

Church Growth through Proper Race Relationships

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Proper Race Relationships Enhance growth

The specifics of this treatise concern the subject “Church Growth Through Proper Race Relationships.” Much of the material presented will derive from the experiences of this author. For more than twenty years my wife and I have sought to practice that for which I now write.

In the midst of a segregated world a young man obeyed the gospel of Christ and the Lord added him to His church (Acts 2:47). The young man was fortunate to be a member of a culturally diverse group of sound Christians. When the military transferred him to a new location, the young man (now newly married) was eager to attend the church in their new location. With great anticipation the new couple arrived at the appointed time for Bible study and immediate attention was given to the racial makeup of the new congregation. Without any hesitation (in part because of his zeal) the young man raised a question that would forever change his life. “Where are the Black folks?” The question seemed to have penetrated everyone in the room when a very fine elder responded, “you know, you can help us to answer that question.”

The reply of this godly man created an atmosphere for growth and change in the racial identity of that congregation. Here was a Christian of another race who was willing to take a new convert and make a difference for the Lord! What was great about the response of the elder? Negatively: (1) He did not direct the couple to another congregation that crystallized on race and culture. (2) He did not try to justify the absence of people from the other races. (3) He did not determine how comfortable we would be worshiping elsewhere. Positively: (1) He was honest and genuinely interested in helping us to feel at home. (2) He was proactive and he valued our assistance in reaching others of our race. (3) He treated us as equals in the Lord. This was all we

expected because we were aware that we are all one in Christ and that the new goal for our lives is to go to heaven.

What a difference one person (the elder) made for the Lord! In twenty years time, that congregation's racial makeup increased and today it thrives as an example of a church united in Christ Jesus. This unity is also reflected in a proper regard for race relations and the royal law of God. Here is a church that seeks to answer the prayer of Jesus for complete unity of all believers!

A proper understanding the Lord's prayer will enable all Christians to realize the important axiom for genuine growth. Christian unity promotes world conversion. Let us note some passages from the prayer of Jesus:

“Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me” (John 17:20-23).

The late Guy N. Woods wrote:

“The object of this prayer was that all of his disciples should be one; and the unity he desired from them finds its model in that close and indissoluble union obtaining between himself and his Father. This unity for which he so earnestly prayed in the shadow of the cross was not for unity of opinion or of organization alone, though these are certainly included; but for unity of faith, of practice, of aim, of purpose and of love. Such unity can be realized only when men of good will come to recognize Jesus as the only sovereign of his realm, the head of the church and the executor of his will on earth.

The unity of life and spirit for which Jesus prayed had as its design the conversion of the world: ‘That the world may believe that thou didst send me.’ The greatest barrier to the conversion of all mankind is the disunity which prevails in the religious world. The only really effective argument the infidel has against what is called the Christian religion is the disgraceful divisions which fracture and weaken it.”¹

Stacy W. Grant writes:

“Those who believe that division and confusion are of God have ignored the prayer of all prayers! This prayer is a lighthouse and tour guide for all who seek to please the Master. It is the foundation upon which the church rests.

Although the concept of complete unity has been preached fully to the world, it has been practiced selectively in the church. Ephesians 2:10-22 and Galatians 3:26-27 can strengthen the church in a mighty way. If only brethren, black, white, brown, red and yellow would communicate more often, they would realize they have much in common than ever imagined! Everyone will win when brethren unite.

Think of the good that could be accomplished if only God’s people would demonstrate to the world proper conduct concerning race (only one truly exist, Acts 17: 26) relations. Think of the effect it would have on neighborhoods and communities throughout the world. Think of the message it would send. Think of the pleasure the Lord would enjoy. Think of the effect it would have on succeeding generations of Christians”²

As Jesus prayed to His Father concerning the apostles, He also prayed for ALL BELIEVERS that they might be united. This was not an exclusive prayer for a certain race of believers! Every person (regardless of purse, position or pigmentation) that believed on Jesus through the teaching of the apostles is the object of the prayer of Jesus. The simple truth behind the prayer of Christ can be stated without any contradiction; **ONENESS IN CHRIST BY BELIEVERS PROMOTES OBEDIENCE TO CHRIST BY UNBELIEVERS.**

When the world can focus on genuine Christian unity – they (the world) can be so influenced (because of the power of unity, which is wrought only through the cross) that sinful mankind would believe. The Christian’s message to the world is a message of unity among us (Christians)! This unity is not just in word, but also in deed. It encompasses practice as much as it does precept. Friends, there must be the presence of unity of all Christians involving true racial integration rather than an imagined separate, but equal toleration! The world takes note of people who are truly different. Instead of being one racial group to ourselves - why not practice being ONE IN CHRIST?

The ingredient of oneness is Paul's inspired solution to a fractured church in the ancient city of Corinth:

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body (1 Cor 12:12-20).

Oneness in Christ is the only solution for the problems of mankind. This unity of oneness (according to Jesus) is achieved when every man will obey the words of God rather than man (John 17:20; Acts 5:29). If Christians drift away from the Word of God in just one area (respect of persons, which includes racism) would it really matter? The prayer of our Lord unequivocally demonstrates that it does matter! The Lord's prayer for unity of all believers is not some lofty and unattainable ideal! This is an inspired achievable framework for growth. If this were not the case why emphasize the Great Commission passages (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-47; John 20:23)? Why would Jesus bother to reconcile Jew and Gentile in one body (Eph.2:16) if unity of believers was not His priority? These two groups (Jew and Gentiles) were segregated (Eph. 2:11-12) until the doctrine of Jesus had thoroughly impacted them!

The world of today awaits the impact of ONE CHURCH! This church is uniquely colored RED because the blood of the Lamb redeems all members (Acts 20:28; Eph. 2:13; Rev. 1:5-6; 7:9). Great good can be realized in our broken world when the church of Christ is fully integrated to send the message of salvation within our communities. Division of believers in Christ by reason of racism or class is truly the major hindrance to world conversion! May God help us to

end the programs of planned division and hypocrisy! The hypocrisy to separate and discriminate base on race and cultural appreciation while telling the world that we are united minimizes and mocks the prayer of Jesus! Any program of church growth which intentionally excludes because of race or status (Jas. 2:1-7) or circumvents the prayer of Jesus (John 17:20-23) such a program should be rejected.

The so-called "*homogeneous-unit principle*" has been endorsed by a number of brethren as a reason to resegregate the churches under the guise of growth. This theory suggests that the churches that grow fastest are monocultural (one culture). While many among us may find great comfort in worshiping with folks who are young, attractive, verbal, intellectual and similar, Christ did not assure us of this social amenity. Christians can not afford to be seduced by a materialistic culture into a comfortable, racially resegregated brotherhood. Too many souls are at risk of being lost and every child of God will account for their role in answering the prayer of Jesus for complete unity, even in the midst of our diversities. With the exception of tongue speaking (I Cor. 14: 22-30) where an interpreter is not available, churches of Christ have no reason to separate because of culture or any other social variable.

Ways to Develop and Maintain Race Relations Priority Number One

In the Lord's church we should always be mindful that the first place of honor is reserved for the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul stated emphatically that "*He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence*" (Col. 1:18). The unity and fellowship that exist in the body (church) of Christ is achieved when each member prioritizes Christ first. The first priority of your life (Matt. 6:24) will determine the rest of your life (2 Cor. 5:10-11).

Note the language of I Cor. 12: 24-27:

“For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.”

From the language of I Corinthians 12: 24-27 we learn important truths in regulating proper relationships among diverse cultures of believers: (1) **Maturation**--It is God who tempers the members of the body. This truth requires Christians to grow up together in the Lord (2 Peter 3:18; Phil. 1:9). (2) **Mutual Care**--It is only when members have the same care one for another that division in the church of Christ is averted (Gal. 6:1-2). This truth demands brotherly love (I John 4:20). (3) **Mutual Allegiance**--Membership in the body of Christ demands submission to the Head (Jesus). This mindset can help us to overcome racist thinking and fears about other members different from ourselves. Total dependence is on Him rather than ourselves (Gal. 2:20). (4) **Master Control**--The preeminent Head (Jesus) directs member functioning. This is accomplished through the Word (John 12:48). When Christians allow Jesus to have His way with us we can be empowered to leave our “comfort zones” and boldly take the world with the gospel (I John 5:1-4).

G. Ernest Wright has observed, “The confession that Jesus is Lord was a highly significant social statement. The church was an effective social instrument, then, not because it was *primarily* a social institution. No, it was effective precisely because it knew itself to be the body of Christ under the guidance of the Spirit. This knowledge, in turn, made far-reaching concomitant social demands. In time, it came to reshape the whole religious and social structure of the Empire itself.”³

Unity in the body of Christ requires every member to mature in wisdom and knowledge. Members who are maturing are members who are caring for others without respect of persons. They treat one another according to the royal law. *“If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well”* (Jas. 2: 8). Mutual allegiance to Christ will permit Christ, the Master controller, to use every member to the glory of God. Let’s return to God’s pattern for regulating all of our relationships.

Practical Interventions for Christians

Since unity, which includes proper race relations, is an outgrowth of Jesus’ prayer for all believers in Christ, Christians must have the mind of Jesus to maintain racial harmony.

I would begin by going alone to God to discover myself to attempt to know myself as only God knows me (Psa. 139:1). Like the prodigal son, I must come to myself (Luke 15:17). I must find the real me including my true racial attitudes and feelings, my real doubts and fears, and my actual motives and aims.

I must repent of known sinful racial attitudes and actions in my life and, like the publican of old, pray to God for forgiveness (Luke 18:13). I must ask God to enlarge my spirit and to expand my capacity for love and compassion for all others (Eph. 3:14-21). I must pray that God will lead me beyond self-knowledge to a knowledge that will deepen my understanding, and I must receive divine wisdom and courage to guide my actions (Jas. 1: 5-6).

I must realize that the *surest of all signs* of racial prejudice is expressed when I deny my own prejudice. I must realize that the only way to overcome racial prejudice is the way of experience. First, I must seek to promote integration. Why? Because social scientists teach us that behavioral change precedes attitudinal change. Blacks and whites can never change their attitudes toward one another until they first have opportunities for behavioral experiences with one another. This

social contact, if achieved in a setting of equality, can help the races to come to *know* each other as fellow human beings, as *real* brothers and sisters in Christ. When these associations are maintained, the false stereotypes of ethnic groups that fasten themselves on our minds can be destroyed.

I must work for the promotion of healing experiences, striving to promote a non-segregated church. This can be realized when we strive for an integrated leadership of capable elders, ministers, deacons, and teachers in the church. I must affirm equal justice and opportunities for all races with respect to jobs in the body of Christ. Jesus' teaching of the golden rule and his teaching on love for neighbor supports such action (Matt. 7:12; 22:27-40).

I must declare the whole counsel of God on the subject of race relations. This I must do regardless of whether God's will is popular or even acceptable, regardless of cost.⁴

I must never be ashamed of the gospel (Rom. 1:16-17). Four reasons why Christians ought never to be ashamed of the gospel, (1) Because of its origin, the gospel originated with God and not man (Gal. 3:11-12; 2 Pet. 1:19-21). The idea of racism is a genuine reproach upon the gospel! (2) Because of its operation, the gospel is an operation of power that can cut out racist attitudes if we will humbly allow it to leaven in our hearts (Heb. 4:12; 2 Tim.1: 8). (3) Because of its outcome, the salvation of mankind is only through the gospel (Mark 16:15-16). And finally, because of its outreach, the gospel message reaches out to all races of man. To deny any of these four points is to deny Jesus and hinder the work of saving souls.

Instead of blame, brethren, it is time to reclaim (Phil. 3:7-10)! In the Garden of Eden when the man and the woman sinned against God, an amazing phenomenon to place. When questioned by the Creator concerning their transgression the man blamed the woman and the woman blamed the serpent (the Devil). While this incident was occurring God simply noted their behavior and

promptly selected a remedy that would take man beyond the blaming stage. Adam and Eve just stood before God blaming while God prepared the remedy for their sin (Gen. 3:15). They were both equally guilty of sin and the need of the hour was to reclaim their lost innocence! Blaming behavior was not the cure for the problem it only made it worse! Brethren we could do well to end the victimization process of affixing blame and seek the victory by reclaiming unity in Christ Jesus! Here is a challenge. Let's work to reclaim unity, the absence of friendships, and the lack of family harmony.

A Prescription to the Church

If as Christians we are members of the kingdom of God in which all women and men are valued and can reach their true humanity, whatever their race and background, then in our congregations we need to find practical ways of living this out. Is it really possible to merge all races in the one church of the Bible? Not only is it possible it is God's will. Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17 is realized in the church of Christ when Christians can find their proper places in serving God rather than themselves. The basis for this service is the mercy and love of God for all of mankind. A prescription for churches to involve all members without respect to race can be gleaned from a number of passages in the New Testament, but we will use the twelfth chapter of the Roman letter to illustrate the principle.

In Romans 12:1-3 Christians have acceptance with God only when they have mentally prepared themselves to serve Him as a living sacrifice. This sacrifice does not look to the standards of the world or of self, but unto God.

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not

to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Rom. 12:1-3).

In Romans 12:4-8 sacrificial living is accomplished by ALL of the members (though they are diversified by reason of difference, which includes culture and socio-economics) in ONE BODY. These members cooperate with each other through the Head (Jesus) as they carry out diverse functions.

“For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching. Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness” (Rom. 12: 4-8).

While differences among members existed and the involvement of roles were diverse, please note the attitude of sacrificial service to God as brethren cooperated with uniquely different Christians *“Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another” (Rom. 12:9-10).* The Holy Spirit did not state that there would be no problems, but problems were minimized where brotherly love and the royal law were facilitated (Jas. 2: 8). What an ideal picture of the Lord’s church to present to unbelievers!

Where there is unity of a culturally diverse group of saints in a congregation, more groups of people in the community will likely to identify with such a group. The congregation that is culturally diverse showcases Christianity as God intended it to be—a universal religion that reaches out to everyone.

The challenge to leaderships in congregations rings loud and clear. To reach out in our culturally diverse communities, congregations must strive to ascertain full and complete racial integration as we *go into the entire world with the gospel.* Churches must develop their thinking

and strategies about their multiethnic communities if they are to be effective and honor their Lord. This is not out of step with the sentiments of the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 9:20. Remarkable elasticity is necessary in the major task of evangelism. Paul concludes a long sentence emphasizing his own mode of life by stressing that he had "become all things to all," so that he might be effective in reaching some. The statement implies absolutely no compromise of truths, but flexibility in methodology.

There are many very fine ideas that can help churches to move toward complete unity in the matter of race relations. Small groups and zone programs should practice cultural diversity as they reach out into the community with the gospel. Gospel meetings and workshops should consider using sound and faithful men of every race. Black and white role models have much to offer our congregations by way of helping our young people to appreciate every effort of the church to experience racial oneness. Lectureship programs will better enhance all efforts to bridge unity by inviting (beyond tokenism) others races as speakers. Individual congregations can further provide a platform for growth and racial understanding by training and using young men to preach at schedule times. It is unfortunate when congregations possessing so much talent in the pews will neglect it due to racism or professionalism. Team ministry involving a white and a black preacher working in unison with a community. This is becoming more commonplace than ever before in our history.

What will it take? Blacks and whites will have to leave their egos on the altar of Satan and come together in the arms of the Savior. Although it has been some thirty years ago, the words of John Allen Chalk still ring true regarding the issue of peace and unity in the Savior:

Racial peace will never be attained unless it comes from God. Contrary to many popular and ignorant conceptions God does provide racial peace. Our problems today have arisen from man's rejection of God not from a supposed divine separation of the races. Racial peace assures all men freedom from cultural, physical, and even religious

conflicts. There has never been a more intense racial problem than that which existed between Jew Gentile and Jew Samaritan during the Lord's lifetime. Yet, the problem was faced, and Paul says that Christ not only made peace between God and man but he also established peace between Jew and non-Jew. (Ephesians 2:11-19.) Christ took the racial problem to the cross. To all sane and obedient men the problem was settled there! Because of this sacrifice, 'He came and preached peace to you that were far off (Gentiles, jac), and peace to them that were nigh (Jews, jac): for through him we both have our access in one Spirit unto the Father.' (Ephesians 2:17-18.) We may make our black brothers use different doors into public facilities but they will use the same door we use to get into heaven! We both become one struggling mass of lost men when we approach God. Jesus died to accomplish racial peace.⁵

Peter's statement in Acts 10:34-35 has forever settled the issue of racial and ethnic equality for those who believe the Bible. Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him. He wants all men to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), extending his grace to all (Tit. 2: 11). Discrimination, whether racial, ethnic, economic, or whatever, is plainly condemned: If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ye do well: but if ye have respect of persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors (Jas. 2:8-9; cf. vv. 1-7).

May God help His body (the church) to realize the need of the hour. We must turn from selfish superiority and face the Savior as we go out to reach all of humanity with the simple gospel of Jesus Christ (Matt. 5:16-17; Mark 16:15-16). Let us labor within the framework of Jesus' prayer for unity. The journey begins with one person at a time. May that one person include you.

¹ Guy N. Woods, New Testament Commentaries "John" Gospel Advocate Company, Nashville, TN. c. 1981, p. 364.

² Stacey W. Grant, Breaking Down the Wall, article entitled "Unity is the Key" Vol. 1. Number 1, Jan. 1999; Avondale church of Christ, 4017 Memorial Drive, Decatur, GA. 30032

³ Errol M. McGuire, "The Christian and Social Issues" Christ and Race Relations, 20th Century Christian, July 1968 p.38.

⁴ Walter E. Burch, "But What Can I Do?" Christ and Race Relations, 20th Century Christian, July 1968 pp. 28-29, 47.

⁵ John Allen Chalk, "Christ Our Peace" The Praying Christ and Other Sermons, Christian Publishing Company, Dallas, TX c.1965 pp.90-91.