

Revolutionary Justice Transformers: Reclaiming Our Call as Jesus' Disciples

In the fall of 2021, following social outcry and protests over continuing murders of our black siblings by police officers, a white mainline Protestant church here in the midwest set-up a speaker series on racial justice. It was open to the surrounding community. The church's goal was to "highlight how people might expand the dialogue about race relations now and in the future." It was a genuine attempt to respond to the current events and social dynamics of the time, with professionals sharing their personal and professional experiences in the areas of race and racism. In order to reach community members of all ages, the church advertised on their social media accounts. It was in these advertisements that the truth about the white Church's history with the Black community was unconsciously revealed.

We didn't have to attend the speaker series to learn about the white Church's history with race, racism, and social justice. We could just examine the opening lines of the well-meaning church's event description,

"America has awakened to issues surrounding racial and social justice not experienced since the civil rights movement. As a country, a state, a city, and a church, we are questioning how to promote racial justice. Is progress being made towards acting in the ways that promote equity among all people?"

Trends of White Christianity and the White Church

The trends revealed in these three sentences about the white Church's historical engagement with the diverse culture that surrounds us include:

1. References to "America" have meant white America, just as "the Church" or "Christianity" has meant the white Church and white Christianity. "America" has not awakened, white America and the white Church has awakened to the issues of racial and social justice. This is only if we have chosen to wake-up and pay attention.
2. White Christianity and the white Church has intentionally or unintentionally not been paying attention to "issues surrounding racial and social justice." These issues have been prevalent for generations, but white Christianity's ignorance of these dynamics leads us to think they haven't been "experienced since the [C]ivil [R]ights [M]ovement."
3. "[H]ow to promote racial justice" has been a question many in our country, state, city, and churches—particularly by People of Color— have wrestled with for generations. It is white people and white Christianity who have begun asking these questions in response to closer attention paid to the racial tensions around us. It is our white privilege that leads us to think that our experience represents the experience of everyone else around us.

The above trends are not just indicative of this one white midwestern mainline Protestant church, but representative of white U.S. Christianity in general. And, these trends reveal one more predisposition of white Christianity and the white Church. The white Church and white Christianity has neglected practicing a pivotal element of being a disciple of Jesus: working for social justice through systemic change.

Jesus's Purpose: To Transform Oppressive Systems

White Christianity's allegiance with the empire and powerful elite (examined in my previous article "[Deconstructing White Supremacy Culture...](#)") has led us to avoid or outright denounce the justice work of challenging oppressive systems (surveyed in my first article of this series "[Atoning for Christianity's History...](#)") in favor of endorsing charity work through a personal relationship with Jesus. Only this is

not the Jesus that we experience in the Gospels and are called to follow. The Jesus of the Gospels proclaimed his purpose clearly:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’
(Luke 4:18-19, NRSV)

Jesus’s holy and revolutionary purpose is to release the captives and set the oppressed free by transforming the very systems keeping them captive in oppression. This is affirmed by Jesus in “The Sermon on the Mount” when he proclaims that he came not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). The prophet Isaiah declared “learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (1:17), and Micah proclaimed “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” This is what Jesus has come to fulfill: God’s vision of a just world through the transformation of oppressive systems into just systems, and not just to carry out charity. Even Jesus’ proclamation of his purpose cited above is a quotation of the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2). Jesus’s purpose was not just to build a personal relationship with everyone or to provide goods for those suffering within an oppressive system. We diminish the holiness of Jesus’s ministry and presence with us if we emphasize these charitable aspects of Jesus’s ministry to the detriment of his grander transformative purpose.

Picking-Up Jesus’s Social Justice Mantle

As Jesus’s disciples, we follow in Jesus’s footsteps by picking up his social justice mantle and continuing his work of freeing the oppressed through the transformation of our oppressive systems. This work includes charity, but does not settle there. The Rev. Liz Theoharis provides a succinct distinction between charity and practicing social justice in her book *Always with Us?: What Jesus Really Said about the Poor* (2017) that is helpful for us to understand how we faithfully follow Jesus. Rev. Theoharis defines charity as “simply meeting some of the material needs of a select group of people for a limited time,” compared to practicing social justice which is “working to institute a larger program or platform that questions structures and works to end injustice,” (pp. 48-49. Kindle edition). This definition of social justice describes the emphasis of Jesus’ ministry in our world. Yet, as followers of Jesus we often default away from justice and settle for providing for the apparent needs of those around us materially through charitable acts such as holding clothes drives/fundraisers, serving at a soup kitchen, hosting a food pantry, or sponsoring families at Christmas.

We as disciples of Jesus have the higher calling of also engaging in the social justice work of ending systemic injustice and creating just systems. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. raised to consciousness this distinct calling in his sermon, [*A Time to Break the Silence* \(1967\)](#),

“A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True

compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

We are called to transform structures that oppress and marginalize, and not just throw material goods and limited services at those who suffer from the oppression.

Black Christianity’s Faithful Engagement in Social Justice

The Rev. Dr. King Jr. reveals to us that the practice of social justice has not been a foreign concept to the Black church and Black Christianity. In fact, working for justice has been integral to the faith of our Black Christian siblings, just as it was for Jesus. The Rev. Dr. James A Noel, in his article “Contemplation and Social Action in Afro-American Spirituality” (*Pacific Theological Review* 22, no. 1; Fall 1988) plainly stated, “any spirituality which does not engage in justice is unbiblical and only reinforces the political and psychic structures of oppression.” In her book, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (2017), Black theologian and activist Barbara Holmes lifts up that social justice has been a pivotal aspect of Black Contemplative Christianity, as “contemplation is, at its heart...always seeking the spiritual balance between individual piety and communal justice seeking.” Holmes goes on to suggest “the genesis of the great justice movements of the twentieth century emerged from the consistent contemplative practices of those seeking liberation.” This is seen in “the passive resistance of Mohandas Gandhi, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King Jr.” as well as in “the social protests of Daniel Berrigan, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El Shabazz), Nelson Mandela, and Black Lives Matter protestors” (p. 113, Kindle Edition).

White Christian Allies of our Black Siblings

It has long been time for the white Church and white Christianity to join our Black siblings in faithfully joining in Jesus’s purposeful ministry. It is time for us to live into the call of transformational social justice. What our Black siblings have been left to do on their own for generations, we need to join with them as their allies from this point forward. As allies, we faithfully follow Jesus in “working with the black community to dismantle privilege and to create pathways towards equal justice for all.” We as white Christians and the institutional white Church can work to transform the structures of white supremacy and white supremacy culture that are “invisible to the majority of the dominant culture until allies name it and stand against it” (Holmes, 150. Kindle edition). Structures that are present within society, and within ourselves.

Transforming Oppressive Systems Is Who We Are

As disciples of Jesus, liberating the oppressed through the challenging and transformation of oppressive systems is who we are. Not just what we do, but who we are. We are liberators. We are revolutionary justice transformers. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his essay “The Church and the Jewish Question” (1932-1933), proclaimed that as Christians, “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” It is time for us as white Christians and the white Church to reclaim this pivotal aspect of our calling and join alongside our Black siblings in the fight for liberation and justice. Let us not settle for applying bandages, but faithfully step into our calling as Jesus’ disciples to transform oppressive systems in the world and within ourselves. Jesus is working alongside our Black siblings, and we should be as well.

Your sibling in this journey,

Zac

