



Do Segregated Churches Imply Racism?

| *Is there such a thing as integrated worship?*

Introduction

In an interview at Western Michigan University in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke his now famous words about segregation in the church. He was responding to a question about whether or not he thought integration should occur in the church before it took place in public venues such as schools, department stores, and public parks. Dr. King responded:

We must face the fact that in America, the church is still the most segregated major institution in America. At 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing and Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation. This is tragic. Nobody of honesty can overlook this. Now, I'm sure that if the church had taken a stronger stand all along, we wouldn't have many of the problems that we have. The first way that the church can repent, the first way that it can move out into the arena of social reform is to remove the yoke of segregation from its own body.¹

Several points that King made in this statement will be helpful to us as we explore racial segregation in the church. First, King was disappointed with the hypocrisy of the church that sang about the oneness of Christ

African Christian Woman © poco_bw—Fotolia.com



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in worship, yet actively engaged in racial segregation every week and did not take a more active role in challenging the ideology of racism. Second, he believed that the church played an active role in the proliferation of segregation. Third, he believed that the church should repent of its sins by ceasing to practice racial segregation in worship. Is King correct about the church having an active role in the proliferation of racism? Is it in the best interest of all concerned for the church to become integrated? What does true integration look like? Before we

RACISM STUDY PACK

This study is part of the Thoughtful Christian Racism Study Pack. The list below is the suggested order of the study pack, although you may study it in any order your group chooses.

- Why Is it So Difficult to Talk About Racism?
- Racism 101
- The Bible and Racism
- A History of Racism in the United States
- White Privilege
- Is Affirmative Action Still Needed?
- Do Segregated Churches Imply Racism?

can respond to these questions, it is important to understand a bit more about the impetus of racial ideology and the history of racial segregation in churches in the United States.

Origin of Racial Ideology

The United States of America was founded on the principles “equality, civil rights, democracy, justice and freedom” for all people.² As a result, the only way the colonies could justify the enslavement of African Americans was to depict them as less than human. Physical characteristics of skin color, nose width, and eye shape and hair texture became markers of racial identity.³ When Chinese and Japanese people came into the country in the nineteenth century, they were integrated into the status continuum somewhere between European whites and Negros. Along with privileging by racial identity came cultural hegemony, in which European culture was privileged above all other cultures. Africans and other racial groups were taught to have disdain for their native cultures and to revere European culture in all things. One area in which the influence of European cultural hegemony can be evidenced even today is in education. European literature, history, music, and visual arts are often still the standards against which all other cultural contributions are measured.

In order to understand the particulars of the ideology of race, one has only to read *Notes of the State of Virginia* by Thomas Jefferson, one of our country’s founders. In his book, Jefferson writes a blueprint for racial stereotyping of African Americans that exists to this day.⁴ According to Jefferson, the inferiority of African Americans started with the color of their skin, which is the foundation of a “greater or less share of beauty.” Whites had “flowing hair and more elegant symmetry of form.” He not only contended that African Americans were inferior in color, figure, and hair, but that they had a “very strong and disagreeable odor.” Even the love African Americans displayed toward one another was inferior to whites, wrote Jefferson, since black men were more prone to “desire” than “tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation.” African Americans were “much inferior” to whites in reason— participating more in “sensation than reflection.” Jefferson admitted that African Americans were more gifted than whites in music, having an “accurate ear for tune and time.” However, he was not convinced that African Americans could equal whites

in their ability to compose “extensive melodies” or “complicated harmony.” At the end of the “Laws” section of his book, Jefferson wrote that the differences of “mental faculty and color” were “powerful obstacles to emancipation” of African Americans.

Brief History of Racially Segregated Worship

The ideology of race was not limited to the public square but rather was manifest in Christian worship. Though Africans worshiped in the same churches, they were often relegated to worship in separate portions of the church.⁵ One example of segregation would be the St. Georges Methodist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the eighteenth century. Though many white Methodists of that day objected to the practice of slavery, they did not believe that Africans were their equals.⁶ As a result, the white members of St. Georges built a gallery addition to the church and mandated that Africans worship there. Africans also felt stifled in their ability to express themselves in worship with verbal “Amens” or holy dancing. Since he and other African Americans were being oppressed and discriminated against, Richard Allen, a newly manumitted African slave, left St. Georges and started the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. The founding of the A.M.E. church was part of the black independent church movement that began as an expression of black resistance to white oppression after the Revolutionary War.⁷ During the black independent church movement, many black Baptist churches were founded in addition to new black denominations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (now known as the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church).

The founding of black mainline Protestant churches was just the beginning of the black church movement. First, African Americans came out of white Baptist and Methodist churches because of racism. Then, some African Americans came out of the black Baptist and black Methodist denominations because of a commitment to holiness.⁸ In addition to a commitment to holiness, the sanctified churches were countercultural in the sense that while African Americans in the Baptist and Methodist churches “assimilated and imitated the cultural and organizational models of European-American patriarchy,” including styles of worship, the sanctified churches allowed African Americans to retain the traditions of

oral music and ecstatic praise associated with slave religion.⁹ The separation of African Americans and whites in Christian worship established a pattern of segregated worship that endures to this day.¹⁰

The Case for Segregated Worship

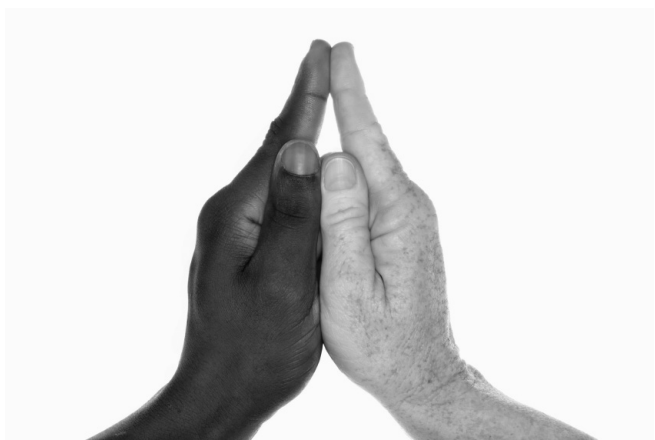
Martin Luther King Jr. argued that the church should cease its practice of segregated worship as a first step in its effort to achieve social reform. He made this statement even in the wake of tremendous social gains made by African Americans during the civil rights movement wherein black churches played a vital role. In black churches, civil rights workers heard prophetic and charismatic preaching that stirred their souls, comforted their spirits, and identified with the daily struggles they encountered in their lives. In those black churches, African Americans did not have to censor their speech to be politically correct or sensitive to the feelings of their white sisters and brothers. Black churches were spaces outside of their homes where they could not only speak their minds, but also could hear messages of renewal that helped them cope with the harsh realities of their lives throughout the week.

Citing my own experiences growing up in black churches, I first learned to appreciate black history in black churches. In black churches I learned about the contributions to American history made by people like Sojourner Truth, Mary McLeod Bethune, Marian Anderson, Frederick Douglass, Charles Drew, and Benjamin Banneker. By learning about other African Americans who were accomplished in so many ways, I was inspired to make my own contributions.

Even in the twenty-first century, black churches are spaces where we can be uncensored. We can hear sermons conceived with black life experiences in mind. We can hear music presented in genres that meet our spiritual needs. We can pray in ways we inherited from our ancestors. We can be free to worship as long as we want. We can worship in an environment that is culturally affirming. We can be assured that our children will learn about their own black history in Sunday school or worship. As it relates to race, we can be accepted for who we are.

The Case for Truly Integrated Worship

Though the benefits of segregated worship are many, there are also benefits of *truly integrated worship*. Truly



Two hands forming a Church with a Steeple ©
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integrated worship is worship in which the many cultural practices of all races and ethnicities are valued and given space in the worship and life of the community.

Often worship that is deemed *multicultural* is simply an expression of *dominant culture hegemony*. By dominant culture hegemony I mean the practice of soliciting and encouraging the presence of people of various ethnicities and races without allowing their cultural practices, traditions, and values (in matters such as music, liturgy, preaching styles) to have a place in worship and community life. Churches that practice dominant culture hegemony expect all members to conform to the ethos of the dominant culture, rather than allowing the dominant culture to be changed by the incorporation of other ways of being. Dominant culture hegemony is akin to the melting-pot metaphor in which all ingredients are welcome but are expected to surrender their distinctiveness to assume the flavor and texture of the soup.¹¹ Truly integrated worship is akin to a salad in which all the ingredients blend to create wonderful flavor while each ingredient maintains its own distinctive taste, texture, and color.

So, is it possible for a church to be truly integrated? Jin S. Kim, the pastor of Church of All Nations (PC(USA)) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, not only believes it is possible, but works with his congregation daily to make it a reality. In 2004, Kim, along with one hundred people, mostly Korean Americans, was granted a formal blessing by a larger congregation to found the Church of All Nations. The goal was to create a church wherein people from many different races and ethnic groups could come together as the body of Christ. Currently, of the three

hundred and fifty people who attend worship, 30 percent are Asian, 37 percent are white, 22 percent are black, and 10 percent are Latino/Latina. The congregation is truly living into its name by having people from more than twenty-five nations represented, including Korea, Kenya, Sudan, Brazil, Japan, and the United States.

Elements of many cultures are integrated into the English worship service held on Sundays at 10 a.m. Prayers are offered in many languages. The Glorybound choir offers an extensive repertoire of songs and hymns that reflect the diversity of cultures. Fifty-six flags are displayed in the sanctuary to represent countries of members' origin and for which the congregation is in partnership or prayer. Testimony, a practice borrowed from the African American tradition, is a regular part of worship. With testimony, individuals share their personal joys and struggles with the entire body. Testimonies are sometimes given at offering time. On occasion, testimony replaces the sermon. At least twice a year, the entire service is devoted to testimony. While revealing personal experiences can be very risky, it can also serve as a conduit to understanding. When people hear each other's stories, they may begin to understand and experience the other in new ways.

On Sundays there is a Brazilian service conducted in Portuguese and a Sudanese service conducted in the Nuer language, as well as a service in French attended largely by West Africans—all are full members of Church of All Nations. Each of these services has its own musical group. Though Kim would like for the community eventually to worship together in one service (and currently it does so occasionally), he also realizes that language is an essential element of culture. Making the services available in native languages brings tremendous comfort and sense of belonging to new immigrants in the congregation. The pastoral leadership of the church reflects the diversity of the congregation, with pastors from Kenya, Togo, Brazil, China, Sudan, and the United States. With all the diversity that exists in the congregation, Kim contends that the greatest challenge is the black-white divide. In addition to being truly integrated as it relates to race and ethnicity, the church also dares to be counter-imperial, in that it rejects capitalistic emphasis on production and material wealth as the symbols of identity, status, and success. At Church of All Nations the people who are held in highest esteem are those whose lives reflect faithfulness to God and care for one another.

Kim believes that the church thrives because they are willing to engage in the hard conversations about white privilege and racism. They openly confess their complicity to unjust structures. Kim realizes that since he is Korean, it would be easy for the Korean culture to be the dominant culture. It would also be easy for white culture to be the dominant culture, since many people in the congregation are indoctrinated in it. However, he is intentional about reducing the influence of Korean and white cultures whenever possible—allowing space for the many other cultures that exist. His congregation trusts him to be the “cultural referee.”

Another congregation that embraces the salad metaphor is the Plymouth United Church of Christ in Oakland, California—also known as the “Jazz and Justice Church.” The Plymouth congregation is 59 percent Euro-American, 31 percent African American, 5 percent Asian, and 5 percent Latino. When Pastor Lois Mueller came to the church nine years ago, twelve and fifteen people regularly attended Sunday worship, a few of whom were black elders. The church had a long history of commitment to social justice. Currently the membership is about 65 with 120 participating regularly in worship. The jazz part of their mantra is metaphor in the sense that worship is a practice of living in the moment—a place where improvisation is welcome and there is no such thing as a mistake. Jazz is also experiential. Musicians from the Bay Area, many of whom are African American, provide music for the worship service throughout the year, which helps to create a lively and soulful worship environment. Though jazz is a large part of their identity, gospel music and hymns are also part of the musical repertoire. Mueller believes that the musicians are some of her best evangelists.

Like Church of All Nations, Plymouth UCC makes time in its worship service for testimony with a weekly spot known as “Grace Notes.” The congregation strives to have open and honest discussions about racism, sexism, and ageism. As it relates to staff, Mueller unintentionally discovered a possible correlation between diversification of ministry staff and diversification of the congregation. For example, when she hired a gay minister, other lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people started to attend services. When she hired a Cuban American minister, other Latina/Latinos began attending worship. The artwork in the church is African, Asian, or Latin American in origin; Mueller is intentional about

not having white images of Jesus displayed. In addition, the church celebrates cultural festivals and holidays such as Juneteenth and Cinco de Mayo.

Summary and Conclusions

In response to the question, “Do segregated churches imply racism?” we must respond with a resounding “yes.” The impetus for establishment of segregated churches was racism embodied in censorship and relegation of African Americans to separate spaces in white churches. Some believe that the antidote to traditional segregated church is the melting-pot church in which many different races and ethnicities are represented in body but are not represented in the leadership and whose cultural practices and traditions are subsumed into the dominant culture. This melting-pot model is disingenuous at best. The real antidote to traditional segregated worship is the salad church. In the salad model, ethnic and racial groups are not required to deny or abdicate who they are to be part of the community. Their practices and traditions are welcomed and integrated into all aspects of the worship and community life.

The perpetuation of segregated churches implies the ongoing need of various racial and ethnic groups to have spaces in which they can freely and unashamedly worship without fear of judgment or disdain—places wherein they can have a sense of pride and solidarity with people who look like them, have similar values, and have shared experiences. Though this is the twenty-first century, many racial and ethnic groups still have few public spaces in which their cultural practices and traditions are honored, respected, and embraced.

Therefore, the task for any church that seeks to be truly integrated is for church leaders to be willing to relinquish their power and then take it up again. The power that is relinquished is the *absolute* power that maintains a congregational ethos that is exclusive and discriminatory. The power that is taken up is a *shared* power that invites

all people to the table, embraces who they are, and invites them to share their whole selves with the community. Shared power enables the church to become more like the body of Christ the church is really meant to be.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

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