

Re-segregating the Church

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"They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world but to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. . . I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me because of their word, that they may all be one. As you Father are in me, and I in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (John 17: 14-16, 20-21).

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27 – 28).

"People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God." (Luke 13:29).

"And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine in it for the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day --- and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations." (Revelation 21:23 – 26)

"The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us live honorably as in the day." (Roman 13:12-13)

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Despite the disgraceful performance by "Les Bleus" from my second (or is it third) country, France . . . and despite the ultimate failure of the Americans to advance . . . I have been enjoying the World Cup. One thing I love is the way the "nations of the world bring their glory" (or their best effort anyway), athletically speaking, to this amazing global festival every four years. South Africa has done an awesome job hosting this coming together of the nations. With some unfortunate exceptions the athletes and their fans display great sportsmanship and global civility. I finally got around to watching the film *Invictus* about the way Nelson Mandela led his new African nation, just out of apartheid, to embrace the mostly white national rugby team as they hosted the rugby world championships (and won).

The Ministry of Reconciliation and Peacemaking

There is something so incredibly emotional and moving and satisfying about reconciliation whenever and wherever we see it. Conflict and separation feed the worst side of our nature, Reconciliation lifts us to our best nature. Reconciliation to God is incredibly moving when it happens and we can witness (or experience) it. Reconciliation of families, spouses, parents and children, labor and management, nations, races . . . it is powerful. Our hearts leap for joy.

At its best, then, the church is the community of reconciliation. To us has been committed the "ministry of reconciliation" (II Corinthians 5:18). Ours is not the "ministry of separation" but the "ministry of reconciliation" . . . not *segregation* but *integration*. God's purposes are to destroy the walls that separate us and bring us together. We do not become the *same*, but we do become *one*. We do not become *uniform*, but we do become *united*.

There is coming a glorious Day when we will all come together from east and west, north and south and sit at table together. It is not yet that Day . . . but the Bible tells us to begin living as *if* we were in that day. In other words, start bringing people together from east and west, north and south right now, as an anticipation of the coming Day. It is still Night; but let us live "as in the Day" Paul writes. Every time we act as peacemakers and reconcilers we bear testimony to being recognizable "children of God."

But is this the church you know? Is this your own witness to church and world? Separation or reconciliation? Segregation or integration?

The Ministry of Segregation and Division

I'm afraid that for many people the Christian church is a reliable source of conflict, division, and separation --- not just among our neighbors but among Christians themselves. And I think this is a huge tragedy, a betrayal of our calling.

Here are three examples of what I mean:

Racial Segregation. We have for good reason felt guilty for years about the racial and ethnic virtual segregation of our churches,. Martin Luther King famously said that 11:00 o'clock Sunday was the most segregated hour of the week and he was right. Jazz clubs and restaurants and sports events do a much better job of bring the races together than the church does. I was pretty surprised to speak to InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at my alma mater a couple months ago and find 99% Asians looking back at me. The African-American IVCF meets separately, as does the Hispanic chapter, and the Philipino one, I was told. The Caucasians mostly just hang with one or two active church-based college groups. Anybody besides me find this troubling?

Nationalistic Segregation. And think about the flag waving and hard core, uncritical nationalism that is the "ministry" of many churches and Christians today. Clearly these Christians care a lot more about the United States (their version of it) than about the kingdom of God, with its global membership. Super-patriot Christian Americanists segregate and divide the church and contribute to factionalism in the surrounding world. In a world torn by nationalistic strife, Christians are whipping up partisan, nationalistic fervor. Anybody besides me find this troubling?

Musical Segregation. Finally, there seems to be very little resistance anymore to the movement to segregate the church along music and cultural lines. Rock n' roll church over here . . . classical church over there . . . gospel church over there . . . Suits here . . . robes here . . . Saturday morning picnic shorts there. Traditional service here . . . contemporary service there. Anybody besides me find this troubling? All this talk about diversity, globalization, etc., and their benefits to all. All our biblical theology of one Body, many members, all necessary to the functioning of the whole.

So the church divides and segments people, it tailors its message to specific races, musical tastes, political and national orientations. Somehow I don't get that in the Bible.

Three Moves to Get Back on Track

The fact is that all members of the Body are necessary, including (Paul writes) the less honorable ones (i.e., those you don't agree with or appreciate). They need you; you need them. And the fact is that the world is dying for a witness to unity: they will know our faith and believe in Jesus insofar as Christians rally together and demonstrate the sort of oneness the Trinity has. They will not be inclined to believe in Jesus insofar as we are the agents of division, separating from each other. They get little helpful witness if the only people invited to your table are from the north -- and you ignore the east, west, and south.

Three bits of advice to end with:

- (1) Invite others to come to your church, your home, your life. Make them welcome. Listen to them, more than talk at them. Practice hospitality every day. Make sure that your doors are wide open and that you greet and welcome everyone with a genuine smile. In your church *teach* regularly, frequently, and biblically the themes of reconciliation. *Teach* the old hymns, classics, and spirituals and explain where they came from and why they are important; *teach* the new white people praise songs --- and the black gospel songs --- and the songs of all nations. *Teach it pastor!!* Don't give up and yield to musical/cultural/liturgical segregation. Don't let the geezers narrow up the church any more than the praisers and rockers. *You can do it!!* The people can be

taught to appreciate and value a diversity of the body of Christ and its music. But they must be *taught* by their leaders. Your people can have some affinity small groups to indulge and satisfy their narrower preferences. But in the worship of the church, please try to *be the church* in its eschatological reality.

- (2) Go, whether invited or not, to where others are living, worshipping, meeting. Go with an open heart. Listen much more than talk. Go to serve but be careful to humbly accept being served. Go regularly. Go outside your comfort zone. Go! This is at least as important as item one.
- (3) Create and support collaborations among nations, races, social classes, educational classes, geographic regions and neighborhoods, musical affinity groups, etc.. Don't you fund it or direct it by yourself; build a collaborative team that collectively owns a project or event that facilitates reconciliation and integrated teams.

We need it. The world needs it. God longs for it. Let's do it.