
Accepted Power: Black Authority and the Multiethnic Church

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Black people, specifically American descendants of slaves, and the American church have had a complex and painful relationship. From the slave plantation, to Jim Crow, to the Civil Rights Movement, and Black Lives Matter, the relationship between Black Christians and the church seems to have improved. Black slaves are no longer being beaten or imprisoned for secretly having their own worship services, nor are Black Christians openly being told they can't sit on a pew in a White church, nor are Black Christians the only ones speaking out about racism and injustice, as many White Christians have joined in the fight. In an effort to unite Christians in America, the multiethnic church movement has gained momentum. But what does the dynamic between Black Christians and the American church look like now? I investigate this question through study of the contemporary multiethnic church movement. While Black and White Christians have come together in churches, it is not without relational issues that are the result of the unreconciled past.

Since the establishment of America the label for descendants of African slaves has had a journey of its own. From the derogatory “n word” to negro, colored, African American, black, and now Black. As the label has evolved, so has the race into an ethnic group with culture and language. The awakening of America concerning the plight of the black American has caused an evaluation in how we identify this group. The consensus is that respect is owed to black Americans to be honored as a race and ethnic group. In July, 2020, Coleman from the New York Times wrote,

W.E.B. Du Bois had started a letter-writing campaign asking publications, including The Times, to capitalize the N in Negro, a term long since eradicated from The Times's pages. “The use of a small letter for the name of twelve million Americans and two hundred million human beings,” he once wrote, was “a personal insult.”

The Times turned him down in 1926 before coming around in 1930, when the paper wrote that the new entry in its stylebook—its internal guide on grammar and usage—was “not merely a typographical change,” but “an act in recognition of racial self-respect.”

Decades later, a month-long internal discussion at The Times led the paper on Tuesday to make, for

similar reasons, its latest style change on race—capitalizing Black when describing people and cultures of African origin.

“We believe this style best conveys elements of shared history and identity, and reflects our goal to be respectful of all the people and communities we cover,” said Dean Baquet, The Times's executive editor, and Phil Corbett, associate managing editor for standards, in a memo to staff.

Conversations about the change began in earnest at The Times and elsewhere after the death of George Floyd and subsequent protests, said Mike Abrams, senior editor for editing standards. Several major news media organizations have made the same call including The Associated Press, whose stylebook has long been an influential guide for news organizations.

“It seems like such a minor change, black versus Black,” The Times's National editor, Marc Lacey, said. “But for many people the capitalization of that one letter is the difference between a color and a culture.” (Coleman 2020)

For the purpose of this article I will reference Black and White Americans with capital letters.

Segregated vs. Multiethnic Churches

Black lives matter is a statement. It is a factual statement. It is a statement that historically, in America, has not been accepted as fact. Since the start of American slavery, the Black life has been assigned to the lower caste of the American racial caste system. The Black life was sold for money and was minimized to nothing that resembled a human life. The Black life was emancipated only to find itself *still* bound by a system that sought to maintain its hold in a “lesser than” position, despite the freedom given on paper. And the American church found itself at an intersection, with a decision to make, which side to take? To represent the Kingdom meant to go against this caste system and usher in God’s way, Kingdom culture. To represent America meant the acquisition of power, position, and money. The cost for it all was the cross, if the church would only put down the cross and accept the rules of the caste system. The decision was made, and not only did Black lives not matter in America but Black lives didn’t matter in the dominant American church. But today, in the midst of the demand for social change, God has provided the church with yet another opportunity, another intersection, at which to make the right decision.

I decided to spend some time studying the church I believe to be at the center of this intersection, the multiethnic church. What I found was a movement with a vision to bring together all ethnicities in America, especially Black and White Christians, and to build a culture of unity in the American church. The Black life matters more in the multiethnic church today than it has in White churches in the past. However, the multiethnic church is yet limited by the rules of the American caste system for the exercise of power and authority. As a result, the Black life, the Black voice, has limited power and hardly any authority in the multiethnic church.

“What are you?” This is a question I was often asked while growing up with such a fair-skinned complexion. It became even more puzzling to my friends when they would meet my white-skinned, green eyed, Black momma. My family is Creole and originated from Louisiana. Creole people in Louisiana were a mixed race consisting of French and Black (and sometimes Native American) origins (or ancestries). My mom was someone who was able to “pass” racially. Racial passing in the US meant that a light-skinned Black person could present themselves as, or “pass,”

for White. In their article, “Passing as Black: Racial Identity Work among Biracial Americans,” Nikki Khanna and Cathryn Johnson explain that racial passing “has generally been understood as a phenomenon in which a person of one race identifies and presents himself or herself as another (usually white)” (Khanna and Johnson 2010, 380). However, my mom and her siblings always answered the “what are you?” question with “Black.” Back then to be Black in America meant that you had a drop of blood from African ancestry. F. James Davis, a sociology professor and author of *Who is Black? One Nation’s Definition* explains:

To be considered black in the United States not even half of one’s ancestry must be African black. But will one-fourth do, or one-eighth, or less? The nation’s answer to the question “Who is black?” has long been that a black person is any person with any known African black ancestry. This definition reflects the long experience with slavery and later with Jim Crow segregation. In the South it became known as the “one-drop rule,” meaning that a single drop of “black blood” makes a person a black. It is also known as the “one black ancestor rule,” some courts have called it the “traceable amount rule,” and anthropologists call it the “hypo-descent rule,” meaning that racially mixed persons are assigned the status of the subordinate group. This definition emerged from the American South to become the nation’s definition, generally accepted by whites and blacks. Blacks had no other choice. (Davis 1991, 4)

Having a Creole mother meant that I spent a lot of time going back and forth between two worlds: the Black and the White. It was not because my mom was trying to pass for White, but my mom was often forced (or socially pushed) to go wherever she could be accepted at that time. Sometimes it was White spaces and other times it was in Black spaces.

In Houston during the 1980s, diversity was not a “hot topic” of conversations. I remember growing up attending an all-White Catholic church. Although my family—whose skin tones come in multiple shades of what we Americans call Black—were the only Blacks in this White church, my mom decided to take my sisters and I to this church because it was closest to our home. On one particular Sunday, however, we attended the Black Catholic church a little further away. I remember feeling a sense of community once inside.

Kids were running around playing with each other like they were cousins or brother and sisters. Families held full conversations beyond the courteous “good morning” greeting. It was a very different experience from our mornings at the White church, where people smiled and greeted us, but conversations hardly ever went past that. When worship began at the Black church, parishioners sang aloud jubilantly and even clapped their hands! I could not believe what I was seeing and hearing. After the service had ended and we were on our way home, I remember asking my mom, in a somewhat begging manner, if we could return the next Sunday. We did.

Early on in my life I had a clear understanding that church here in America meant Black or White. It meant that Black people went to their own church and White people went to their own church. In 1954, *Brown vs The Board of Education* ushered in a new era of societal integration. However, due to the separation of church and state in America, this ruling had no effect on the American church. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1960) made a famous observation saying, “it is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning.” Fast forward to the 21st century and center stage is a new church, the multiethnic church—a church where Black people and White people come together into one unified body of Christ.

The multiethnic church is supposed to represent a place where Black people are accepted and free to be “themselves,” and White people worship alongside them as brothers and sisters in Christ. It is supposed to be a place where racial stereotypes, both Black and White, are discredited. It is supposed to be a place where the outside racial issues of America are reconciled under the blood and banner of Jesus Christ. It is supposed to be a place where the unjust American racial caste system of power has no authority. But the multiethnic church does not fully promote or accept Black authority as I will demonstrate below.

America is not the first place where a diverse group of people have come together in churches. During the first years of the New Testament church, scripture suggests that people from different backgrounds and ethnicities came together to hear the Good News. In fact, it was quite a diverse scene at Antioch, the place where followers of the Way were first called Christians.

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the

word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. (Acts 11:19-26, ESV)

In order to fix a crooked line of tape you have to lift it up with your hand press firmly on the beginning and start at the beginning laying the tape yet again, with hopes that this time it doesn’t stray from the straight path. Something happened between the beginning years of Christianity to the formation of the American church that greatly altered our understanding of what it meant to be Christians, an offspring of the New Testament church. It is necessary for the American church to trace back to the beginning of *the* church, so that it can see how Christ brought together both Jew and Gentile into one people. Despite the cultural differences and preferences Paul instructed that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Today, many Americans claim that separate churches are needed because Whites and Blacks have different worship styles. But it is profoundly absurd to say Black and White Christians can’t worship together because of worship style preferences when the early church in America showed that even White Christians enjoyed the preaching style of Black preachers. (Mitchell 2004, 50). It is profoundly absurd to say Black and White Christians can’t worship their same God together because of worship style preferences when those same Christians can be found eating at the same restaurants, shopping at the same stores, watching the same movies, engaged in the same TikTok dances and even going to the same music concerts. This illusion of a need for separation due to worship style preference is an illusion crafted by the

enemy. If we can be unified in various ways in the world, we certainly can and should be unified in lifting up the banner of Christ.

We must use the New Testament church as the example of a diversified body because that is exactly the reason that Christ established it, so that *everyone* who believed could come together by the blood of the cross into one body. It was to establish his Kingdom. If Revelation 7:9 tells us that every nation is coming together into a multitude that is praising the Lord together, then we quite urgently need to figure out how to do that sooner rather than later.

One of the central pieces of research found within the multiethnic church movement is a study conducted in 2003 by Michael O. Emerson and Karen Chai Kim. In the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Emerson and Kim's research, called "Multiracial Congregations: An Analysis of Their Development and a Typology," defines and analyzes the types of multiethnic churches and hypothesizes the various issues that can arise within these churches. In it, Emerson and Kim observed:

Although some institutions must abide by laws aimed at decreasing racial disparity, religious congregations will remain beyond the reach of legislation. By virtue of their voluntary nature and the separation of church and state, religious congregations largely remain segregated by race . . . despite the racial integration that has been occurring in other institutions, the vast majority of the more than 300,000 religious congregations in the United States—the largest and most active voluntary associations—involve members who are of the same race. (2003, 217)

In 2003, sociologist George Yancey wrote *One Body, One Spirit: Principles of Successful Multiracial Churches*. In the opening of his book, Yancey, a Black man married to a White woman, shared about his experience of being uncomfortable at a predominately White church in Texas where he lived. He mentions that his wife expressed his concerns with her women's study group and their response was somewhat expected. "They maintained that they were not prejudiced and that their church was quite open to people of all races. They stated that anyone was welcome, including people of other races. They simply could not understand why racial minorities did not come to their church" (Yancey 2003, 14). Yancey (2003, 14) concludes that, "the reason why this church

was going to remain predominately White for the conceivable future was not because the church leadership intentionally barred racial minorities. Rather, it was due to the inability of this church, like most American churches, to create multiracial Christian environments." It is important to mention that the multiethnic church movement started in predominately White evangelical churches. Most authors writing on this topic are speaking from the notion of transforming these predominately White churches into multiethnic churches. Yancey (2003, 18) stresses that, "multiracial churches can include any combination of racial groups in our society. . . [but] multiracial churches are more likely to be White and either Latino or Asian than to be White and Black."

Many multiethnic churches are trying to create an environment of *cultural pluralism*. Cultural pluralism is the idea that minorities can participate fully in the dominant society yet maintain their cultural differences. However, one of the main concerns in the multiethnic church is that minority integration into majority church settings will allow the dominant race's power to "overwhelm the integrity of the minority culture" (Yancy 2003, 30). Therefore, it is unable to maintain *cultural pluralism*. Yancey argues this point, writing:

They [the minorities] perceive assimilation as a further extension of white superiority. This philosophy of culture pluralism mandates that cultures of minority groups are to be respected and maintained in as pure a form as possible . . . the development of black theology has supported the idea of maintaining distinct African American congregations and liberation theology has supported the value of maintaining the uniqueness of Latino American congregations. Such theologies regard preventing the loss of black and Latino cultures as a priority for minority Christians. (2003, 31)

The multiethnic church can address the argument of cultural pluralism by creating a culture of accommodation instead of a culture of assimilation. This means intentionally building a diverse teaching team with Black and other minority teaching pastors and allowing them to preach from theologies that not only speak into their lives but the lives of the minority members of the church. In *Ethnic Blends: Mixing Diversity into Your Local Church*, Mark Deymaz and Harry Li, in the opening chapter, express concerns

with the ability of the church to continue to proclaim Jesus Christ from a segregated platform. “For in an increasingly diverse and cynical society, people will no longer find credible the message of God’s love for all people when it’s proclaimed from segregated churches” (Deymaz and Li 2010, 37). It is easy to see the point the writers are making for the multiethnic church movement. The Gospel message of Jesus Christ cannot be advanced in a diverse country by an intentionally divided and segregated church body. It would seem that any church operating in this manner would lose its ability to be a credible witness for the Kingdom of God.

Deymaz insists that such a movement has nothing to do with race at all. “The pursuit of ethnic blends must be firmly rooted in God’s Word. In other words, it’s not about racial reconciliation; it’s about reconciling men and women to God through faith in Jesus Christ, and about reconciling a local church to the principles and practices of New Testament congregations of faith, such as existed at Antioch and Ephesus” (Deymaz and Li 2010, 37). The purpose of the multiethnic church movement, according to Deymaz, is soul salvation and the pursuit of reflecting the New Testament church. Interestingly enough, what Deymaz describes here is the primary purpose of the Christian church, not the need to label a church or movement *multiethnic*, which only emerges from the history of the American church. Unfortunately, very few writings on the multiethnic church movement address the history of the segregated church in America. The segregated church is the opposite of the multiethnic church; it is on the other side of the spectrum. So the reason for the multiethnic church is actually to make amends for the segregated church.

God created diversity. He created humanity not only in his image but in a variety of appearances. Just as diverse as we are, we also have different cultural experiences in the world. As Christians, those experiences are connected to our expression of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If those diverse cultural expressions of the Gospel can come together properly in the multiethnic church, then it can have a more holistic picture of God and his Kingdom. An important observation to make about the multiethnic church is that the majority of these churches will reflect a White American cultural expression of the Christian faith. So, it is necessary to make corrections now in the

multiethnic church while it is still young. In the discipline of missiology, self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting are understood and accepted as the first three “selves” in the empowerment of local churches. Paul Hiebert, a missionary anthropologist, coined the term “self-theologizing,” as a “fourth-self.” In his article, “The Surprising Relevance of the Three-Self Formula,” Robert Reese (2007, 26) explains what Hiebert means by this notion of a fourth self, writing that “by this he meant the ability of an indigenous church to read and interpret Scripture within its local culture.” At a deeper level, Hiebert (1984, 295) states that, “true contextualization, whether of word, practice or institutional structure, requires a deep knowledge of the historico-culture contexts of both the Christian message and the culture into which it is to be planted. This must include a knowledge not only of the explicit meanings of cultural forms, but also the implicit theological assumptions upon which they rest.” Based on Hiebert’s theory, each of the “others” that make up the minority body in a multiethnic church will likely have their own cultural understanding and interpretation of Scripture separate from the majority culture, even if learned from White cultural understanding. Thus, if the only preaching of Scripture is done by White American pastors, then the “multiethnic” church is not receiving a multiethnic sermon. It is imperative that multiethnic churches create and maintain diverse teaching teams so that there is diversity in the expression and cultural translation of scripture. It should learn from the New Testament church, the original multiethnic church. The New Testament church had diverse leadership and were often sent out in diverse teams. “Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul” (Acts 13:1 ESV).

According to two historians of the Black Church, the struggles of the multiethnic church and the lack of strategies required for “building” a healthy one are all symptoms of the ailing relationship between White and Black Christians.¹ Henry H. Mitchell’s *Black Church Beginnings: The Long Hidden Realities of the First Years* and Dr. Carter G. Woodson’s *The History of the Negro Church* both paint a less familiar narrative

¹ It is important to note that outside of sociologists (or sociological) and leading voices of the movement, most people will label a church with 80% White “predominately White” or “White,” not multiethnic.

of the relationship between Black and White Christians. Mitchell explains:

It must be understood that prior to the 1800s no (Black) church, North or South, evolved without some form of white denominational recognition, trusteeship of land title, and/or certification to the government by respected whites that the Blacks involved would cause the slave system no trouble. . . . Whether whites exited mixed congregations and formed their own, or whites invited the blacks to exit and form their own separate congregation, the black group was always thought of as the white church's mission, subordinate to the sponsoring church. This arrangement was inevitable because of the legal requirement for white sponsors and guarantors. Without such, the government prohibited blacks from gathering for mass worship at all. (2004, 48)

It is evident that, from the time of the establishment of Christianity in America, White people have had the controlling hand even in the setup of Black churches. Stories about the "Invisible Institution"—the secret outlawed gatherings of Black Christians—were not heard of or shared until after the Emancipation Proclamation. Albert J. Raboteau in his book, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, points out that secret religious gatherings of slaves were very common. They desired preaching from their own preachers, songs that uplifted them and gave them hope for something better, and reminders of their freedom in Jesus Christ (something they did not hear at their master's church) (Raboteau 1978, 218). Raboteau (1978, 219) shares that, "at the core of the slaves' religion was a private place, represented by the cabin room, the overturned pot, the prayin' ground, and the 'hush harbor.' This place the slave kept for his own. For no matter how religious the master might be the slave knew that the master's religion did not countenance prayers for his slaves' freedom in this world."

All of this is not to say that separation is necessary to maintain cultural diversity in the church, but that there must no longer be cultural assimilation but cultural accommodation. In our coming together all parties must be represented and have equal power and authority. The multiethnic church must strive to make a safe space especially for minority groups to express their faith along with the majority.

Power

Too often the price exacted by society for security and respectability is that the Christian movement in its formal expression must be on the side of the strong against the weak. This is a matter of tremendous significance, for it reveals to what extent a religion that was born of a people acquainted with persecution and suffering has become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless peoples.

Howard Thurman (1976, 1)

Much of the dynamics and struggles for power and authority between Black and White Christians have to do with the social order established in the foundation of America. It is clear that the social hierarchy of America established itself inside the Christian church as well. Wilkerson explains:

The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power—which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources—which caste is seen as worthy of them and which are not, who gets to acquire and control them and who does not. It is about respect, authority, and assumptions of competence—who is accorded these and who is not In the American caste system, the signal of rank is what we call race, the division of humans on the basis of their appearance. In America, race is the primary toll and the visible decoy, the front man, for caste. (2020,17)

In America, White people are at the top of the racial caste system and Black people are at the bottom. The difference between the top and bottom is one of power and authority. Max Weber's definition of power is, "the ability to exercise one's will over others" (Griffiths and Keirns 2015). To exercise one's power it is necessary to have authority. Sociologists Griffiths and Keirns state, "authority is accepted power. It is power that people agree to follow. People listen to authority figures because they feel that these individuals are worthy of respect. Generally speaking, people perceive the objectives and demands of an authority figure as reasonable and beneficial, or true" (ibid.).

The complex dynamics of power structures is a topic that would require an in-depth study, beyond the

scope of this work. But we can gain insight into the relationship between Black and White Christians from the work of James C. Scott, author of *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. Scott has identified some specific characteristics between dominant groups and subordinate groups that involve what he calls *transcripts*. These transcripts exist in two spaces: the public and the hidden. Scott explains the dominant groups' public and hidden transcripts:

The public transcript is, to put it crudely, the self-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen. Given the usual power of dominant elites to compel performances from others, the discourse of the public transcript is a decidedly lopsided discussion. While it is unlikely to be merely a skein of lies and misrepresentations, it is, on the other hand, a highly partisan and partial narrative. It is designed to be impressive, to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites, and to conceal or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule. (1990, 18)

On the other hand, the subordinate group also has its own public transcript that usually involves presenting one's self in a manner that is deemed "acceptable" to the dominant group (1990, 1). Scott further explains,

How do we study power relations when the powerless are often obliged to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful and when the powerful may have an interest in overdramatizing their reputation and mastery? Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed. (1990, xii)

These nuances in the exercise of power provide insight into how the American racial caste system is perpetuated. So, in order to answer the question of whether or not there is a caste system in the multiethnic church, it will be necessary to explore the movement for signs of power dynamics such as these along with their accompanying public and hidden transcripts. If the system has established itself in the multiethnic church it will likely be seen in a rejection of Black authority and power.

The History of the Black Church

To return to the history that has produced this caste system, including in the church, I've experienced my share of church history courses, with lectures and syllabi filled with references to "THE" American church. I was always puzzled as to why church history, specifically in America, hardly ever mentioned Black Americans or the Black Church. Even in studying the multiethnic church there is little to no mention of the Black church or how we came to the place of *now* needing to label a church multiethnic. A good portion of American history and the details of the colonization process are often left out of history text books in schools. Woodson explains the initial intentions of earlier colonizers and how the "negro" became part of those plans.

One of the causes of the discovery of America was the translation into action of the desire of European zealots to extend the Catholic religion into other parts. Columbus, we are told, was decidedly missionary in his efforts and felt that he could not make a more significant contribution to the church than to open new fields for Christian endeavor. His final success in securing the equipment adequate to the adventure upon the high seas was to some extent determined by the Christian motives impelling the sovereigns of Spain to finance the expedition for the reason that it might afford an opportunity for promoting the cause of Christ. (Woodson 1921, 1)

As a grade school child I remember learning that Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492, but we never received a back story, it was only about getting us to learn dates and names. I don't recall ever having a primary or secondary teacher reconcile this story with Christian motivations. The narrative was, Columbus was to explore the *New World*. We didn't learn about the desire to "explore" the world in the name of Christianity or the Catholic church. It is clear Christianity was not a separate cause of the exploration efforts of the European colonizers of America. But, unfortunately, these Christian colonizers had little to no regard for the Negro's salvation and found their salvation to be a threat to the development of the colonizer's wealth.

The first persons proselyted by the Spanish and French missionaries were Indians. There was not

any particular thought of the Negro . . . there were among the colonists thousands who had never considered the Negro as belonging to the pale of Christianity . . . Because of the unwritten law that a Christian could not be held a slave, the exploiting class opposed any such proselyting; for, should slaves be liberated upon being converted, their plans for development would fail for lack of a labor supply subject to their orders as bondmen. (Woodson 1921, 1)

The British were even less interested in converting Negroes to Christ.

Few, if any, of the pioneers from Great Britain had the missionary spirit of some of the Latins. As the English were primarily interested in founding new homes in America, they thought of the Negroes not as objects of Christian philanthropy but rather as tools with which they might reach that end. It is not surprising then that with the introduction of slavery as an economic factor in the development of English colonies little care was taken of their spiritual needs, and especially so when they were confronted with the unwritten law that a Christian could not be held a slave. (Woodson 1921, 2)

Early explorers and missionaries pictured African people as heathens, savages, godless, or faithless. In his work *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in Antebellum South*, Albert J. Raboteau explains that that idea is far from the truth.

Common to many African societies was belief in a High God, or Supreme Creator of the world and everything in it. It was also commonly believed that this High God, often associated with the sky, was somewhat removed from and uninvolved in the activities of men . . . Early travelers were quick to note that Africans believed in a High God who transcended ritual relationships with humans. Describing religion on the Slave Coast, William Bosman, a Dutch factor, remarked that the Africans had an "an idea of the True God and ascribe to him the Attributes of Almighty, and Omnipresent. It is certain . . . that they believe he created the Universe, and therefore vastly prefer him before their Idol-Gods. But yet they do not pray to him, or offer any sacrifices to him; for which they give the following reasons. God, they say, is too high exalted above us, and too great to condescend

so much as to trouble himself or think of mankind." (Raboteau 1978, 8)

African slaves arrived in America with preexisting religious beliefs, and the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, did not land in a cultural context unfamiliar with the supremacy of an omnipresent, creator God.

Widely shared by diverse West African societies were several fundamental beliefs concerning the relationship of the divine to the human; belief in a transcendent, benevolent God, creator and ultimate source of providence; belief in a number of immanent gods, to whom people must sacrifice in order to make life propitious; belief in the power of spirits animating things in nature to affect the welfare of people; belief in priests and others who were expert in practical knowledge of the gods and spirits; belief in spirit possession, in which gods, through their devotee, spoke to me . . . Thus the religious background of the slaves was a complex system of belief, and in the life of an African community there was a close relationship between the natural and the supernatural, the secular and the sacred. (Raboteau 1978, 11)

One of the parallels that historians have found between the Christian faith and African traditional beliefs was the concept of *justice*. Even though slave owners who were willing to allow Christian conversion of their slaves censored the Gospel by only sharing parts of the Bible that they could bend to support the institution of slavery, still Christian slaves recognized the injustice they were experiencing.

African slaves would never have believed this justice doctrine if they had first heard it from a cruel master. Failure to recognize that slaves already had this early depth of spiritual and ethical insight is an insult to the great wisdom of our enslaved fore parents. And they voted with their feet when the white preacher or teacher strayed from what they knew was the real gospel truth. The deep conviction that masters were accountable to a just God for disrespecting the personhood of slaves was one reason they kept sane minds and weathered the cruelties. (Mitchell 2004, 16)

Slave conversion didn't happen because of the righteous example the slave masters exhibited but because "the providence of God was well established

in their world view and belief system long before they crossed the Atlantic, and it was not hard to accurately translate into biblical English” (Mitchell 2004, 18). The only concepts of Christianity that weren’t known to the African slaves were Jesus, hell, and the Bible (Mitchell 2004, 19).

Slavery in America was established and maintained from 1619, when the first African slaves arrived in Jamestown Virginia, to 1865 when the 13th Amendment passed. As mentioned earlier, there were objections to slaves becoming Christians at all for fear that it meant their freedom from slavery. So laws began to be put in place to prevent such freedom even in Christian conversion. For example, in the Virginia Assembly in 1667 bishops from the Church of England wrote a resolution stating, “the freeing of the souls in Christ did not alter the bondage of the body in any way” (Mitchell 2004, 24). However, prior to the “allowing” of slave conversion to Christ, slaves were gathering together in worship.

As soon as enough Africans were imported and settled in a single location, they readily recalled and shared the commonalities of their African religious traditions and engaged once again in an adaptation of their already similar worship practices. Records of their being forbidden to gather clearly established the fact that, regardless of the variety of tribal backgrounds on any given plantation, they did gather and devoutly engage in an African style of common worship . . . this and numberless other religious gatherings of slaves occurred as early as 1660s, long before there was, if ever, any serious or widespread thought of winning the enslaved to the Christian faith, or of recording anything about their spiritual welfare. (Mitchell 2004, 24)

Even with laws like the resolution enacted at the Virginia Assembly many slave owners didn’t want to run the risk of slaves feeling equal to their masters and therefore opted not to allow their slaves to become Christian (Mitchell 2004, 25). It wasn’t really until the First Great Awakening of 1730 that the conversion of African slaves and freedmen was widely accepted (Mitchell 2004, 46). Prior to that, slaves either worshiped in secret or under the supervision of the slave master. Raboteau explains the Invisible Institution:

At first glance it seems strange to refer to the religion of the slaves as an invisible institution, for

independent black churches with slave members did exist in the South before emancipation. In racially mixed churches it was not uncommon for slaves to outnumber masters in attendance at Sunday service. But the religious experience of the slaves was by no means fully contained in the visible structures of the institutional church. From the abundant testimony of fugitive and freed slaves it is clear that the slave community had an extensive religious life of its own, hidden from the eyes of the master. In the secrecy of the quarters or the seclusion of the brush arbors (“hush harbors”) the slaves made Christianity truly their own. The religion of the slaves was both institutional and non-institutional, visible and invisible, formally organized and spontaneously adapted. Regular Sunday worship in the local church was paralleled by illicit, or at least informal, prayer meetings on weeknights in the slave cabins. Preachers licensed by the church and hired by the master were supplemented by slave preachers licensed only by the spirit. (Raboteau 1978, 212)

One of the central themes found in the Invisible Institution was the Gospel message of hope and freedom delivered by the Chief Sufferer, Jesus. Many of the slave masters that permitted their slaves to become Christian were strategic about what they learned. They hired Black preachers and instructed them to preach messages of obedience to the master and warnings for stealing, not the Gospel message. Raboteu documented the story from a slave named Charlie Van Dyke. “Church was what they called it but all that preacher talked about was for us slaves to obey our masters and not to lie and steal. Nothing about Jesus, was ever said and the overseer stood there to see the preacher talked as he wanted him to talk” (Raboteau 1978, 213).

The secrecy of the Invisible Institution was necessary not only to protect the slaves from possible flogging or even death (gatherings outside of what the masters approved were forbidden), but to uphold, as they believed it to be, the message of hope and deliverance found in Jesus Christ. Their message was a message of hope and a future freedom (Raboteu 1978, 218). Slaves came up with secret symbols to share with each other where these prayer meetings would be. They ranged from overturned pots left on the front porch to songs with hidden messages for the time and place of the prayer meeting (Raboteu 1978, 219). They overcame obstacles of not being able to

preach the liberating message of Christ. One slave preacher from Texas said,

“I been preachin’ the Gospel and farmin’ since slavery time . . . When I start preachin’ I couldn’t read or write and had to preach what massa told me an he say tell them niggers iffen they obeys the massa they goes to Heaven but I knowed there’s something better for them, but daren’t tell them ‘cept on the sly. That I done lots. I tell ‘em iffen they keep prayin’ the Lord will set em’ free.” (Raboteau 1978, 232)

Slave preachers that preached the “real” Gospel, a Gospel of equality, even risked serving prison time. Rev. R. S. Sorrick from Washington County, Maryland went to prison for three months and eight days for, as he stated, “preaching the gospel to my colored brethren” (Raboteu 1978, 233). As the biblical Gospel began to spread more and more among the slave community a distrust for White people, specifically White Christians, became more apparent. “Slaves were distrustful of white folks’ interpretation of the Scriptures and wanted to be able to search them for themselves” (Raboteu 1978, 239). They “distinguished the hypocritical religion of their masters from true Christianity and rejected the slaveholder’s gospel of obedience to master and mistress” (Raboteu 1978, 294). Slaves exhibited a relentless pursuit of Jesus that not only drove the vitality of the Invisible Institution but that would eventually birth the independent Black church movement.

The Black church grew into not just a place of worship but a place of safety and community for Black Americans. Since the Black man (let alone the Black woman) was not allowed in politics the church also became a means for the Black community to collectively fight together for social uplift of the people. Additionally, the Black church met the needs of the community as a sort of welfare agency (Woodson 1921, 102).

During this same time in history the White church, thought of as “the” church in America, became divided over positions on slavery, whether for or against. For example, the Baptist convention split in 1845, and the Southern Baptist Convention was formed in support of slavery. But, unfortunately, from Jim Crow to the Civil Rights movement (and even after Civil Rights through the 21st century) the history of the dominant American church, has largely been one of silence,

complacency, and even participation with the oppression and murder of human beings.

Black Authority in the Multiethnic Church

The Multiethnic church is a very young concept which gained notability and popularity during the earlier part of the 21st century. Many leaders of this movement express the need for a multiethnic church so that the American church reflects that of the Bible, a reconciled body of believers. However, there is another social aspect that is certainly at the top of the list for reasons why the multiethnic church movement began. That reason is the growing racial and ethnic demographic change of the American landscape. Derwin Gray, a Black pastor of a multiethnic church in North Carolina, mentions this change:

America is starting to look and feel a whole lot different. For the first time in the country’s history, ethnic and racial minorities “are projected to make up the majority of students attending American public schools this fall” . . . In 1960, the population of the United States was 85% white; by 2060, it will be only 43%. The face of America is no longer just black and white . . . Since 1965, forty million immigrants have arrived in the United States, “about half of them Hispanic and nearly three-in-ten Asians.” In addition, “Intermarriage is playing a big role in changing some of our views of ethnicity.” (Gray 2015, 2)

Arguably, the leaders of the multiethnic church movement knew that in order for the American church to remain viable and impactful for the next generation a new church had to come forth. It had to be a church that would be intentional about the inclusion of all groups of people, and a church that would attempt to unite Black and White Christians. And while progress has been made within the multiethnic church, it has not happened without hiccups and moments of reflection. These are the years of reflection. As the national poet laureate, Amanda Gorman, mentioned in her reflection on America during the inauguration of the 46th president, “it’s the past we step into and how we repair it.” For the multiethnic church to be The American Church of the next generation it must take this time to reflect on the past and figure out how to repair what is broken.

The journey God has taken me on through my faith walk has been unique to say the least. I began at a

predominately White Catholic church, then went to a predominately Black Catholic church, then back to the predominately White Catholic church, then to the predominately Black charismatic Church of God in Christ, and now to a predominately White Southern Baptist church. I've had my share of cultural experiences in the American church setting. With my rare collection of experiences and interest in people and cultures, I became intrigued with how the American church would reach such a diverse country in the future.

Understanding the multiethnic church and the issues that surfaced with Black authority required some research and observation. I wanted to find two "truly" multiethnic churches. Previous research conducted on the multiethnic church identified churches based on the 80/20 rule, with no more than 80% of one ethnic group (Emerson et al. 2003, 217). However, based on my experience in predominately White churches, the experience of Black Christians would be better evaluated in settings where White people represent half of the membership and minority groups combined make up the remaining half. This would hopefully reduce the expectation of assimilation. Given that multiethnic churches are still very unique organizations in today's context, I felt that observing two as my focus would help to compare and contrast results. Additionally, it would help determine which results could be categorized as general for the multiethnic church as a whole and which were specific to an individual church.

I was particularly interested in Black leaders' ability to exercise authority in a multiethnic context. Here is one participant's account (let's call him Mike) of an experience where his authority was called into question:

Me: "How would you describe the culture of this church?"

Mike: "It's very loving and caring."

Me: "Did you every feel like your authority or power was not accepted?"

Mike: "Yes, as the first Black staff person I've had people go around me on decisions I made."

Me: "As a leader have you ever been assumed to not be a leader because you are Black? For example, Barack Obama told a story about attending a gala one time as a state senator. He goes on to say that one of the attenders assumed that he was one of the wait staff instead of a senator, and asked him to get

him a drink. I call this the 'Mistaken Leadership Identity.' Has that ever happened to you?"

Mike: "Yes. There was a time when I had taken a team to serve at the homeless shelter downtown. For the day we were all dressed in relaxed clothes. You know, regular clothes people volunteer in, blue jeans and a shirt. Some of my team was in the back kitchen area working and I was heading back there to check on them and one of the shelter workers stopped me. She said, "uh you can't go back there." I asked her what she meant. She thought that I was one of the homeless individuals that had come for the day. I had to explain to her that I was one of the pastors with the church group volunteering for the day."

As part of my research, I interviewed 16 Black people about their experiences in a multi-ethnic church. After reviewing all of the participants' responses to the interview questions, I was able to compose a summary of each of my questions based on the information shared.

Did you grow up in church?

100% of the participants grew up going to church.

What church denomination did you grow up in?

62% of the participants grew up in a version of the Baptist denomination (Southern Baptist, Baptist, Missionary Baptist). 31% of the participants grew up in a charismatic denomination (Pentecostal, Church of God in Christ). The remainder 7% were another denomination or non-denominational.

Have you been part of a predominantly Black church?

100% of the participants have been members of predominantly Black churches.

Are you in a leadership role? If so, what role?

The majority of the participants are leaders in their respective churches. An estimated 18% were not in leadership roles. Leadership roles included small group leaders, kids' ministry directors, associate pastor of worship, missions pastor, small groups pastor, young adults married leader, project manager, Celebrate Recovery leader, care and counseling pastor, procurement manager, and audio director.

Have you at any point felt you were not welcomed here?

While all participants mentioned never feeling unwelcomed, there was mention of having heard that others (not in leadership) have felt unwelcomed. Additionally, one participant mentioned that even though they felt welcomed, they felt devalued.

Are you part of any small groups? Describe your experience and the makeup of your small group.

75% of the participants are part of a small group at their respective churches. Based on the research it appears that small groups that are focused on women or recovery (like Celebrate Recovery) are diverse groups. However, groups that are not topic or gender related, and are only focused on the day of the week or location, tend to be racially homogeneous. Additionally, small groups covering topics on racial reconciliation report being predominately minority groups (Black, Hispanic, etc.).

Do you feel your authority or power is not accepted because you are Black?

Of the leaders interviewed, 69% said they do not feel that their authority is rejected because they are Black. Many participants celebrated their senior pastors for affirming their authority to others. This appears to be the main reason most of the participants have not experienced rejection of their authority. One participant mentioned that though they have not experienced rejection of authority, they have noticed frontline leaders are Black, but the higher up you go in leadership the more White leaders you find. They describe it as, "higher up leaders are White." Also, 50% of the men interviewed that are in "pastoral" roles report feelings of rejected authority. One participant who is a frontline/lay leader describes noticing that during small group fairs, if the leader was Black the majority of the people that signed up to attend that group were minority people. Additionally, it was mentioned that during Bible study breakouts Black leaders who received White members as part of their breakout group report that the White members would not return back to their group the next week.

There is evidence here that the American racial caste system is still at work behind the scenes. Isabelle Wilkerson explains how it works:

What people look like, or, rather the race they have been assigned or perceived to belong to, is the visible cue to their caste. It is the historic flash card to the public of how they are to be treated, where they are expected to live, what kinds of positions they are expected to hold, whether they belong in this section of town or that seat in a boardroom, whether they should be expected to speak with authority on this or that subject . . . We know that the letters of the alphabet are neutral and meaningless until they are combined to make a word which itself has no significance until it is inserted into a sentence and interpreted by those who speak it. In the same way that black and white were applied to people who were literally neither, but rather graduations of brown and beige and ivory, the caste system sets people at poles from one another and attaches meaning to the extremes, and to the graduations in between, and then reinforces those meanings, replicates them in the roles each caste has and is assigned and permitted or required to perform. (Wilkerson 2020, 18)

Wilkerson identifies eight pillars that uphold the structure of the system: (1) Divine Will and the Laws of Nature, (2) Heritability, (3) Endogamy and the Control of Marriage and Mating, (4) Purity versus Pollution, (5) Occupational Hierarchy, (6) Dehumanization and Stigma, (7) Terror as Enforcement, Cruelty as a Means of Control, (8) Inherent Superiority versus Inherent Inferiority (Wilkerson 2020). Characteristically, the American caste system is a structure in which boundaries are in place through years of foundational ground work. It is imbedded in the way we think, act, treat one another, and perceive our individual positions in it. "It lives in our hearts and habits, institutions and infrastructures" (Wilkerson 2020, 75).

The fallacy upon which we live as Americans and Christians is that the end of slavery and the Civil Rights Act somehow completely removed the customary and socially acceptable behaviors that developed under American chattel slavery. The laws that gave Black people rights to be considered humans did not come with a new code of conduct. America didn't issue "classroom rules" for behavior across the race lines, like: Be respectful of others, listen when others are

talking, be nice to others, provide a helping hand, etc. It is not only laws that need to change but the dismantling and reconstruction of worldviews and belief systems. The way Black people have been treated historically in America has generally been considered a normal part of American culture and traditions. Clifford explains, “tradition is ways in which we pass on the life of cultures, issues of authority, as well as invention, practice as well as interpretation” (Clifford 2004, 152). He goes on to say, “People are more ready to organize in defense of customary rights and local traditions than they are on behalf of more universal class solidarities or human rights” (Clifford 2004, 158).

From my research and experience, as well as those of other researchers like Yancey and Emerson, it does not appear that the multiethnic church lacks a “welcoming” nature. All participants express feeling welcomed at their respective churches. There was never a point during my visits that I felt unwelcomed at either church. Historically in the church in America, prior to Jim Crow, there was not an issue with Black Americans being in the same churches with White Christians so long as they kept their lower positions and White Christians were able to still exercise authority over Black Christians. Thus, now, in certain instances, there appears to be a bit of rigidity when Black Christians are placed in leadership roles that allow for authority to be exercised over White Christians.

As I conducted this research and spent time worshiping at these two sites, I found that the multiethnic church has yet to shed its secular caste system. It is evident in the structures of upper leadership roles and the experience of many of the Black leaders. For example, neither of the two churches I studied have Black representation in its upper leadership rungs. In the first church, while they have more Black pastors on staff than many other multiethnic churches, they do not have Black elders, which is their top tier. (Interestingly enough, they had White, Hispanic, and Asian representation. Everyone except Black people.) In the second church, their top leader is the senior pastor, and he is White. The next rung from the pastor is the executive team. Unfortunately, there were no Black leaders on that team. Additionally, the history of the multiethnic church has shown little to no Black senior pastor representation. Also, while Black Christians have found themselves willing to set aside worship style preferences and join predominately White churches in an

effort to bring diversity, White Christians have yet to do the same and join predominately Black churches. I can only conclude that either White Christians are not willing to set aside worship style preferences to join predominately Black churches or White Christians unconsciously operate within the parameters of the American caste system and are unwilling to come under Black authority and leadership. Based on my research I believe the latter possibility should be taken under serious consideration.

The multiethnic church, though it has work to do in shedding racial caste system boundaries, has progressed significantly beyond churches with 80% or more White membership. The two churches I studied have a significant number of Black Christians in mid-level leadership roles. Often churches in America can only be found with Black representation in the “pews” and not in the decision making, vision casting spaces. Still, as Wilkerson mentioned, the racial caste system shapes how we all, both the dominant and lower castes, respond to those “expected to speak with authority on this or that subject” (Wilkerson 2020, 18). Therefore, it is no surprise that 50% of the participants in pastoral roles have had their authority questioned.

I believe that by the power of the Holy Spirit the multiethnic church in America can overcome this secular imprisonment of the body of Christ. It has the opportunity, now, to reflect on the last several years and address “American” cultural behaviors that have crept into the standard operating procedures of ministry. A healthy, Holy Spirit led, multiethnic church has the power to help *all* Christians develop healthy biblical worldviews that are free from the corroding acid of the American racial caste system. The multiethnic church is a Kingdom Embassy and it is here to represent the Kingdom of God on Earth. It should not operate within the confines of the American culture and caste system, but operate under the guidelines of God’s Kingdom and with the authority of Christ Jesus.

The great poet, Maya Angelou, instructed, “You can’t really know where you are going until you know where you have been” (Edmund 2018). One of the biggest errors of the multiethnic church movement is that there has been a failure to evaluate the past. Many of the unhealed wounds and unreconciled sins from the past have crept into the multiethnic church. Those wounds and sins affect how Christians treat each other. They determine who is worthy of compassion and love instead of extending it to all. The multiethnic church tried to build on a faulty foundation, likely

unconsciously. This uneven and cracked foundation has allowed roots of racism and the American caste system to creep in unnoticed, destroying the integrity of the foundation.

The pioneers of the movement ventured out to build this new church having hopes of bringing together a new body of Christians, a multiethnic body. Unfortunately, the toxic roots of a racialized caste system have made their way into the structure of the multiethnic church. They have prohibited Black Christians' authority from being fully accepted. Black Christians have been allowed into mid-level leadership positions with mid-level authority and decision making. Yet, often, even this mid-level authority does not come without question or the need to have White affirmation of Black authority. While Black Christians have made it to mid-level leadership, only a few, a handful, have made it into upper-level leadership with the ability to exercise upper-level authority.

The multiethnic church can be repaired. The foundation of the multiethnic church will need some major remediation work. But a healthy multiethnic church can be built on a healthy foundation using these three principles:

1. Christ Must Preside. The ruling power of Christ should be the governing power of the church.

He exercised this power in Christ by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens, far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he subjected everything under his feet and appointed him as head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way. (Ephesians 1:20-23).

2. We Must Walk in the Spirit. To walk in the Spirit means we no longer see the world or people through a worldly perspective but a biblical one.

I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don't do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (Galatians 5:16-18)

3. Live as Ambassadors for Christ. Kingdom ambassadors are officials sent on assignment by the King of Kings. They do not operate under the guidelines or authority of the flesh. The church, the Kingdom embassy, does not belong to America but to the Kingdom of God.

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf, "Be reconciled to God." (2 Cor. 5:20)

At this pivotal point in history the multiethnic church can elevate the Black voice, the Black life and be the leader in the advancement of Black authority. It can dismantle the racial caste system that is governing the Body by using the principles I have outlined above to establish a new, solid and healthy foundation. I would encourage White pastors and leaders to share or even give their platforms to Black pastors and leaders. I challenge White Christians to be willing to be under the authority of Black pastors and leaders, and expand their reading list and discipleship voices to include Black pastors, theologians and leaders. I encourage multiethnic churches to offer regular Bible studies that incorporate looking at *all* of the history of the American church. If the American church, and by proxy the multiethnic church, can truly understand its history, then confession and reconciliation for participation in America's sin, racism, can be carried out. If *all* Christians know where they've been then they *all* can work on building the future together as the New Multiethnic Church.

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