

How Spirit-Filled Christians Should Confront Racism and Bigotry in the Church

How can Spirit-filled Christians both reject and confront bigotry and racism as injustices while also treating the individuals who express bigotry and racism with biblical love? Pastor Donny Karpinen of Victory Church in Boca Raton, Florida, and Pastor Tyler Burns of New Dimensions Christian Center in Pensacola, Florida, co-preached last month at Victory Church on that complicated topic.

Burns introduced the discussion by noting that their perspectives—as a white man and a black man—were necessarily limited and did not represent the full scope of the subject matter.

“I think it’s important for us as we tackle these complex topics and, Lord willing take a step forward in the right direction to acknowledge our own limitations, to acknowledge the perspective that we’re coming from,” Burns says. “So I acknowledge that I’m a black Christian man in America and that is my perspective. That is the perspective that I come from that is the only lived perspective that I have authority on. So at the same time, what that does is there are a lot of different perspectives that will not be heard from this stage, so I just want to acknowledge, honor and hold space for people who feel a certain type of way about these questions, but at the same time hopefully that you feel valued you feel loved. So I’m thinking of women, especially as we talk about the topic of women. I’m thinking about my Latinx brothers and sisters, my Asian brothers and sisters, my First Nation brothers and sisters, African, any other ethnic minority. I want to hold space for you, and hopefully through this African-American man’s perspective, you see that God loves

you, God values you, and God has a place for you in His kingdom.”

Karpinen framed the discussion with two primary questions: “How does the Bible justify equal treatment while also justifying slavery and mistreatment of women?” and “How do we handle racists and bigots biblically?”

“I believe these questions are important because they touch on the very fabric, the cornerstone of God’s created order,” Burns says. “Because in Genesis 1:26-27, it tells us that God created every single human being in His image. ... No matter where you come from, no matter what class you’re in, no matter what you look like, you have dignity. You have value. You have worth. And you have eternal significance today. So it’s important for us to start this conversation not from a cultural lens but from a biblical lens of God’s desired intent. God desires that every single human being that He created flourishes to the extent that He created them.”

At one point, Karpinen defines racism as “prejudice, discrimination or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one’s own race is superior,” and defined bigotry as a more overt, aggressive and malicious form of racism (which he noted is often subtle or subconscious). Burns says both still happen today, and shared an example of a recent example of bigotry that he experiences as a black man.

“Three years ago, I went to a local hardware store to get a key made,” Burns says. “I walked in and asked one of the cashiers who happened to be a black woman if I could get this key made, if there was any way that she could unlock the key station. So we struck up a conversation, and then an older white man comes up and starts a conversation with us. I didn’t know the man. I wasn’t seeking to have a conversation with him. But in the midst of that, in broad daylight, in 2016, he called me the n-word. In broad daylight, church. I don’t know

if I can properly unpack and properly communicate the trauma, the pain, how that feels emotionally for me. I think a lot of people think of it as an intellectual thing, a cognitive reaction: 'This was wrong. The thing that happened to me was wrong.' But let me tell you how people in my community carry this. We carry this in our bodies. There are people in this room who have experienced discrimination, and even when I said that, they felt that in their body. There is a trauma. There is a pain that is incalculable."

But other times, racism is more subtle than overt bigotry.

"I don't believe that people are going to hear the n-word in our churches," Burns says. "But what they may hear, what they may see, is a subtle other-izing. Subtle inferiority. A subtle push away. ... So it's important for us as a church to fully confront this, to fully acknowledge that this is an issue for us."

Karpinen notes that confronting bigotry can be difficult, however, because "we're supposed to be forgiving people" as Christians. But he says that holding people accountable for traumatizing others is not the same as unforgiveness or bitterness. Abusers can be forgiven by a victim, but that doesn't necessarily make the trauma go away. So how should the church handle these offenders—whether their abuse is intentional or unintentional?

"How do we handle racists and bigots biblically?" Karpinen says. "Well, it's with grace and it's with truth. ... We've been given the ministry of reconciliation. If we talk about the narrative of the Bible as telling a story of God's heart to redeem His people back to him, then we should carry His heart and redeem others and be all-inclusive. But here's the thing. God's grace is big enough for the offended and for the offender. Believe it or not. A lot of times, I mean, our emotions are like, 'No this person is dead wrong. They're so awful. Let's ostracize them.' And then we just perpetuate the

whole thing. We have to be loving, caring and graceful towards even those who are being offensive, OK, seeking to win them to Christ into His truth, into humility, into forgiveness.”

But repentance by the offender doesn’t just mean saying sorry; true repentance involves setting the wrong right. Burns points to Zacchaeus—who economically exploited others and, after he repented, promised to repay anyone he defrauded fourfold—as an example of true repentance.

“For those who are just wanting a simple definition, justice is making other people’s problem my problem,” Burns says. “... People often say, ‘Well, why should I make other people’s problem my problem?’ ... You should make other people’s problem your problem because God made your problem His problem. How are we going to say ‘That’s their problem’ when that’s not how God treated us? ... So how would it look for the recipients of grace to turn around and not share that liberally lavishly with everyone, even the people who don’t deserve it, church? That’s what justice is. It is both individual and it is systemic.”

Burns and Karpinen cover a lot more in the full conversation, which can be watched in the embedded video here.