

PREJUDICE

The Bible teaches that prejudice based on ethnicity, education, gender, power, or financial standing is wrong. However, such prejudices have existed over time. Moses was attacked by his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam because he had married a black woman (Num. 12:1). God showed his displeasure by afflicting Miriam with leprosy (v. 10). James, a brother of the Lord, condemns churches which showed an attitude of favoritism toward the wealthy, and one of despise toward the poor (James.2:1-9).

In New Testament times, the Palestinian Jews held a very special prejudice toward Samaritans. We are told that Jews had no dealings with Samaritans (John 4:9). The traveling Jews would usually walk around their country rather than pass through it, and they certainly would not have eaten their food. When Jews in opposition to Jesus became very angry with Him, they called him a Samaritan and demon possessed (John 8:48). This prejudice against Samaria and Samaritans was probably the reason that almost every time Jesus mentions them, it is in a very positive light. For instance, when He wanted to illustrate how we should show love to our neighbor, He told the story of the "good Samaritan" who stopped by the wayside to take care of the Jew who had been beaten and robbed (Luke 10:30-37). When Jesus healed ten lepers, He remarks on the fact that the only one who returned to thank Him was a Samaritan (Luke 17:11-19). A Samaritan woman is given as an example of being open to Christ and to the Gospel, and who even brought the people of her city to be taught by Him (John 4:4-42).

The prejudice on the part of the Jews against Gentiles is clearly evident in the New Testament and served as a barrier against full unity between the Jewish and Gentile portions of the church. When Peter, at God's bidding, entered the house of Cornelius, He said, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean" (Acts 10:28). And yet, even though God had spoken in such a way to Peter, some years later the Apostle Paul shamed Peter before the church for refusing to eat with Gentile Christians because of his fear of the Jewish Christians (Gal. 2:11-14).

Jesus gave an example of loving service to the lowly when he washed His disciples feet (John 13:5-17). Later, He emphasized that He was giving them a NEW commandment, to "love another, even as I have loved you" (13:34). This goes beyond the Old Testament command to "love our neighbor as we love ourselves." Now, the measuring stick is no longer to love others as we love ourselves, but to

love others as Christ has loved us!" Our model has become the eternal divine Son of God who left heaven and took on human flesh to live for us, and to die for us so that we would be saved, even while we were His enemies (Rom. 5:8)!

However, the fact that people tend to group together in terms of things that they have in common is not in itself either prejudicial or sinful. The Synagogues in New Testament times were often composed of people who had similarities that brought them together. The Jews in opposition to Stephen were said to be members of a synagogue made up of "Freedmen" i.e., former slaves (Acts 6:9). There is a possibility that the reference in the same verse to persons from Cilicia and Asia indicates another synagogue made up of persons who came from the same areas. Since synagogues could come into existence when there were ten heads of families present, and often met in homes, or in attachments to homes; they would tend to draw persons from the linguistic, ethnic, and even socioeconomic nature of the immediate area. We know that among the Jews there were sub-groups that had varying opinions about both religious and political subjects, such as the Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees, Herodians, and Zealots. In all probability, these would tend to congregate together. There is also some evidence that synagogues in larger cities would tend to be more likely to be ethnically and culturally uniform, while those in the more sparsely populated areas would be more varied in their makeup.

It is sad to say that the attitudes of some white Christians toward black Christians have been lamentable since the founding of our nation. In the past, not all, but many Whites considered Blacks to be an inferior race, and some even questioned as to whether or not they had souls. I had the pleasure of knowing Marshall Keeble and getting to hear him preach when I was a child, and later when I was a professor at Pepperdine College in Los Angeles. I remember him saying that one time a brother approached him saying he did not believe the Gospel needed to be preached to Blacks because they had no soul anyway. Brother Keeble answered, "Well, the Bible says it is to be preached to every creature, and you can't deny that we are creatures!" In our earlier history, when some white churches held meetings which Blacks wanted to attend, they would have to stand or sit separated from the white congregation. There was a period when Blacks were not admitted to our Christian colleges. It is a shame that the forerunners of the fight to end racial segregation were not, by and large, headed up by members of churches of Christ. On the other hand, there were voices raised against the sinfulness of such attitudes. A case in point was the historical speech of Carl Spain when he dropped a bombshell at the ACC lectureship by calling the record in race relations of the church and of

our schools, sinful. Clearly, much has changed, but much is still to be changed.

The question still remains as to why in this time of enlightenment, we would have racially segregated churches, or churches segregated for socioeconomic reasons. If it is because of prejudice, then it is sinful, and God will surely judge in the matter (James 2:9...."If you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors"). If it is for reasons like the Jews had for having synagogues form on the basis of commonalities, and if they are not closed groups, but lovingly embrace all races and individuals of all socio-economic conditions, then it is not a sin.

The truth of the matter is that where the churches are numerous, the preponderance of the congregations will be more uniform in composition, with some here and there being very diverse. On the other hand, while there are notable exceptions, where the churches tend to be few and far between, there will tend to be more diversity in congregational composition.

Searcy has a population of about 21,000. We have about eight congregations, all of which are composed of primarily white Christians, but our churches also have Blacks, Hispanics, and Orientals attending, albeit in much smaller numbers. Recently, a black minister met with the elders of the church that I attend, and of which I am also an elder, and asked our financial support in founding a black congregation. There was some conversation as to why a black congregation was necessary since all ethnic groups are welcome in all of these congregations. He responded that we did not know how to preach to and teach many of the Blacks as well as he could, and that he could reach Blacks with the gospel that were not likely to ever be reached or made to feel at home in our predominantly white congregations. He went on to explain there were methods of preaching, teaching, and of worshiping, that went over well with many of the Blacks, but which would make some Whites uncomfortable. We have now been supporting that preacher for some time and he seems to be making good progress.

In our city, we also have some Hispanic Christians who have chosen to meet in one of our church buildings but either in a different part or time from the main assembly. They do this to be able to worship and to preach in their own tongue. We have a wonderful ministry in the local prison, and in other prisons nearby. We have been baptizing about one hundred per year. Many of these, upon release, return to their hometowns. The few that stay have been difficult to assimilate into our congregations. They do not feel comfortable worshiping in the midst of

college students, professors, professionals of many types, and with what generally would be called a middle class congregation. We have talked about trying to start a congregation of persons who have been brought to Christ while in prison, although we have not done that yet. But if we do it, I do not believe it would be either divisive or sinful, but merely a carrying out of the principle of trying to make all things as easy and as conducive to Christian growth toward maturity as possible...basically, to "become all things to all men."

Christ had a preference for Peter, James and John. He took them with Him to the Mt. of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1), He took them with Him when He went into the house of a Synagogue official named Jairus to raise his daughter from the dead (Luke 8:51), and He took them with Him when He left the others and went farther into the Garden to pray (26:37). It is said of Jesus that His love for John was special (John 21:20). However, He also loved the others, and spent much time with them. We all have feelings of greater closeness to certain persons for a variety of reasons. It would be wrong if we marked everyone else off, and refused to have anything to do with them.

It is wrong when bad feelings exist between racial groups, or groups of diverse socio- economic standing. It is unacceptable for a church to close out others for prejudicial reasons. It is not bad when commonalities bring people together to help them be more cohesive and unified as they go about doing the work of the Lord, so long as they are happy to accept all Christians who wish to be a part of their church family.

One of my most satisfying ministries was at the Vermont Ave., Church in the Watts part of Los Angeles. I was also a professor of Bible at Pepperdine. Vermont Avenue served college students and local residents as well as members of the Pepperdine faculty and staff. It was composed of Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, and Orientals. Our elders and deacons were multiracial. I worked closely with other churches in the area that were predominantly Black and enjoyed fellowship with my late beloved brother, R.N. Hogan, a great man of God and minister of the word. There was also a Japanese church in the area. This will continue to be the picture of the church, as it was of the synagogue. I pray the church will grow spiritually so that the above differences in church composition will never mask an underlying strata of prejudice.

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