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The Yoke is Toxic: Galatians 5.1–6

JOSHUA JACKSON

Addressing race in a Christian or institutional church context is a debatable topic, and in many ways, comes across as a form of criticism that furthers the racial divide already present. For this reason, *Leaven* readers should take time to pray and reflect before continuing to read this article. My goal is not to place blame or criticize, but rather to bring forth a sense of informed clarity on racial issues with the hope of furthering the unity of God’s people. The biblical text that serves as a foundation for my thoughts is taken from a portion of Paul’s letter to the Galatians (Gal 5.1–6). I believe that this passage, although originally written to address issues related to Jews and Gentiles in the early church, can help us explore certain recurring racial issues today. I will use it to highlight certain racial issues among our churches. I will also use it as a basis for some concluding proposed solutions. The passage reads as follows:

1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

2 Listen! I, Paul am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. 3 Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. 4 You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. 5 For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.¹

RACIAL ISSUES WITHIN OUR CHURCHES

Toxic is not a word commonly associated with Christianity. However, many Christians refuse to set foot into an institutional or corporate worship assembly. The majority of these non-corporate worshipping Christians has been ostracized, or they have been victims of church divisions. They conclude that institutional church environments are toxic, that they are more detrimental than beneficial.

Thus, I ask, “How can all Christians serve the same God, but cannot serve him together?” This question is puzzling and has no quick response. The time that I’ve spent in discernment and researching this issue has resulted in very few answers but many new questions—a process that led me to write this article. Why is this question a consistent one for many in my age range (eighteen to twenty-nine), regardless of ethnicity? There is so little cultural diversity in Church of Christ congregations. And yet, there is obvious racial tension within the body of Christ that few of us choose to address. Using phrases such as “white congregations” or “black congregations” instead of just “Christian,” is an obvious example of the racial strain that prevails within the Christian body today.

1. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is the source of all biblical passages quoted in this article.

The racial issue of which I speak is a deep and complex problem that requires the doors of communication to be opened. A lack of dialogue has led to little or no change in bringing about racial reconciliation. As a result, higher levels of toxic Christianity in the United States rapidly continue to breed and to brew.

In Galatians 5.1 Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Paul makes what appears to be an easy claim. However, living out his affirmation has proven to be a difficult task throughout the history of Christianity. Christ has not only set apart his people, those who place their faith in him, for freedom, but all those who are willing to follow him. If this is true, and if we value this claim as being important to our faith and values as Christians, why is the yoke of racism and slavery still in existence and tolerated in Christian communities?

Paul struggled with Christian Jews who wanted to bind the yoke of the law upon Christian Gentiles if those Gentiles were to be recipients of the promises of Abraham. Those who would bind the law’s yoke believed that without circumcision, Gentile Christians had no connection with God. Paul detested this thinking as evidenced in verse 3, “every man who lets himself be circumcised is obliged to obey the entire law.” Surely Paul’s claim must have sounded harsh to his Jewish listeners. But he did not want to “surrender Christianity entirely to Judaism.”² If that had have happened, the principle of grace would have been made void. Thus, the syncretistic³ attitude of Paul’s opponents sought to place the yoke of the law upon Gentile believers who had placed their faith in Christ. Paul confronted this error in verse 6 when he states, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.”

Paul’s foundational thinking is vital for us today. The historical issues I have described are still actively present in American churches. We have created a subconscious tradition that has placed a toxic yoke upon others. Racism in America has bred division among our churches for years—a racial divide that continues to grow due to some people’s inadequate concern for those mistreated by society. Some Christians also have demonstrated an insufficient effort toward reconciliation.

Racism, I believe, can be defined in three different forms. First, there is “dominant racism.” This form is depicted by crude acts of violence and brutality, blatant actions such as lynchings and burnings that stem from racial hatred. Second, there is “aversive racism.” In this form good and noble Christian people avoid the oppressed. The mentality of this form of racism is captured by the phrase “out of sight out of mind.” Finally, there is “meta-racism,” a form in which social divisions become normative, that is, racism is perpetuated through institutional logic with the mindset that affirms “this is just how things are.” This form especially challenges us theologically because it assumes that racism is not a social problem. Accordingly, federal regulations are not needed. Neither is there a need for the work of social activists. However, I believe that such a mentality requires a deeper level of theological understanding, which should then be combined with a much greater effort on the part of Christian people.

The inception of racism in America is derived from the belief that western Europeans should make Western Europe the center of Christian civilization. The white Europeans who came to the New World brought not only Jesus as they knew him, but they also indoctrinated others whom they brought to the New World as well. This paradigm has forced a drastically different depiction of Christianity even though it made some positive contributions to our lives.⁴ The positive can be viewed in the spread of Christianity across the New World, the negative is the poor theological concepts that didn’t do a fair job of addressing the social issues in United States. The ideological models adopted by this way of thinking and the social issues that led to so

2. Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953), 188

3. Definition: one involved in the combination of different forms of belief or practice (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

4. Dennis L. Okholm, *The Gospel in Black and White: Theological Resources for Racial Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

much fighting in Europe were carried over into the New World culture. These problems mixed with racism and gave birth to what we know today as the United States of America and its Christian divides.

As immigration to the New World grew and slave trade increased, white missionaries largely shaped Christianity in the Americas. American culture, however, never linked its fundamental belief of equality with a sound theology. For example, the biblical demand of God for justice and mercy for the outcasts and the downtrodden was largely overlooked. This was so, even though Christians read the Gospel of Luke, which features Jesus' dealings with Gentiles, lepers and other medical outcasts, despised tax collectors and a host of others. Instead, Jesus was viewed as one who reinforced the social boundaries of polite society. This perspective, however, was irreconcilable with the biblical message, because the gospel presented Jesus as one who saved people from all walks of life and backgrounds. Paul's writings alone should have pierced the minds of the missionaries, leading them to teach the need for radical change. Nevertheless, they did not, and as a result, the same issues remain under the radar in today's church culture.

Historically speaking, white Western Christianity gave birth to what we know as African American Christianity in this country. Think of it. Are not most of the issues faced by conservative black Churches of Christ today the same issues that mainstream white Churches of Christ dealt with in the recent past? For example: singing, the order of worship, dress code and more—these issues still have a stronghold on the black churches.

A CRITIQUE OF WHITE CHURCHES OF CHRIST

The founding of Churches of Christ is a recent phenomenon, growing out of the Stone-Campbell Movement. This re-birthing of how to do Christianity differently developed in the era of American slavery, a period characterized by the mistreatment of African Americans. Thus, the roots of the majority of black Churches of Christ formed from white churches and are based on a white Western theology. Consequently, some black Churches of Christ have become a re-creation of the white congregations that provided the black church with minimal resources and structures.

As many white congregations have developed financially and theologically over the years, many African American Churches of Christ have seen little or no change. This has left a glaring doctrinal and financial divide between the two races of God's people within the Churches of Christ. The theology that blacks received from whites has been perfectly regurgitated for decades. The failure of this model is evident today. There are black Churches of Christ that cannot address the social, spiritual and economic needs of the African American community because they remain loyal to a version of overly spiritualized white Christianity.

This type of second-hand, hand-me-down white conservative Christianity that was historically based upon racial bigotry and Jim Crow segregation is totally irrelevant to the social and historical context of African American Churches of Christ. As the Churches of Christ remain divided by race, this inadequate form of slave religion does not meet the present and pressing needs of the African American people. Many preach the rhetoric of racial "oneness in Christ" but much of the money raised in white churches is very rarely used to address the social and physical ills confronting people of color in this country.

There still exists the unspoken expectation among many: white Churches of Christ will evangelize and meet the needs of whites only, and black Churches of Christ will evangelize and meet the needs of blacks only. To summarize, the white members came during Jim Crow segregation, built the black people's worship houses and gave them an institutional structure, then left the black people to fend for themselves—but not entirely. They hovered over the black churches as a mother church, a tie that never acknowledged the full equality of both races in the eyes of God. It seems as if Jim Crow segregation is deeply imbedded in the DNA of Churches of Christ.

The issue of race is still a present reality. It is true that a few black individuals and churches have deviated from what was once the unquestionable interpretation of Christianity given them by the white

church. But sadly, for the most part, the ideology of white conservative Jim Crow Christianity still holds sway in most black Churches of Christ. Whether it is stated openly or not, it is obvious that many remain unrelentingly loyal and committed to the white version of Christianity they inherited during the darkest years of race relations in America.

A CRITIQUE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCHES OF CHRIST

However, we must also criticize African American Churches of Christ, because the pattern of Jim Crow segregation continues today in new and improved forms. “Black professional people in the black middle-class are now re-segregating themselves from less privileged blacks.”⁵ Black congregations have the mindset of doing things bigger and better. In actuality, they are retrogressing due to a lack of theological principles. As a result, black congregations, influenced by the white conservative model, have removed themselves from the very people most in need of help.

Traditional black Churches of Christ desire to resemble the white congregations of the Jim Crow segregation era, while at the same time holding a subtle malice and hatred for them. Thus, there is a continuation of enslaving their own congregations and people with the yoke of doctrinal and traditional slavery that was once placed upon their spiritual parents in the Jim Crow South.

Both races need to rethink and rediscover the reasons for church and the calling of Christ. Many whites have realized the error of their ways, but the tension and hatred of blacks who lived during the struggling decades is so strong that the love and true repentance of whites cannot be met with forgiveness. The bickering and complaints of blacks against whites, and the social privilege that esteems the white race above all other races in the United States can only be addressed and reconciled by Christians coming together for a mission that surpasses personal gain.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

1. *Ask the Right Questions*

For race relations to get to a level of acceptance and change, it is first necessary that we ask the right questions. Whose are we? What does God desire of us? Micah 6.8 asks what the Lord requires of his people, “to do justice, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” This is possible, but making it a reality requires intentionality and effort from all of God’s people.

2. *Educate Ourselves Theologically*

Secondly, Christians have to educate themselves theologically. Education can be a dividing or joining factor in both the secular and the religious realms. When Christians educate themselves, they learn to better discern God’s word. This does not require that one gain a doctorate in theological studies. But it does mean that Christians need to educate themselves concerning God’s mission as God’s people. Christians need to be equipped in conversing and empathizing with people from multiple backgrounds. In response, the number of “exegetes” will begin to outnumber of “eisogetes” (those who take biblical passages out of their context within a biblical book). This will result in a proper respect for God’s word. It will help bring about a paradigm shift.

3. *Availing Ourselves of the Christian Faith*

Last, but probably most important, the solution to racial reconciliation is grounded in Christian faith. Christ’s followers have to believe that God is going to work with them, to bring about change through them. Their understanding of the word of God should cause action in bringing forth the will of God.

5. *Ibid.*, 21.

CONCLUSION

Where do Churches of Christ go from here? Racism in the church obviously has deep roots and overcoming it appears to be impossible without divine assistance. I believe God is able, capable, willing and wanting to work alongside us to see change take place. Paul affirmed, “for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5.1). Solving the race dilemma isn’t about white privilege coming to blacks, nor is it blacks marching into the sanctuaries of white congregations. Instead it requires us to do away with our sinful hatred towards each other and come together to affirm that Christ is Lord over all of us, regardless of our race. Just as Christ died, so must our hostility and walls of division die. Truth be told, both sides have burdens to set down and confessions to make. Neither has fulfilled the mission of Christ, a mission of reconciliation described by Paul in Ephesians:

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death the hostility through it. (Ephesians 2.11–16)

Regardless of past differences, we have all been bought by Christ Jesus’ sacrificial blood. Christ is the peace that can reconcile us as one, but even more can we be reconciled to God. It is through Christ that we are united and freed from the yokes of past traditions and tainted theologies. The division of race will become obsolete when we become a new humanity by putting hostility to death at the cross. As in his resurrection, when Christ reappeared in a new and a different form, so will Churches of Christ in the United States rise anew. We will be whole and one in the body and Spirit. Our love for Christ will be displayed and “everyone will know . . . [we are Christ’s] disciples if we have love for one another.”⁶ It will be through our mutual love that the kingdom of God will be present, because we will no longer pass on the toxic yokes of our past. Instead we will create communities with sound spiritual foundations that are committed to the mission and calling of God.

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6. *Ibid.*, 21.