

Community Church of Issaquah

February 23, 2025

The Role of the Church in Black History

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Day by day I become more and more anxious about our country and other countries like ours who are in such times of turmoil and change. In defense, I don't watch or listen to any news programs, nor do I read any news websites. I suppose you would say that I'm running scared, and that's true. But occasionally when I am on Facebook pages, I will see something newsworthy that pops up and causes my eye to bulge. Last week was one of those terrifying moments. It was a list of holidays and titled months that our new government administration has cancelled. Holidays that we have observed for years are now erased – at least on the administration's homepage. One of those is our observance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and the celebration of Black History Month during this month – February. Why would anyone do this?

For the next few minutes, I will speak as a “Woke Christian.” For a very long time, I didn't even know what that meant. The word “woke” is now being used by extreme right-wing conservatives as a negative term to talk about those who follow certain social justice initiatives. Those include:

- ❖ LGBTQ+ rights or the movement advocating for equal rights that are hurtful to those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer world.

- ❖ Gender affirming care which would provide all services like mental health, medical, surgical and nonmedical services for nonbinary and transgender individuals
- ❖ Diversity, equity and inclusion that would advocate for hiring employees that would reduce bias and encourage companies to have minorities in their workforce. By the way, revoking this is one of the main focuses of the administration leading to pressuring companies to focus on white males at the base for employment. Companies who refuse to adopt this directive are being boycotted by fundamentalists. On a positive note, Costco has refused to adopt this and their business has grown because of it.

What fundamentalists don't realize is that the word 'woke' was first used in 1923 by an African activist. It was used to recognize the struggles of African Americans to give Blacks a word to empowerment. This is one of the important aspects of the Black community that has been misconstrued and turned against not only the Black world, but others who seek to practice what would make the world a better place. I personally consider myself a 'Woke Christian' as I said earlier. One of my passions has been support for the African American peoples because I believe that is what Paul felt God was telling him to share with the churches in Galatia. "For we are all one in Christ Jesus."

My early life was spent in the prejudiced world of the American South, or as I came to call it as I began to deal with the world of prejudice and hatred. The Black people in my life were employees – our maid and the women who worked for my mother as kitchen staff at the church where

we were members and where she served as Church Administrator. There were no People of Color or other ethnicity in my schools until I went to college. I lived in ignorance and blindly lived a White Life.

One event changed that. I heard about a series of events and ventured to downtown Birmingham to see if it was true. There I watched the Chief of Police, Bull Connor, release attack dogs on the young Black people who were protesting the arrest of Dr. King. I was outraged. And then soon after, the pastor of our church called for a special church meeting one Wednesday caused me to be angrier about what was going on. The purpose of the meeting was to plan for the possibility that a Black person might desire to come to our church for some reason. Four deacons were assigned to the duty of locking the doors if any person of color would attempt to come to church and two deacons were assigned the guard the parking lot to send away another of color. This was the Baptist Church where I was licensed and ordained, and now I had to process how a church could preach that everyone was one in Christ Jesus.

I was a student at a Baptist college in Birmingham studying religion at the time and felt the calling to practice what I was preaching. I went to Selma and participated in the third march with John Lewis and other Black leaders. That decision was noted by the college administration and I was penalized by adding one more semester to my graduation requirements. They thought it was going to be a devastating blow to my college career and cost me a penny. The reality was that I was on a full-ride scholarship

from my role as drum major in the band and having a scholarship from my home church. It didn't cost me a dime. Guess I showed them, huh?

Since those days, I have been an advocate for the Church to be inclusive of not only Blacks, but people of any color or ethnicity. Activists use the term BIPOC in their work for a more inclusive society. Many people have not heard of it since it is also among the words and terms banned by the extremist fundamentalists. If you are wondering, BIPOC is the shortened version for Black, Indigenous, People of Color.

Is the Church practicing inclusivity for other than Whites? That's an embarrassing and complex question. If we were to look around our church and others in our neighborhood, we would see that 99% of mainstream denominations are White. There are few Blacks except in churches which they are members or associates. I head someone say that over the years there was one Black person at CCI. Why? You don't have to answer that. I know the answer. But this is Black History Month and it's an opportune time to reflect on the role of the Church in the Black World,

History tells us that Blacks or African Americans did not come to this country by choice. They were stolen from their home countries and brought here as slaves to be sold at the human market. We all likely saw the TV series, 'Roots' and learned much about how these people were shipped here on boats and sold as property. If you've done any studying, you know that the Civil War was fought between those who wanted to abolish slavery and those

who did not. The Emancipation Act freed these women and men to be an integral part of American society. Thus, the term, African American.

Did the Church as we know it serve as the foundation for the cessation of slavery? No. Quite the opposite. The Southern Baptist Convention was actually founded to establish churches who opposed the end of slavery. It has been among the last to acknowledge the acceptance of the validity of Black congregation. Today the Christian Nationalists are seeking to revive that exclusion. Teaching about the history of slavery or the Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. King or critical race theory that studies the relationship of race, racism and power. Their desire is to bury that. Which raises the question, "What are the churches like ours and other mainstream denominations where we are members or attenders going to do to carry on the work of Jesus Christ to create a spiritual world where we are truly one in Christ Jesus?"

Has the Black Church worked to build a stronger faith world? I would say yes, indeed they have. When Michael Brown was murdered by the police of Ferguson, Missouri, it created a new movement called Black Lives Matter. My hope and theory are that we are at a place where all lives matter. We may never have a mixed-race church, but we have gifts from other faith groups that show that we all do have much in common. One when I was asked to speak at a Black church, I fell in love with the music. Black spirituals were not something I ever sung in my church as I grew up and led basically White congregations. Would you like for me to close by sharing some spirituals that you

might remember and that might help to see the role of the church in Black History. Try these:

- ❖ Wade in the Water
 - ❖ Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
 - ❖ Every Time I Feel the Spirit
 - ❖ Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho
 - ❖ Ain't The Good News
 - ❖ Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen
 - ❖ Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child
 - ❖ There's a Balm in Gilead
 - ❖ When the Saints Go Marchin' In
 - ❖ Oh Mary, Don't You Weep
 - ❖ My Lord, What a Morning
 - ❖ Deep River
 - ❖ Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around
- And probably the one we are most familiar with,
- ❖ Go Tell It on the Mountain

Let me close with these questions.

Did the church have a role in Black History?

And will the church have a role in current Black history?

Those require some deep thinking. But let me end with the words from Galatians: *There is neither Jew no Gentile, neither slave nor free, no is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

To that I would say, Amen.