

Editorial: What did we do in the year after George Floyd died?

May 25, 2021

Our fast-paced and busy world often gets in the way of reflection. Without reflection, we are diminished, remaining captive to the churn.

With reflection, we grow in wisdom, faith and Christlikeness, and we break free from the chaos of this world.

We need to reflect to see and understand how far we've come and how far we have left to go. Today is a day for reflection on racial justice.

Looking back on a year

George Floyd died one year ago today.

“George Floyd died” is an oversimplified description of what happened, but it’s a description we all agree on. However, if that was the sum total of what happened, Floyd’s death would not have given rise to months of unrest. Nor would a Minneapolis jury have [convicted](#) former police officer Derek Chauvin of murder and manslaughter in Floyd’s death.

George Floyd’s death on May 25, 2020, was enormously consequential, as evidenced by responses at nearly every level of American society, not least of which was the response of the church.

So, how have churches responded? In particular, how have Texas Baptist churches responded?

Early responses

Pastor Joseph Parker, David Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Austin, issued an early response May 31, 2020, in [a video shared on YouTube](#). He began by pointedly opposing stealing, looting, violence and destruction that might accompany protests following Floyd's death.

With that condemnation, Parker noted yet another occasion for nonviolent protest of racial injustice, asking, "Do you hear us now?" He powerfully explained the justice Black Americans seek and the grief they constantly experience, spending most of his time connecting protest to hope. I commend his video to those with ears to hear.

Pastor Steve Wells, South Main Baptist Church in Houston, also responded early. Directly addressing Floyd's death in a [sermon](#) the following Sunday, Wells attributed Floyd's death to racism, "the consummate expression of perfect fear casting out love."

Wells incorporated parts of his sermon in words he delivered during Floyd's [funeral](#) on June 9, 2020. In his sermon, Wells challenged his predominantly white congregation, saying, "The silence of the white church about racism is deafening in the Black church."

Speaking to Black attendees at Floyd's funeral, he acknowledged the ease with which his church can avoid talking about racism and dismiss political and economic injustice. Speaking directly to white churches, Wells said, "We are better than we used to be, but we are not as good as we ought to be, and that is not good enough, which means you have to take up the work of racial justice."

Mixed responses

In the year after Floyd's death, pastors of many predominantly white churches preached on racial justice. Some preached series on the topic, focusing on the *imago Dei*—the image of God in each person—and giving attention to the marginalized and vulnerable. Some churches read books on racial justice or devoted Bible studies to learning about it.

Common among pastors was a felt need to do something, while not knowing what exactly to do. Some in smaller or rural communities weren't sure they could contribute much to the change they felt was needed. Another common struggle was knowing what kind of response would be appropriate.

Additionally, most pastors already were struggling to navigate the tensions in their congregations related to presidential politics and the still-new pandemic.

At a personal level, some white pastors sought to build new relationships or grow existing ones with Black colleagues in their communities. They engaged in intentional conversations with fellow pastors about race, understanding change in their churches often needed to begin with themselves.

As I watched the video of police restraining Floyd, and his subsequent death, I immediately felt the weight of what happened. As protests unfolded, I sensed I must do something, but I wasn't sure how best to respond. Ultimately, I launched the ["Justice looks like..." series](#) in the Voices column of the *Standard* to allow people to speak for themselves about justice—racial and otherwise—from numerous vantage points.

For some, Floyd's death initiated a first move toward racial justice; for others, their motivation in that direction was strengthened or renewed.

Others stayed their course without attempting to address racial justice.

We can celebrate when the needle moves toward justice and can commend the courage of those willing to move the needle. We also can encourage others to take up the work of justice for the sake of God's kingdom.

Hope

Despite challenges and disappointments, many see hope.

Wells locates his hope in Jesus Christ. He cites the promises in [Isaiah 55](#), one of which is that God's word will accomplish its purpose.

Pastor Ralph West of The Church Without Walls in Houston, who also spoke at Floyd's funeral, also locates his hope in Jesus and points to the work he has seen white churches do this last year to address racial justice. He expressed gratitude for efforts by Baylor University's religion department to educate students and faculty about racial justice.

Gaynor Yancey, professor of congregational and community health in Baylor University's Garland School of Social Work and Truett Theological Seminary, sees hope in predominantly white churches, individuals and institutions engaging in difficult conversations and learning from people of color. Her institution currently is engaged in a system-wide effort to address racial justice—as are other Texas Baptist institutions.

Yes, there is hope. And there is work.

Where work is needed

More than one pastor paid a price for addressing racial injustice from the pulpit. For one, they watched church members leave their church and not come back. That alone is evidence there is work still to do.

Pastor West continues to hone his preaching, sharpening his “ability to address issues of injustice from the Scripture.” He tries to say something about matters of justice every Sunday, because that’s “where people live and exist,” and “not to say something about these issues in this environment is pastoral malpractice.”

“I see work everywhere,” Wells said. Referring to the Texas Legislature, Wells charged: “We live in a state with foreseeable racially disparate outcomes, but aren’t willing to make a commitment of resources to make it look like we understand God is king of the world.” He pointed to education, poverty and voting as areas lacking justice and needing work.

Not all pastors and churches addressed racial justice during the last year. Wells, West, Yancey and others expressed disappointment that some churches and leaders either did nothing or continued to insist there is no racial injustice. There still is work to do to see and to hear the injustice many of our brothers and sisters in Christ experience regularly.

The work of justice is the work of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. It is obedience to the command and will of God. George Floyd wasn’t just our neighbor, though; he was our brother. We owe it to him to do something.

We might be tired of the subject of racial justice; we may be overwhelmed by the confluence of significant events; we may want it all to go away. One day, it will, when Jesus Christ restores all things. Until then, we have work to do, embodying the kingdom of God in loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

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