Chapter 8
Race Relations in the Churches of Christ:
Strategies towards Reconciliation

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ABSTRACT
The denomination of Churches of Christ is racially segregated. While this is true for most Christian denominations, this chapter argues that this segregation is by design. This chapter presents a historical context of race relations within the Churches of Christ. Specifically, this chapter relies on primary sources to highlight this Christian denomination’s doctrine that is steeped in racist ideology. Finally, this chapter concludes with suggested strategies towards racial reconciliation within the contemporary denomination.

INTRODUCTION

Eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of America (King, 1968).

This often quoted statement, made by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., describes the state of racial segregation in America’s churches during the height of America’s Civil Rights movements. Unfortunately, this statement still holds true (Emerson, Mirola & Monahan, 2010). This reality provides context for race relations in the Churches of Christ.

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Contemporary Churches of Christ in America are rooted in the Restoration Movement of the early 1800s, often referred to as the Stone-Campbell Movement. This movement was an attempt to return to the church of the New Testament in its governance, doctrine, and worship style. The Restoration Movement was intended to be a movement that united all Christians, but evolved to a movement characterized by separation and division. There are three main branches of this movement: the Christian Church, the Disciples of Christ, and the Churches of Christ (Foster, Blowers, Dunnavant, & Williams, 2005). Within the Churches of Christ, there are six identified divisions (Garrett, 1981): Mainline; Non-cooperatives; One-cuppers; Pre-millennial; Non Sunday School Churches of Christ; and, Black Churches of Christ. The identification of one division within the Churches of Christ as “Black Churches of Christ” indicates that racial division is a major issue within this fellowship. This division is most pronounced when the Churches of Christ is placed within the context of American history.

While racial segregation is not unique to the Churches of Christ, the reason for the racial segregation is relatively unique. There are six historically Black denominations: the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the Church of God in Christ, the National Baptist Church, and the Progressive National Baptist Church. These denominations began as protests of racist practices within historically White denominations. Each of the historically Black denominations are unapologetically Black in the way in which they worship. In contrast, Black congregations of Churches of Christ were established by Whites to create a class of subservient citizenry among Blacks (Crawford, 2013).

It is this context that shapes this discussion of race relations in the Churches of Christ. This chapter seeks to present a historical context of race relations within the Churches of Christ, and to provide strategies toward reconciliation.

BACKGROUND

The Church of Christ in Black and White

One of the most pronounced nadirs of American history is the institution of chattel slavery. Members of the Church of Christ, particularly in slaveholding states, supported the institution of slavery, and were often slaveholders. The following account provides a glimpse of the relationship between the slaveholder and the enslaved within the context of an early congregation:
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