“Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest of me, which am a women of Samaria? For the Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.” - John 4:9

As we consider issues of race and the church, we often hear talk of the “white church” and the “black church” -- the two juxtaposed as though one stands against the other. It is true of course, that cultural differences exist in worship, preaching, liturgy, church administration, leadership and undoubtedly many other areas. (Note that "culture" here is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors, interactions, and intellectual constructs that are learned through the process of socialization. These shared patterns serve to identify the members of a particular cultural group while also distinguishing them from other groups). This article highlights the importance of recognizing and appreciating our differences. Corporately, these differences are related to our kingdom assignments and interconnectedness.

**Kingdom Assignments**

We all have particular vocations or particular assignments in God's kingdom, both corporately and individually, which means that we have been uniquely positioned by God to be a blessing to someone else or another group. In other words, there is an intrinsic value in our various “church contexts”. We do the kingdom a disservice if we arrogantly or ignorantly define “church” only as the “black church” or “white church” without recognizing and valuing the uniqueness that each of these brings to the table. It is important to appreciate our differences while not allowing the distinctions to cause division or fragmentation within the body of Christ, because there is only one church. The "black church" and "white church" have each given birth to great gifts for the one church. One need not be seen as better than the other or attempt to replace the other, because each exist to exercise a particular responsibility within the one church. The fact is, if they do not understand their kingdom responsibilities, they will go about their journey missing the opportunities that God has for them.

Far too many of our churches are engrossed in their own contexts to be utilized to the fullest extent that God has ordained for their lives. God wants our churches to be instruments of the kingdom transmitting, vocalizing, and manifesting the personality of the Spirit of God, effecting change in this world. We are God's instruments to influence God's word. This influence is ordained and at the same time leverages unique historical experiences, insufficiencies, and gifts of a people. It is informed, empowered, and structured as a divine partnership that cannot be what it is outside of the identities of each “church” within the body of Christ.

**Interconnectedness**

We learn from James H. Cone, there is an interconnectedness of all humanity that makes the freedom of one people dependent upon the liberation of all -- or, as Martin Luther King Jr. puts it, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” There will always be a deeper power and effectiveness in our churches when we can appreciate and learn from different cultural contexts.

When we do not realize we are interconnected, we end up blind like the Samaritan woman

found at the outset of the story in John's Gospel. Comparisons on race blinded her at first to the deep compassion and sympathy that radiated from Jesus --- the authority in his voice, the passion in his tone, the conviction in his articulation. What could this have to do with her, a Samaritan? The tainted perception of race, shared by her and those around her, deafened her ears to the spoken truth. She could not see her interconnectedness until she recognized it being brought forth in her encounter with Jesus.

We should be careful lest, in our deafness, our churches do not receive the life-giving gifts that exude from being connected to other kingdom churches and ministries. This type of blindness and deafness must be removed from our churches (both the “white church” and “black church”). We must move to a context of greater appreciation for the gifts that each bring to the body.

**Final Thoughts**

Within our different church contexts, there are elements that others may admire and desire for their own congregations while still valuing ones own uniqueness. Charles Caleb Colton, stated that “Imitation is the greatest form of flattery”. But flattery is often seen as insincere or excessive praise. It is possible, however, to maintain identity by practicing emulation rather than imitation. Emulation maintains the identity of our particular churches while, at the same time allowing for the integration of outside ideas. Recognition and appreciation of our differences are related to our kingdom assignments and interconnectedness. This allows our churches to offer the highest quality of ministry and services to our members and communities, while ultimately glorifying God in the process.

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