

## **Becoming an Anti-racist Church: Journeying Toward Wholeness**

Joseph Barndt.  
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Joseph Barndt addresses racism in the Christian Church head on. He firmly declares that racism exists in the church as it does in society, and that the church cannot confront this evil in society until it is eliminated in the church. To accomplish this, the church must address the *systematic power of racism* that controls its organizations and the *imprisoning power of racism* that enslaves the privileged and the oppressed. Barndt believes that the eradication of racism is the top priority for the church and its mission in society. He calls every Christian to personally engage in this struggle until the Church is truly anti-racist in word and practice. While sternly rebuking the Church for its complicity with racism in the past and the present, Barndt is quite hopeful and confident that racism can be eliminated, both within and outside the Church.

The author presents two basic assumptions that serve as the foundation for the book. The first of these is “that the Christian faith stands absolutely and unconditionally in opposition to racism wherever it may be found, whether inside or outside the church.” The second assumption is that “before the church can effectively participate in efforts to address racism outside the church it needs to be effective in

addressing racism within the church” (ix). The target audience of the book is the mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic churches in the United States. According Barndt, these denominations are overwhelmingly white, and his goal for writing this work is “to help equip Christians to address racism within these predominantly white churches and religious institutions” (x).

Another premise of the book is that racism in the church cannot be adequately addressed unless the power and accountability structures in church organizations are changed so that whites do not control and dominate, but rather all racial and ethnic groups have an equal part in the control and decision-making in the church.

The book is divided into three sections that deal with racism in the past, present, and future. After an initial chapter that sets the biblical foundation for becoming an anti-racist church, Part I of the book includes four chapters that review the racism and its opposition in the history of the Church in the United States. Barndt claims that the power and accountability structures that have developed in the mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic organizations favor Whites and exclude, to a large degree, people of color. The four chapters in Part II look at the Church today, and describe how racism is institutionalized in the various denominational organizations, and make the point that multiculturalism has not removed this imbedded racism. This racism imprisons and demeans both those in power and those who suffer under it. In Part III Barndt maps out a path for the Church to become truly anti-racist. This section of the book includes a 6 stage continuum along which a church can move from being an Intentionally

Segregated to an Anti-racist church that is also committed to move the society at large toward anti-racism (148, 149).

The author states that the Bible mandates that the church address the issue of racism. The foundation for this premise is composed of four principles that describe how the Bible and faith lead Christians to engage in this struggle. The first principle is that “we are the family of God” (p. 12). Because God created human beings, we are all sisters and brothers in God’s family. Whether we agree or not, whether we like it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, the fact remains that we are brothers and sisters. Therefore, God requires that we treat each other as family, and racism has no place in a family. Brandt further states that “the central purpose of the Christian faith is to put the family of God back together again” (13). The entire plan of salvation is focused on this one thing. Therefore, justice and peace are at the core of the mission of the Christian Church. Barndt asserts that “eleven o’clock Sunday morning remains today the most segregated hour of the week” (1), and most congregations are mono-racial in membership. He acknowledges that there has been some movement toward multiculturalism in certain quarters, but the often even this dynamic has proved a hindrance to becoming antiracist; white control of and benefit from organizational system still often prevails. The foundational core of the system must change before true equality can ever be attained.

The second foundational principle is “the inseparability of Jesus and justice.” “God’s opposition to all forms of societal inequality and the call to a radically inclusive community are at the center of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (13). Barndt quotes Luke

4:18, 19 as Jesus announcement of the central focus of his ministry and mission. He then appeals to liberation theology to articulate the call of Jesus to “the pursuit of racial justice” (15). The Christian is required to engage in an active attempt to realize equality and justice for everyone, both in the Church and in society. And racism is the most import issue that must be addressed. The plan of redemption demands that the evil be corrected.

Taking back “stolen sacred stories” (16) is the third principle. The Bible and the teachings of the church have been twisted and reinterpreted to endorse racism. For example, Barndt says that it has been claimed that the Scriptures teach the superiority of white people and their culture, which in turn has then been used to justify slavery and genocide. Other stories include the idea that individualism and personal initiative are God’s ordained way for people to improve themselves, and everyone has the same opportunity to do so. Therefore, there is no need for church or government to address racism. Yet another stolen story, according to Barndt, is that charity, which addresses temporary needs, is sufficient, and justice, which includes the permanent solving of poverty, is not needed. Though charity is necessary, it cannot replace the work for justice and equality that is needed. Barndt also opposes the story that wealth is always the blessing of God, and its corollary that poverty is then the curse of God. All these stories must be reclaimed by denying that God condones any form of racial, national, or economic inequality.

The final foundational principle for Barndt is that the Church is a part of a stream of witnesses (past, present, and future) that call for justice and equality in the church

and society. He sees the New Testament as clearly teaching that this is the first work of the people of God on earth.

There are several useful charts in the book. On pages 121 and 122 Barndt describes 5 “Levels of Institutionalized Racism in the Church,” which include personnel, programs and services, members and community, organizational structure, and mission, purpose and identity. The chart contains a description of each of these levels and examples of how racism functions there. The chart on pages 148 and 149 presents a “Continuum on Becoming an Anti-racist Multicultural Church.” It describes six levels, moving from “An Intentionally Segregated Church to “A Changing Church in a Changing Society,” where the church is not only anti-racist itself, but is part of the struggle to dismantle racism in the society at-large. The focus is on white churches becoming antiracist. The final chart is on pages 180 to 183, where some very valuable and practical steps are given on how Christians can assess and develop the move toward antiracism in their own church organization. The entire book is focused on equipping and motivating the reader to take action by evaluating and addressing racism in his or her own church context.

Barndt clearly argues for a change from white cultural dominance in the church, but he does not clearly define what should take its place. Should African-American or Hispanic culture replace it, or, as some have argued, should a new “Christian” culture be created that goes beyond any single culture and unites all people at a higher level? And what of worship styles? Should white worship styles give way to others, or should

a new, all-inclusive worship style be created? The answers to these questions are not clearly addressed.

The author also does not deal with sociological and psychological dynamics that cause people to naturally segregate themselves. Although he quotes Martin Luther King, Jr. as saying that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is "the most segregated hour of America" (1), Barndt offers only racism as the reason for that segregation. He might have acknowledged that research describes certain sociological and psychological dynamics that cause people of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds to naturally segregate themselves. These certainly are not an excuse for racism, but should be acknowledged and addressed when seeking to eliminate racism from the church.

Another issue not addressed in the book is the issue of racism practiced by non-whites. Barndt seems to lean toward the idea that only whites can be racist, because they hold the power and control in the Church. But he does not clearly state whether people of color can be racist in their sphere of power and influence or not. Nor does he address the possibility that non-whites might become racist if the balance of power moved too far the other way. He does seem to indicate that all whites are racist because their group is in power in the church and society (157). But he does not address the question: Would these be true also of African-Americans in a black denomination?

Although few will argue against the main purpose of this book, there are parts that may be cause for disagreement. For example, Barndt says that perhaps a strict democrat approach to decision-making in the church will need to be altered so that minorities can have an equal say. "When the white majority makes the decisions, white

power and privilege continues to perpetuate a white church with a white culture, administered by a white majority and its effectiveness measured by a white accountability process" (190). Barndt suggests that people of color might be given weighted votes or veto power on certain issues.

Another potential area of disagreement is Barndt's inclusion of gays and lesbians with ethnic and cultural groups that are discriminated against in the church. Those of a more conservative theological persuasion will probably resist this inclusion when addressing racism in the church.

Others may wonder if the church can really partner with secular institutions in addressing racism in society. Some might argue that, since at its core, racism is a spiritual problem, secular organizations may not be able or willing to take the steps necessary to root out discrimination completely in the social realm. They would say that the ultimate goal of the Church and secular society are too radically different for them to effectively work together on this issue.

And others, particularly those from an evangelical perspective, may question the possibility that this side of heaven total equality in the secular society is ever achievable. But perhaps all might agree that it can and should be a major goal of the Church to eliminate racism in the Body of Christ. And maybe we could also agree that serious attempts should be made to move society in this direction, even if we believe that total equality is not possible. Barndt's call is certainly something we all need to carefully and prayerfully consider, no matter what our theological view.

I would recommend *Becoming an Anti-racist Church* to anyone who is serious about racial and ethnic equality, particularly within the Church. Although there are a few weaknesses, the book gives a good overview of racism in the history of the Church in the United States, and offers theological and philosophical reasons for addressing the issue now. And perhaps most importantly, it offers some very practical steps for the Church to move away from merely discussing racism and actually addressing it.