

The Dangers of Church Silence and Complicity Around Racism

By Rev. Dr. Melvin L. Grimes, Executive Director of Churches United of the Quad City Area

“I have wept over the laxity of the church. But my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love...Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ, but oh! how we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformists.” -Martin Luther King Jr, Letter from a Birmingham Jail

Our nation and world have been grieving and hurting. The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically shifted what was viewed as normal in society from employment to basic social interaction. For a few months, news of COVID-19, including the stay at home orders and the realities of the new normal of society, dominated news coverage. Yet, recent news of unjust killings of African Americans, most notably, George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, coupled with massive social unrest across the country, has shifted the focus of much of the news coverage and has reignited a discussion around racism in America. Though some of the protests around the country have been violent, resulting in looting, many of the protests come from people peacefully, yet persistently, demanding justice and expressing their deep felt hurt and pain.

As followers of Christ, we are called to do justice (**Micah 6:8**) and mourn with those who mourn (**Romans 12:15**). We serve a God who is radically inclusive and proclaims a gospel that at its core, breaks down the racial and social barriers that have long plagued our country. Jesus and the early Christians preached to a social context that was too, plagued by histories of injustices and ethnic divisions. Yet too often in American history, the church has been complicit in the racial injustices in America. Some condoned slavery and upheld segregation in its churches and Christian universities. Others simply ignored the suffering and persecution that their African American brothers and sisters faced in their pulpits, streets, and homes. This complicity was a result of conformity with culture, comfort with racism, and fear of facing persecution. There is no doubt that American society has achieved much racial progress due in large part to the courageous and biblical prophetic work done among many Christians and churches in America who used Scripture and deep spiritual conviction to fight injustice. Despite much progress, recent events remind us that much work is still needed to bridge racial barriers and it is essential that we as Christians individually and as churches corporately serve as a critical voice for racial reconciliation and justice.

Like any effort to follow and live like Christ, pursuing racial reconciliation and breaking down barriers is costly. It may cost our popularity and comforts that we cherish, even from others within our church traditions. It cost the lives of many spiritual trailblazers within American history. Yet, we cannot afford to be complicit for the sake of preserving our own security when black and brown brothers and sisters are hurting and demanding justice, when our churches remain deeply segregated, and when our country remains plagued and impacted by the sin of racism.

As protests erupted across America, many Christians, particularly white Christians, asked the question as to how they should respond. Below are three ways that Christians individually and the church corporately should respond, moving from complicity to courage around race:

1. Discern: In Psalm 139:23 ESV, the Psalmist writes “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. And see if there be any grievous way in me and lead me in the way of the everlasting.” It is essential that we seek discernment from God to reveal to us the wickedness and evil thoughts within our own hearts that all of us possess in some way or another. In a politically-correct society, it is unpopular to believe and admit personal struggle with racial prejudice. Yet, ignoring this keeps us complicit in our own sin and inhibits us from truly valuing and serving brothers and sisters across racial lines authentically. In a society with significant racial barriers and divisions, possessing racial prejudice is more prevalent than commonly perceived. Ask God to reveal the racial hatred, fear, defensiveness, or discomfort over talking about racism and injustice or feelings of superiority/inferiority within your own heart as uncomfortable as it may be.

2. Listen and Learn: Listen to black and brown brothers and sisters about their pain without an intention to pass judgement, provide solutions, or defend your current thoughts on the situations at hand. As the New Testament author James writes “Be quick to hear and slow to speak” (James 1:19 ESV). Along with listening, we need to learn about the realities of race. In that learning, we must not place the burden on black and brown brothers and sisters to educate us about their experience. We must study and learn about race and reconciliation through books, podcasts, and other resources, taking this subject matter as seriously as we would other spiritual-related matters.

3. Condemn and Challenge Racism: The church must remain a strong and visible voice for racial justice and reconciliation and against racial injustice. The recent turmoil in our country reminded us of this necessity, but we must not wait for a major event to condemn injustice or cease to challenge racism once that story becomes old news. Our condemnation and challenge of racism must be consistent, acknowledging it as a persistent evil in our culture. For many American Christians, it is easy to fall into the trap of limiting our justice and compassion work to the atrocities that exist in other countries where corruption and injustice is blatant and overt. However, along with challenging global oppression, we must stretch ourselves to speak and act boldly and loudly on behalf of people experiencing injustices within our country and within our own communities and churches. Our silence makes us complicit and speaks volumes about our indifference at best and our tolerance and participation in injustice at worst.

We must not neglect the opportunity and responsibility that we as Christians and churches have to speak for justice and care for those who are hurting and vulnerable in our society. Let us remedy the sins of many of our church forefathers who were complicit and silent and follow the example of brothers and sisters who spoke and fought courageously against injustice and for reconciliation. Ultimately, let us grow deeper in serving and living like Christ. May God bless us and strengthen us during these difficult times.