

Black, Pro-life, Pro-Gun, Strict Constitutionalist Democrat Asks: Is This Conversation Off-Limits in the Church?

In 2016, I ran for judge in the county where I live. Judicial races usually are (and should be) non-partisan. Though politically minded people think they want a Democrat or Republican judge, they really don't. As my stump speech told it:

No one cares who the judge is until they or someone they truly care for is standing in front of one and their life or livelihood is on the line. But by then, it's too late to care. By then, though you're hoping for fairness and favor, what you really want—whether you know it or not—is for that judge to “follow the law.” You see it's the already-written law that your attorney uses to fight for you. If the judge is a legislator instead of a jurist, your lawyer's arguments are useless because the judge is simply making it up as they go and, as Forest Gump's momma says it “You never know what you're gonna get!”

But the truth is, my race was partisan and I lost. What I learned was that the “D” or “R” in front of the names was more important than whether the candidate would follow the law. That “D” and “R” seemed to tell people all sorts of things our mouths did not. Problem was, the things people ‘heard’ or believed based on that “D” or “R” were inherently misleading. But I digress.

To understand who I am, you must know that I am a Christ-

following, black, pro-life, pro-gun, strict Constitutionalist Democrat. Oxymoron? Perhaps. On the campaign trail, I ran into a lot of white folks who wondered why I was not Republican. I admit, at times, I sound like one. I own a business and always want my taxes lowered. But the thing is, just as I fight from within my party now, I'd have to fight from within the other party if I were there. The parties are so left- and right-wing that there is hardly any moderation. But that's a conversation for another day.

The one thing that truly changed my outlook of politics and what God might want from me in this most difficult time of our nation was my interaction with church folks during the campaign. It blew my mind how differently various churches viewed, talked about and responded to politics. We all know the saying: "Eleven o'clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America." Lots of people attribute the saying to Martin Luther King Jr., who often repeated it but, in fact, it was first said by Billy Graham ("Why Don't Churches Practice Brotherhood?", *Reader's Digest*, August 1960,). I never realized how true that statement was until I found myself in the political arena.

Here I was, a long-time attender of a mixed-congregational church. At the time, I would have said we were a multi-cultural mix of blacks, Hispanics and whites, led by a white pastor who really knew how to connect with folks from the pulpit. Then came the 2016 election cycle, along with the many heart-wrenching, gut-twisting, race-dividing, nationally televised killings of unarmed black men. And with it, the pastor clammed up. Not a word was spoken to elicit prayers on behalf of the nation or the families involved. Not a word spoken to press the congregation into action to work for peace in the community. Not a word was spoken from the pulpit of our church. And no conversation started between congregant and leadership. But that didn't mean no one was talking.

By then, our church was more than 65 percent black and, inside

the “walls” of our church, the tension of what was happening in our nation and communities was building to overflow in many of our members. And though no one was dialoging in our church, many were certainly dialoging outside the church—on Facebook, Twitter, in homes, restaurants and other churches. But without the facilitation of Holy Ghost peacemaking, a lot of those conversations hit raw nerve and festered.

As I moved through my tour of church campaigning, it was amazing to me how black churches were not only having the conversation, but the conversation was starting from the pulpit! Some of the conversation in the black churches was disconcerting to me—attacking law enforcement without caveat and quietly encouraging unrest through less than peaceful community activism. But most of the conversations were a call to godliness, prayer, peace and more prayer. After being in my mixed church for so many years, I’d forgotten how comforting it is to sit and relate with other Christians about truly meaningful but difficult cultural issues.

I was equally surprised to find myself in white churches with pastors who also felt the call to talk to their congregations about race relations—even though there were few brown faces therein. These pastors felt the conviction of the Holy Spirit that, despite their church’s lack of diversity, their congregation still had opportunity and obligation to get and be engaged.

Then, I’d go back to my church. Still, there was no open dialogue within the four walls, until halfway through the year, after five white police officers were gunned down by a sniper in Dallas, Texas, a word finally came from the pulpit—we need to pray for these officers and their families. Had it been said in a vacuum, it would have resulted in the entire congregation praying fervently right then. But the only one who seemed to have been in a vacuum was the pastor. This did not go over well at all!

I don't think the leadership ever understood the explosive undercurrent that would come from that, but the atmosphere only got worse as more black men lost their lives (one not far from us), and the pulpit returned to silence. People left. Others disengaged. Some settled on the idea the pastor himself was racist. Social media burned up with anger, rage, even hatred. But the most disheartening of all responses was that of folks who came to believe their church had no understanding of who they were and the daily lives they lived. In choosing to stay, many settled on the idea that conversations about being black are simply off-limits in the four walls of the church. They decided to keep some semblance of peace by remaining quiet even if it meant relinquishing the freedom (and responsibility) that knowing Christ affords.

But I have to wonder. Can Jesus coexist with a lack of freedom in His own house? Some folks who stayed answer with a resounding, "No!" Nevertheless, they stay, because they believe their call is to live out loud and pray the church through blindness and into deliverance and healing. I applaud them, knowing someone has to be willing to stand and fight.

"True repentance requires that we lovingly confront our brothers and sisters concerning racial sins and personal bigotry." *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race*, John M. Perkins, Moody Publishers 2018, .

As for the rest of us, our job is to pray our nation, leaders, pastors and selves through to repentance and insight, courage and tenacity so we are prepared, able and ready to engage in the conversations that must be had in order for the church to be healed and become one in Christ. {eoa}

In Part 2, as we're coming into another election cycle, we'll look at what the conversation might look like—first, between a Bible-based, culturally conscious and curious church family and then opened and shared with our communities at large as we seek to reach them with the love of Jesus Christ.

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