

Understanding Colorblind Racism

By Dave Snyder

I was reading Esau McGaulley's *Reading While Black* this week and found his insights on what the Bible has to say about colorblind racism to be relevant. Barna polls indicate an increasing number of Black Americans are worshiping in multiethnic churches but many of those black congregants feel they are expected assimilate to normative white church culture. They believe that when they attend these churches, they must leave part of their identity at the door. What is the root problem? I believe it is colorblind racism.

When I started talking about race on our church board, suggesting that we needed to develop cultural intelligence and to raise up leaders of color, I encountered gut reactions from my fellow Elders. Several Elders approached me privately and said, "I don't see color", suggesting that we should treat black congregants as if they were white and that a nearly all-white church board was essentially no different than a church board that included a healthy mix of Elders of color. These are examples of colorblind racism.

Below are Esau McGaulley's thoughts on colorblind racism from his book *Reading While Black*.

It has become common to claim that strong affirmations of ethnic identity are improper for Christians. Some white Christians have even begun to claim that they do not see color. This is rooted in a strange appropriation of Martin Luther King Jr's "I Have a Dream" speech. In that message King speaks of his vision of Black kids and white kids playing together and people not being "judged by the color of their skin but the content of their character." King's point was never that ethnicity and culture are irrelevant, but that they should not be the cause of discrimination. King often called on African Americans to take pride in their culture and heritage.

Far from being colorblind, King called on his people to look upon themselves as Black and see in that blackness something beautiful. In doing so King echoes the vision of Revelation in which each ethnicity brings its own unique glory to God.

In Revelation 7 we see people from every tribe, people and language around the throne worshiping the Lamb. The distinct cultures, languages and skin colors are everlasting. What unites this diversity? It is not cultural assimilation, but the fact that we worship the Lamb.

- *Reading While Black*, pg. 112

Imagine if our church were to receive a large influx of refugees. No one would think to say, "I don't see cultural differences" or "I don't see language barriers". No, the need to accommodate would be obvious. In leadership we frequently talk about the unique needs of young adults, families with young children or families with teens. I can't imagine my brothers and sisters in Christ saying I don't see age, I don't see family make up, I only see unique individuals. Yet, when it comes to black congregants, we want to discount commonalities shared by the group by saying, "I don't see color".

When I pointed out to our church board that our black Elders felt like they weren't being heard, one Elder approached me privately and said, "Helen doesn't speak for all black congregants". If we can establish that our black congregants are just individuals, without common group characteristics, shared experienced and shared cultural difference, it makes it easier for us to discount what we are hearing as

just one individual speaking. This then allows us to remain comfortable with the status quo of black congregants feeling expected to assimilate to the established white church culture.

I decided to find out for myself. I invited 5 Elders and Deacons of color over for lunch so we could listen to what their experience had been attending, serving, and leading in our church. While each story was unique there were common themes that tied the stories together. When I then summarized these stories to my fellow Elders on our church board, one Elder responded, “but did you get feedback from John? I bet John has had different experiences.” John (fictitious name) is a black American who some congregants perceive to be more white than black in culture. The point was, if we can find one black congregant whose experiences don’t match the group, we can continue to treat our black congregants as individuals and deny that our black congregants are experiencing our church differently, as a group, than our white congregants.

This is colorblind racism.

Now let’s review what we’ve learned in past conversations. Those of us that now get colorblind racism are not morally superior to those that don’t yet get it. And those that believe that colorblind racism is the solution to racial issues are not a rare exception. We have all been there at some point in our own racial identity development process. But colorblind racism is preventing multiethnic churches across our country from achieving the genuine unity that the Bible teaches.