

“When Jesus arose from the grave, he created a whole new race of people, not defined by color but defined by his blood.”

There are a few committed Christ-followers who would disagree with this pithy quote-extracted from the Twitter feed of Pastor Derwin L. Gray, which is actually supported by Scripture.

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:13-14 ESV).

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:28-29 ESV).

“One in Christ” is a recurring theme in the New Testament, which Christians of all races claim to believe. However, it is not racially characterized in Sunday morning worship services across America. African Americans, Hispanics, and Caucasians, for the most part, praise the Lord separately each Sunday morning. We attend the same schools, play on the same intramural sports teams, and work in the same offices. But, on the Lord’s Day, we drive out of our shared neighborhoods to churches that are full of people who look much the same as we do.

A study conducted by LifeWay Research indicates that 85% of senior pastors of Protestant churches believe church congregations should strive for diversity.¹ Unfortunately, what pastors believe should happen and what actually does happen are two different matters. Only a scant 13% say that more than one prominent race or ethnicity attends their churches.² Assuming the pastors polled are being truthful, and there is no reason to assume otherwise, one has to wonder what’s causing the disparity.

Why do African Americans primarily flock to black churches, while churches that Caucasians typically attend are mostly white? Why indeed, since 51% of Americans reveal they would be most comfortable visiting a church where multiple races and ethnicities are represented?³ But where are these people? They are overwhelmingly under-represented on Sunday morning. Could it be that 51% of Americans would be comfortable *visiting* a multi-ethnic church but wouldn’t want to *live* there, so to speak? Is it racism that segregates our worship services, or is it something else?

Preference or Prejudice?

¹ LifewayResearch.com

² LifewayResearch.com

³ LifewayResearch.com

The factors that separate worshipers are not strictly motivated by race. Personal and cultural preferences often play a divisive role, simply because they accentuate our differences.

Americans take a smorgasbord approach to worship. How a church demonstrates worship, or rather, the *style* in which worship is conducted, plays a huge part in whether someone aligns himself with an African American, Anglo, or Latino church. Even within the same denomination, the face of worship changes. The music alone is an enormous influence: traditional hymns, contemporary, gospel, southern gospel, and on it goes. Between African American and Anglo churches, there are varying degrees of differences within these categories and beyond. For instance, contemporary Christian music celebrated in an African American church is not necessarily the same as that sung in Anglo churches. The playlist of songs, and even the codes and cues reflected during worship, are most often dissimilar.

“The language that is used, the physicality of worship, there is a lot that goes into Sunday morning [worship],” said Dr. Richard Allen Farmer, Senior Pastor of Crossroads Presbyterian Church. The Stone Mountain, GA Church has undergone significant changes. Historically, an interracial church, the demographic of the congregants has shifted.

“Some of the Anglo members left because they relocated. For others, the church ‘no longer met their needs,’ and some moved away to different neighborhoods, as our church’s neighborhood changed and became more African American,” said Farmer.

Crossroads, which has a modest but growing congregation, remains racially and culturally well-balanced. The body of believers represents twelve nations, and the church has a shared leadership model. Its governing body consists of both Anglos and people of color. Regarding preferences, Dr. Farmer believes that worship planners and leaders should at least be aware of how different groups express worship.

“We work hard at singing music of many styles and traditions,” Farmer stated. “We experiment with sound, and silence...that which appeals to and affirms differing age groups. It is difficult, but a church that wants to bridge the divide will take this seriously.”

Dr. Jimmy Scroggins, Lead Pastor of Family Church in West Palm Beach, Florida, has a similar approach to encouraging diversity. The century-old church has evolved into one that is more racially balanced, though Scroggins admits it is not where he would like it to be.

“We want our church congregation to look exactly like the community, and we are working to make that a reality. Racial and cultural integration have no value for a church, in and of itself,” said Dr. Scroggins. “It only has value as it reflects the gospel, as it invites the whole community to know Christ. It is a theological commitment, and we are trying to reflect the implications of the gospel. The gospel of Jesus is for people of all life

stages, all ethnicities, of all backgrounds. So, we want to be intentionally inviting and inclusive and to eradicate the prejudices in our own hearts and in our own programs and in our own verbiage.”

While it is true that personal preference and tradition affect diversity in the American church, it is also true that Christians sometimes couch their prejudices behind preferences (which is more polite and accepted). No one is going to admit to attending an African American church simply because he or she does not like white people (or vice versa). It is impossible to look into a man’s soul, humanly speaking, and determine whether he is disguising prejudice with preference. However, there’s still the prickly problem of becoming “one in Christ.”

Defining the Difference Between Prejudice and Preference

- If joining a Bible-believing church that prominently represents a race other than your own proves problematic, then you may be couching prejudice with preference.
- If you find it objectionable to place yourself under the spiritual leadership of a pastor of a different race, then you could be couching prejudice with preference.
- If church members imitate Jesus, eventually their congregations will reflect his mission. God embraced the *world* through Jesus Christ.
- The proof of a New Testament church is in the pudding. It strives for diversity, even in the face of preference.

At the very least, a global-minded church will have an inviting spirit toward all people and seek to fulfill the Great Commission in Matthew 28.

Christians of all nationalities will do well to remember that, ““Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart”” (1 Samuel 16:7). He will discern what is motivated by preference or prejudice.

Christ-followers who wish to pursue the truth of God’s Word must grapple with racial inequity.

(In the words of the old spiritual, “It’s not my brother, nor my sister, but me, oh Lord.”) **Parishioners - within their own hearts - must truthfully answer the hard questions about race, not only for the sake of Sunday morning inclusivity, but also for the “love of Christ, which constrains us”** (2 Corinthians 15:4).