

The Answer to Racism in the Church

Do You Love People of Color as Much as You Love White People?

My wife and I have been pastoring a church in Atlanta, Georgia, for thirty-one years. Our church is generally recognized as the most multicultural church in America, as we have 145 different nationalities in our church from all over the world. So, we are a very mixed congregation and people have asked us, "How did that happen?" "How did you get a church like that, in Atlanta, one of the most segregated cities in America?" To answer that question, I need to give a little background.

I grew up in the era of Dr. Martin Luther King, in a segregated little town called McDonough outside of Atlanta, Georgia, where Blacks were on one side of the tracks, whites were on the other and we never crossed the tracks. Beginning in the eighth grade, I was bussed across town to a school where I was the only white kid in my homeroom and everyone else was Black. And every day, every single day, I was in a fight.

There was a particular young Black man, a little guy named Sammy White, who was a lot shorter than me but he always had a lot of friends. Every day after school, he would corner me, and he and his friends would beat up on me.

Then suddenly one day, Sammy came up to me and he apologized. He said, "I just want to tell you I'm sorry. We've had a lot of tension in this town and I took it out on you. I want to come and see you; I want to come to your house." So, I told him where I lived, which of course was on the other side of town—the tracks—from him.

Later that day, after I got home, I was outside playing and he

and his friend rode a bicycle into my yard. They had driven 10 miles down country roads to come to my house. And I'll never forget when he was riding up the driveway, I got the feeling that I was missing something in my life.

Fast forward to years later, when I was just starting in ministry. I felt the Lord speak to me about starting a church in Atlanta. He said to me, "I want you to cut a new road in the South; I want you to bridge the gap between the cultures." He began to show me a church like we had in a county that was, at the time, 90% white. Then He said, "I want you to build a church of at least 100 nations."

I asked how we could do that and the Lord said, "You have to have a change inside of you. Something has to change inside of your heart and you have to learn to love people." Then He asked me, "Do you love Black people as much as you love white people?"

And that was a big question for me. Do I love Black people as much as I do white people?

Other questions followed, "Do you love Hispanic people as much as you do you white people?...Do you love Asian people as much as you do white people?"

As I started to think through that process, I began to realize that in order to build a multicultural church, I just had to love people. I couldn't love only one race. Jesus loves everybody and so should we. So, here are the three things the Lord taught me to build this church on in order for it to be welcoming to everyone:

Number 1: Build your church on a kingdom culture, not on an earthly culture. Our earthly culture is what divides us but our kingdom culture is what unites us. Almost all churches in America are built on earthly culture. It may be a white culture or a Black culture but it's a certain culture within the earth which appeals to a certain group of people, and they

get what they want. But when you build on a kingdom culture, no one gets what they want. Nobody gets the praise and worship they want; nobody gets the preaching they want; nobody gets the style of church that they want. Everyone has to give up a little something of what they want to make it work but that's what you do when you love people.

Number 2: The second thing God revealed to me was that we need to build our churches on righteousness and justice. He took me to the book of Psalms, where it says that the two pillars upon which God builds His throne are righteousness and justice.

Isn't it interesting how the devil has divided people over those two issues?

Whole political parties are formed around either righteousness or justice. And instead of working in harmony together, the devil pits them against each other, and they begin to fight and argue and politicize everything. This is why we have such a segregated society. It shouldn't be built on justice alone; it's built on righteousness too. But it's not built on righteousness alone either.

So all the Fox News people and all the CNN people, they have to come together and see that the kingdom of God is not built on one or the other; it's built on both—righteousness and justice.

Number 3: The third thing required to build a multicultural church is to be willing to feel the pain of other races. You have to go there. You can't just say that you feel their pain; you have to feel it. And the only way you can do that is to seek to understand rather than to be understood. Rather than trying to make your point, what you think is right, you have to listen to other people.

And by the way, as a white pastor, I really believe that white pastors have to lead the way in this because we have the history of oppressing. So, we have to lead the way of

repentance, of humility, of brokenness. And you can see that this issue is very popular in the minority community but not as popular in my community.

And so when I started seeing our church begin to become multicultural and I began to experience principles of “white flight,” I had to learn to love people of color as much as I love my own.

Do you truly, truly try to understand what’s going on in other people’s hearts? That’s what the church needs to be built on. My heart has just broken over the last few years with all that is going on in America and yet the church still stands its ground. It’s still the most segregated hour in America. And that should not be. Let’s commit to loving each other and trying to understand each other, and maybe we can do something about that. {eoa}

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