

Voices: No justice, no unity

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As a youth minister, I find it essential to teach about issues happening in our culture. During a recent Bible study, I taught about racial justice. As I spoke, I did it with fear and trembling, because racial justice is an issue that can cause division. As I thought about that fact, I was saddened to think an issue that matters so much to God—because all humans are created in God’s image—still divides the church in the United States.

While I know it is well-intended, I see church leaders calling out for unity. However, from my experience, promoting that unity many times has turned into being quiet or passive, and we end up doing nothing to transform the world around us.

Putting a finer point on our understanding of unity

I ask, “*Who* and *what* defines unity?” Is it following the status quo that turns a blind eye, says there is no racism and claims brown and black people have equal access to their inalienable rights and to a just system? Who has the privilege to proclaim we have arrived at this utopic unity?

In reality, we have not arrived at unity because people of color are discriminated against, treated unfairly, judged unjustly and even killed, while the church continues to seek “unity” by remaining silent.

Recently, I learned about a Baptist university that posted this billboard message: “We stand for the flag and kneel at the cross.” As catchy as that quote might appear, one could argue it is dismissive, divisive and discriminative.

- Dismissive of the pain of a community who is peacefully speaking out.
- Divisive because it creates a negative space for black students who know the raw and up-close reality of racial injustice yet were more than likely obliged to sit painfully and quietly in fear of retaliation as the university and fellow classmates cheered such a statement.
- Discriminatory, as I have no recollection of this university responding or standing up for our American flag when the KKK waved it around in hate in Charlottesville.

While it may be easy to point fingers at this university, I question if those same leaders who have proclaimed the need for unity also have encouraged, stated and posted such divisive statements.

The relationship between unity & seeking justice

We are called to love one another and to reconciliation. Yet, I continually see and hear Christians speak horrendous things about Colin Kaepernick. My fellow sisters and brothers, he is our brother in Christ, who chose to use his influence to bring attention to a sin that continues to haunt our country.

I see people ridicule the Nike commercial and change Kaepernick's picture to that of Jesus or soldiers. That only causes further division between you and the community who hurts. It sends a message to people of color that they are not worthy to give up anything for justice.

Rosa Parks and Pastor Martin Luther King Jr. also were shamed and ridiculed for the way they protested for racial justice. Today, we might glorify them, but the church did not at that time. Instead, Parks and King also were accused of causing division.

You may not agree with how Kaepernick protested, and you are within your rights to do so but to shame your brother in Christ, who is also following his Christian principles and exercising his American right to speak up against injustice, goes against your message of “unity” and against Christ’s example.

Throughout Scripture, God calls on us to speak up for the oppressed, to treat others how we wanted to be treated, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be kind, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. What if we practiced these commands when it comes to racial justice?

Suggestions for approaching racial injustice

How can you speak up for those who confront racial injustice and oppressive laws and systems in your community?

- Treating people of color as you would want to be treated might look like hearing their narratives and being empathetic of their pain.
- Loving people of color might mean you stand—or kneel—with them, believe them and cry with them when they say they are hurting because of injustices.
- Be kind to them, even when you might not agree with how they cry out or protest, and offer mercy in the same measure you seek it from God.
- Be humble enough to admit you do not truly understand racial injustice. Be humble enough to seek God and to ask for help from people of color for wisdom and guidance on how to be a leader when facing these issues.

Unity can happen only when all parties have equal value, rights and access. True unity can happen only if the church first acknowledges its sin in racial

injustice, repents, gives voice and value to people of color, and finds ways to work together towards true justice for all.

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31: 8-9).

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