

Title: The End of the Most Segregated Hour in America
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Galatians 3:25-29 NRSV

25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Gal 5:14 CEB

All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Pre sermon: MLK Jr "most segregated hour in America" clip (52 seconds)

Read text

We are living in hard time, but it is also an exciting time. And in this time hard-but-exciting time that we are living, I want to say two things:

1. We have come a long way!
2. We still have a long way to go!

What I mean is: Nowadays there are lots of churches in America in which you see the amazing diversity of the American people represented on the chancel and in the pews. Abundant Life Fellowship in Mountain View. [Describe what I know about Abundant Life church] There are lots of churches that look like this. We have indeed come a long way!

I mention Abundant Life in particular because God granted me the grace to meet Abundant Life's former pastor **Wayne Jackson** about a month ago. I call it grace because our meeting came a moment when, frankly, I was wondering what was happening for Black pastors and their churches in the wake of George Floyd's death. I wish I could say that I could just pick up the phone and call another ECO Pastor. But I can't. I'm not saying there are no African American pastors and elders in ECO. I am saying that there are very, very few and even fewer than there were in the PCUSA.

We talked about what it's been like for him and for the other African American pastors he mentors. We talked about how a white member of his church approached him expressing concern that a young black man was taking an interest in her daughter. We talked about how his wife would ask, "Why do we have to keep talking this stuff?" and Pastor Wayne would say, "Honey we have to teach people how to live with each other!" We talked about the calls to defund the police and why how that affects his friends and family who are in law enforcement.

And meanwhile, the churches in our denomination are still almost completely white except for the occasional worship leader. (Again, I urge you to listen to the Andre Henry interview)

And that's what I mean by, "We still have a long to go."

Why is there still a great deal of separation between black and white Christians in America? Lots of reasons, I suppose, and this morning I am not looking to cast blame. I am only wanting to say that every expression of Us and Them with the capital-C Church is a reminder that **the full power of the gospel has yet to be realized.**

Paul's letter to the Galatians is all about freedom. In fact, as far as Paul is concerned, the whole gospel is about freedom – ["where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" \(2 Cor 3:17\)](#). People who are baptized into Christ don't have to play by the old rules anymore – the rules that keep people divided into Us and Them animosities. When we live divided from one another, people on both sides of the dividing line are less-than-fully free.

We are living in hard time, but it is also an exciting time. We are living at a time when the church in American is more ready than ever to fully live into Paul's gospel vision.

I love how, like James, Paul is connecting this growing-in-freedom with growing-in-spiritual maturity. He explains that the Law functioned like a tutor or a nanny for small children. It gave very strict rules about what to eat, who to eat with, and of course about circumcision – that is, how males were to prove that they were part of "Us" and how to keep a distance from "Them." But a big reason Paul is so upset with the Galatian church is because he knows it is time for them to grow up! "You have faith now!" Paul says. The fact that you now have your identity in Christ and Christ alone means those rules don't govern your behavior anymore – Love does!

And when Christ's Love is the defining reality for us, we don't operate in Us versus Them anymore. The more we grow up into maturity, into the fullness of Christ who is our head, then the more we see [that the love that unites us is infinitely more important than the distinctions that divide us.](#)

And when Paul imagines all those who find their identity in Christ growing up as spiritual maturity people, and people who know how to love sacrificially, love courageously, love extravagantly, what he imagines is a Church full of people who blow up every Us versus Them distinction. He imagines people who look and speak and live very different lives from one another culturally coming together to be part of something totally new: An organic whole that reflections the diverse and multifaceted beauty and glory of God's own self. He imagines a New Community of Believers who confound all the low expectations and petty divisions of the world at large. He is looking forward to a time when the Church is so clearly demonstrating the best of how humanity can thrive that he concludes, "Of course everyone will want to a part of it, and will see themselves as part of it. Everyone will see themselves as a daughter or son Abraham, our First Father in the Faith.

We are living in hard time, but it is also an exciting time.

We are living at a time when a young, maturing generation of Americans is more ready to see justice and equality for all.

I've been hearing some people lament that the Black Lives Matter movement does not have a spiritual impetus and foundation like the Civil Rights Movement had. I honestly don't know if this is true or not. What I do know is this: We have a gospel-centered mandate for being part of any movement that breaks down dividing walls, inside and outside our churches. And I know that if the Black Lives Matter movement is going to succeed and advancing a true "liberty and justice for all" reality for all Americans, then the WHOLE church needs to be giving its support to that. The cause of Christ and the expansion of the gospel doesn't happen when we stand on the sidelines and offer cynical critiques. The gospel grows wherever we live it – and Paul's picture of unity perfectly captures what that looks like.

A friend's FB post: "As I look around I feel like I'm watching the destruction of my country and of humanity." This is a really disorienting time. But we have to go through a breaking down before we can have a rebuilding. The dismantling of the old in order to rediscover what is worth saving in order to incorporate it into the new. Paul is imagining a new humanity.

Paul is not talking about the end of gender, culture, or class. He isn't that naïve. He is saying that we no longer judge others as lesser or greater because of that.

Where can we start? Here is a small, but very significant first step each of us can take:

Ask God to bring a black Christian friend into your life.

Ask them to share their story.

Listen and Care.

Just listen. No agenda other than to actively listen.

God answered that prayer for me by bringing **Pastor Wayne** into my life. He and have continued to talk, and I am looking forward to bringing you all into the conversation in a couple weeks. I want you to get to hear directly from this wise and accomplished pastor what he believes is needed now in order for us to experience true reconciliation and unity in the church.

Conclusion

My friend Julie has been a pastor for a long time. But a few months ago she accepted a call to a new church in a denomination that is new to her. As a female pastor, she has challenges enough to contend with. But living and practicing justice has always been a big part of her life and ministry. Having married into a family of farmers, she and her husband helped create a food ministry called Abundant Table. Being a Gen-Xer like me, she has wondered to herself what she would have done had she grown up during the Civil Rights Movement. And like me, she feels gospel-bound to broach the subject of race in her sermons to her well educated, mostly white congregation of seasoned saints.

One of those beloved saints recently gave her a call. She described the conversation, and it reminded me of ones I have had. "Jim" called to offer encouragement. He began with words of appreciation for her. He wanted her to know that he and his friends were so grateful for her willingness to come and be their pastor. They were grateful for her gentle spirit and loving presence. They were grateful for her thoughtful sermons and beautiful presentation of the gospel. She listened attentively and patiently, waiting for "The But." There is always a "But."

"But I need to tell you Pastor Julie that some other members have told me that they are a little troubled by your sermons lately." There it is, she thought. Her body tensed, waiting for what would come next.

"I listened to them, but then I said, 'Well, I can understand your concerns. *But if we finished the job back in the sixties, we wouldn't be in this mess now.*'"

Julie told me that, and I cheered. Praise God for Saint Jim!

Friends, I believe God is saying to the church: It is time for you to finish the job!

God, to the church: It is time for you to finish the job!

Amen.