American community found a safe haven in their churches during the days of slavery. To sneak away to their “invisible institutions” meant a place of freedom and self-expression, and it “represented attempts by persons of African descent to collectively fellowship and praise the Deity unfettered by Whites who often interpreted scripture to support and justify slavery” (Barnes, 2010, pp. 4-5). The Civil Rights Movement diminished many social and economic racial barriers; however, within the church, little change took place. “Civil rights was a reaction, not a solution,” states Maurer (2010, p. 110). Tim Newton, the pastor and program director of the Tulsa Dream Center, explains how, still nearly 40 years after the Civil Rights Movement, to the African American community, “there is a residue to the things that took place, and we [the church] do not even acknowledge that a residue exists” (personal communication, March 9, 2018). The historic Black Church represented a refuge from a hostile White world that did not stand up for biblical truths of human life (Barnes, 2010, p. 4), and the majority of White American Christians expect the African American community to forgive and move on to days of multiculturalism without acknowledging first the wrong that took place and the residue that still exists.

Frequently, this residue associates with a lack of action taken by the church, ignorance, myths, fear, a lack biblical cognizance, and being comfortable with the way things have always been. Alex Himaya suggests that, “when we [the church] deny that racism exists or that it is not a problem in our world, then what we are really doing is denying the reality of the experience of other people” (2016). Denial and lack of action plague the church of twenty-first century America. “You are still doing it [racially discriminating] when you don’t advocate,” notes

Newton (personal communication, March 9, 2018). Action-oriented personal reflection and sincere acknowledgement goes far in racial reconciliation efforts. Anthony Pinn says, “religion has been the most flagrant perpetrator of racism in the world. In particular the Christian Church in America has been the leader of racism in the world and particularly in America” (as cited in Maurer, 2010). When the church decides to deflect this issue and fails to take leadership in matters of social justice, it only adds to the racial division rather than presents a solution to it.

African Americans long for the day that their White counterparts stand up for social issues that may or may not directly involve them. They need the White community to speak up about racial matters because of an inherent conviction to adhere and advocate for biblical standards. Ray Owens, an African American pastor, states that, “the way social systems play out in our communities, it feels as if the worth of a Black person is not equal to the worth of a White person... Black people don't have the same status of humanity as our White counterparts” (Unite My City, 2017). If anyone has the ability to demolish this narrative of social status, it is the church adhering to an understanding of God ordained equal intrinsic worth and White Christians doing their part (Unite My City, 2017). Though the rising awareness in America, the African American community remains oppressed, even in church circles.

Racial apathy on the majority's part has left minorities with a sense of racial fatigue and exhaustion. Many Whites will not even acknowledge the White bias that is present in America, much less within the church (T. Newton, personal communication, March 9, 2018). This creates an exhausting environment for African Americans standing for change. “Hopelessness that it will never change and a mindset that we [minorities] have no power to do anything about it,” defines racial fatigue (Maurer, 2010, p. 110). Much of the American church afflicts expectations and stereotypes on the Black community, frequently without even realizing it. Even in prominent

multicultural churches, due to racial prejudices, there are highly qualified, educated African Americans ministers that are getting paid less with lesser influence than that of their White counterparts with fractional education and experience (T. Newton, personal communication, March 9, 2018). This reveals only a portion of the issue.

Furthermore, Black men and women feel as though “there is a certain look or speech you are expected to have” (T. Newton, personal communication, March 9, 2018). Comments, slurs, and devaluing people continues to take place within the walls of the church. Tim Newton expresses some of his experience, even being in a pastoral role:

I hear things like “you’re not really Black,” because I’m educated. It wears me out because I feel like I have to speak on behalf of all Black people. We’re not monolithic... We have different viewpoints. I feel like I’m constantly having to prove myself. I need to show enough of my blackness that I’m accepted as Black but show my whiteness as well so I can be accepted by my White counterparts... Sometimes I just let go... It wears me out. (personal communication, March 9, 2018)

Frequently, a lack of knowledge and relationship sustains the color line in the church. Many White Christians do not realize the weight of the comments they make, the questions they ask, or the interactions they have because, in America, they have never been in a position in which they are not the majority. Other African Americans have expressed racial fatigue, as previously mentioned, in their daily struggle comparing it to the engrained exposure of racial discrimination some African Americans experience when being a part of predominately White organizations with the encumbering stress experienced by soldiers returning from the field (Richards, 2018).

Knowing God’s heart for multiculturalism, such a feeling in Christian circles remains a disheartening reality. However, it would not be appropriate to express the feelings of those who

are speaking to multiculturalism and its struggles without recognizing the heart behind some that choose mono-ethnic churches or those that live in mono-ethnic communities. Many, especially African Americans, enjoy the spiritual and cultural heritage of a historically Black Church. Often, they feel most enriched and empowered here (Stetzer, 2017). A place for minorities to feel they have a voice and can share time with people with shared life experiences should exist (Hansen, 2015). Even in a push for multiculturalism, this must be respected. Biblical multiculturalism holds not as much to what one's church physically looks like but the heart of the Christian church as a whole. Ed Stetzer addresses it as follows, "A church is not primarily responsible for how multicultural its neighborhood is, but it is responsible for how kingdom-minded it is" (Stetzer, 2017).

A Biblical Answer to Racism

Kingdom-mindedness stands as fundamental to challenging racism in the church. Jesus defines this kingdom-minded living as he confronts racism in John 4:1-42. Samaria existed as the home of the "half-breeds" the Jews hated due to cultural maltreatment years before. Samaritans were mixed breeds between the Assyrians and the Jews and disregarded as an entire race. Intermingling between the Jews and Samaritans did not occur. So much so, the Jews would walk out of their way on a route specifically developed to bypass any possible interaction with a Samaritan. However, on this particular day, Jesus insisted to go through Samaria. This puzzled the disciples, but "Jesus is always pushing us [His followers] past traditions and ideas that hinder our relationship with him. He passes the cultural mindset here and challenges man's perceptions" (Maurer, 2010, p. 58). Going to Samaria challenged racial tensions enough, but Jesus did not stop there. At Jacob's Well, he met a Samaritan woman, and spoke with her. This proved so unprecedented, due to the cultural discrimination, that the woman questioned why he would do

such a thing. All throughout this passage, Jesus challenges traditional ways of thinking and develops common ground without ever forsaking his culture or hers. Jesus understood that diversity revealed God and his glorious redemption, and that ultimately man's identity in him overrides any cultural discriminations.

Jesus laid out a clear standard for the church to follow in this passage. He "healed 800 years of racial division in 24 hours with the woman at the well," notes Michael Todd (Unite My City, 2017). Todd goes on to explain the interaction in John 4 like this:

He [Jesus] had to send the disciples away because they were still racist... But that woman, because of one positive experience with somebody of a different ethnicity, went and told the whole town in which the disciples, a whole group, had just gone into with no impact because they didn't have a heart and a mind to see anything change... That thing changed a whole town. They all came to Christ. They went from not wanting to have anything to do with each other at noon to asking Jesus to stay an extra two days in the hood. (Unite My City, 2017)

The dividing color line of America will only diminish when the church rises up to challenge racial barriers like Jesus did. He went into Samaria because he was directed to by the Lord and grew the Kingdom by a whole city's worth of people. The time has come for Christians to realize the biblical expectations set before them, exposing themselves to cultures unlike their own, and remembering that they are not Black and White first but Christ followers.

What Can We Do?

The gospel Christians preach molds the churches they have. Yet, Gray reveals that, "in America, we [churches] are preaching a gospel that creates local churches where nearly 90 percent of the people are of the same ethnicity" (Gray, 2016, p. 102). The gospel the American

church must begin to preach should compel Christians to love and unity. This is not homogenizing the church. For 30 years following the Civil Rights Movement, many Christians began to express “being colorblind” (Himaya, 2016). However, this merely changes the problem at hand. Colorblindness strips people of their culture and ignores the beauty of diversity (Okubo, 2016, p. 203). Colorblind perspectives limit people from understanding God’s expression of himself through the image of man. Assimilation in the form of colorblindness and ignoring the history of the United States in this area is a cheap form of reconciliation without lasting results (DeYoung, 2016, p. 128). True multiculturalism is embracing and celebrating the diversity of cultures comprising the unity of the body of Christ. In fact, the color of one’s skin has little to do with the culture they embrace. 1 Corinthians 15:39 (New International Version) says “people have one kind of flesh.” Thus, the only physical difference between an African American and a Caucasian proves to be the amount of melanin in their skin cells (Maurer, 2010, p. 44). Christians must learn to celebrate and appreciate the culture tied to the color of one’s skin.

In addition, Christians must begin to address reconciliation as 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 outlines. There is a calling for the church, by the love and act of Jesus Christ, to be active racial reconcilers and pursuers of justice (Cannon, 2009, p. 219). Man was reconciled into one body through the cross ending centuries of ethnic chaos, and now, the church of Christ must take her stand. The Civil Rights Movement gained effectiveness when the Whites began to march with the Blacks. Reconciliation is going to take that type of stand yet again (T. Newton, personal communication, March 9, 2018). Reconciliation within the church will take Whites deciding to break social standards and issues of submission to join churches with Black senior pastors (Pitt, 2010, p. 222). Newton commented that many times White Christians rave about the preaching of their favorite African American pastor, yet do not sit in their congregation. Newton believes it

has partially to do with, when choosing a church, you are choosing a pastor to submit to the authority of. But, historically White Americans have rarely had to submit to a minority, and thus there is a subconscious expectation for Blacks to come to White churches, not Whites go to Black churches (personal communication, March 9, 2018). Also, this will take Black and White churches, both, assessing stylistic tendencies and staffing that favor one group over the other. Finally, Whites must hear their Black counterparts cries of hurt, apologize for what people that looked like them caused, and come to their aid through active voices, intentional relationships, and unashamed advocacy.

Conclusion

When Whites begin to stand together with their Black counterparts and intentionally move towards appreciation and blending in Christian circles, real change can begin to happen regarding the division of the color line within the American church. When Whites hear things like “Black Lives Matter,” one’s first response can no longer be, “well of course, all lives matter.” Or, when White privilege and systemic racism is brought up, the church’s reaction can no longer be dismissal (Himaya, 2016). Christians must choose to see the world through the eyes of different cultures and raise both their own awareness, and that of others, to the realities that cause division in the church. What the church celebrates, the church will become. Celebrating unity and reconciliation will allow the church to be the unified representation of heaven it was meant to be, and as racial barriers begin to collapse, cultures will blend in a beautiful testimony of what Christ did for all of mankind. As Alex Himaya summarizes, “Unity does not mean uniformity. Unity is not the absence of difference. Unity is love in the face of difference” (Himaya, 2016).

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