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Embodied Integration: A Christian Response to Inequality

Introduction

Statistics concerning inequality are unsettling. “20 percent of the American population controls about 85 percent of the wealth.”¹ However, while there is significant concern over this, inequality has been and is accepted as the naturally occurring norm in the United States. Opinions in the national discourse inspired by the American Dream and informed by the cultural values of individualism and meritocracy exemplify the wealthy as models of hard work, determination, and success. The same narratives simultaneously label the poor as immoral and incompetent.²

Religion holds a complicated relationship to beliefs about poverty and inequality.³ Christians often syncretize American rhetoric with pseudo-Christian themes.⁴ While the position of the church has often been a recitation of the mantra, “God helps those who help themselves,” there are significant movements of socially-aware Christianities who challenge typical narratives about the church’s relationship to poverty.

Questions asked by those who hold more conservative positions are not concerned with how Christians can best end inequality, but with whether and why Christians should care about inequality. The assumption behind such questions reflects the secular relegation of religious convictions to certain spheres of existence⁵; they assume the extent of Christian social

¹ Smith, “Income Inequality.”

² Hunt, “Religion, Race/Ethnicity, and Beliefs about Poverty”

³ Emerson, Smith, and Sikkink, “Equal in Christ, But Not in the World

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Assad, “Formations of the Secular”

engagement to be personal salvation and individual internal moral development. In the words of theologian C.T. Studd, “Only one life, twill soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.”⁶

In contrast to popular assumptions, the central contention of this paper is that inequality is not simply a natural and unintentional reality, but is rather the primary and oppressive assumption of the capitalist economic ideology of the US. Residential segregation, created through housing and labor market mechanisms, operates as the spatial actualization of the assumption of inequality. Inequality is therefore systemic and intentional, as well as detrimental to a just and equal society.

In contrast to Christian syncretism of American political rhetoric, I argue that the response of both individual Christians and Christian churches to inequality must be distinctly intentional and institutional. Martin Luther King Jr.’s theological anthropology and critique of racial segregation therefore provide Christians with a foundation from which to politically engage in opposing the injustices of inequality and segregation. In order to address the structural and institutional aspects of inequality, I argue that embodied equality and integration should describe the normative expression for the Church as the kind of distinct society articulated by theologian Stanley Hauerwas.

Defining Inequality

Today the United States is the most unequal industrialized nation on the face of the earth.⁷ Fewer people today control more of the wealth, income, and opportunity in this country than at any other time since the Gilded Age.⁸ Although Smith says, “a fundamental tenant of the

⁶ Studd, *Only One Life*

⁷ Neckerman and Torche, “Inequality.”

⁸ *Union Made*.

American dream is the stipulation that all people should have the same chance in life to be successful,”⁹ it seems the stipulation of equal opportunity is blatantly untrue. It is maintained, however, in the midst of inequality through the cultural mechanism of meritocracy. Meritocracy, while claiming on the popular level to operate as a socioeconomic equalizer, is defined by Kaplan and Kaplan as the system in which “a large but elite minority dominates economic and social decision making.”¹⁰

Inequality is justified as the natural result of individual merit. Interpretations that claim disproportionate distributions of wealth, income, and opportunity are the consequences of certain individuals’ superior efforts are accepted by the majority of society as evidence of their own deficiency. Particulars concerning how those individuals accumulated their wealth, collect their income, or access their opportunity are easily ignored in popular imagination. What matters instead is that the skew in the bell is nothing out of the ordinary. Inequality unfortunately exists, but is simply a natural consequence of human existence.

Proponents of the free markets assume that life is a competition, and that there will be people who lose. The successful, the wealthy, are idealized as examples of hard work and determination. It follows that the poor are so by their own doing, and are therefore portrayed as either personal moral failures or inherently inferior. Such normalizing and moralizing of poverty can be traced back to Calvinist theological roots in protestant Europe and colonial America.¹¹

⁹ Smith, “Income Inequality.”

¹⁰ Kaplan and Kaplan, “Democracy, Meritocracy, and the Cognitive Elite”

¹¹ Weber and Tawney, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Inequality is instead the most fundamental assumption of the capitalistic enterprise. The narrative that says inequality is a natural occurrence is essentially inconsistent with how inequality is actually created. The privileged are not so by accident, nor are they successful due to their individual effort alone. The actual acquisition of wealth in this country is not as dependent on individual merit as it is on networks of relational connections, racial identity, and parents' social class.¹²

Inequality and the Housing and Labor Markets

Inequality is institutionalized through the mechanisms of labor and housing markets. As Jargowsky puts it,

“The labor market largely shapes the income distribution and the overall extent of income inequality, both across and within racial and ethnic groups. While the labor market generates income inequality, the housing market is the arena in which the spatial distribution of that inequality is determined... the resulting residential patterns can in turn have independent effects on the income distribution.”¹³

The discrepancy in value and the exploitation of the vulnerable is exhibited in the ways we organize urban space. As Yinger notes, “the housing market helps push people into poverty and keep them there.”¹⁴

Housing markets create and perpetuate inequality specifically through the practice of Bidding. According to Yinger, bidding is “the price that compensates a group for its commuting cost.” He continues, “this analysis predicts that the price per unit of housing declines with

¹² Kaplan and Kaplan, “Democracy, Meritocracy, and the Cognitive Elite”

¹³ Jargowsky, “Take the Money and Run.”

¹⁴ Yinger, “Housing Discrimination and Segregation as Causes of Poverty”

distance from a work site. People who live near work sites demand a relatively low quantity of housing. People who live near work sites pay more for less because they pay less in commuting costs.” Urban landlords can then charge a higher percentage of a tenant’s income for less housing, while suburban neighborhoods, which additionally have better access to amenities, have better housing and better prices. Yinger concludes, “in short, low-income people cannot win the spatial competition for housing without accepting either low housing quality or low neighborhood quality, or both.

Through such economic principles and policy, both urban poverty and suburban affluence are concentrated and institutionalized. The city’s skeleton, the spatial features by which it operates, thereby makes physical, visible, and tangible the ideological values of our society. In this way, populations of poor minorities are concentrated and segregated from the rest of the city by policy, while they are demonized and discounted through ideology.

Segregation’s Relationship to Inequality

Both the housing and labor markets are interdependently creating the context of residential segregation.¹⁵ Residential segregation is literally the space in which inequality is physically lived. As people arrange themselves in urban contexts by ethnic and economic classifications,¹⁶ we make physically definite the ideologically constructed categories of difference. Segregation is therefore the solidification of perceived differences.

While the poor are separated from the affluent generally, residential segregation effects poor minority neighborhoods most specifically. Yinger describes their relationship when he says,

¹⁵ *Understanding Poverty*.

¹⁶ Jargowsky, “Take the Money and Run.”

“Segregation influences poverty in several ways. First, it interacts with the high poverty rates among blacks and Hispanics to magnify concentrated black and Hispanic poverty—and hence to magnify disadvantages that blacks and Hispanics face from living in high-poverty neighborhoods. In the labor market, firms whose customers are mostly white may discriminate against black or Hispanic job applicants to avoid losing customers. Because segregation results in many locations where most of the customers are white it also results in locations with incentive to discriminate against blacks and Hispanics. The larger the fraction of minority customers the higher is the probability that workers from that minority group will be hired.”¹⁷

Poverty is often relegated in our imaginations to specific spatial parameters, equating residence within certain neighborhoods with the financial inability to leave. This is why time and again we see that those who are able to move out of such neighborhoods do in fact leave. The flight of middle class minorities from impoverished neighborhoods is understood to be not only a spatial change in residence, but a corresponding mobility in social status. While this change in financial security is beneficial and to be encouraged, it also contributes to the concentration of geographically specific minority community poverty, creating a continuous cycle of resource depletion so that under resourced communities continue to get poorer.

The issues of segregation and inequality are interrelated, intentional, and systemic. The question for Christians, and Christian churches, is how to respond to these issues and the problems they create? In what follows I contend that the theological anthropology of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. provides a foundation on which individual Christians can politically oppose

¹⁷ Ibid.

residential segregation and inequality, and propose the idea of embodied integration and equality as an expression of the Church as distinct society provides an institutional avenue for meaningful social change.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Theological Critique of Segregation

Martin Luther King Jr. developed his theological anthropology in the context of the open hostility, racism, and terrorism in the US in the mid twentieth century. Institutionalized injustice in the form of racial segregation was the accepted status quo; King challenged this norm primarily through theological reflection and nonviolent resistance. Because the levels of inequality in our country have exponentially grown since then, his words are hauntingly poignant in our contemporary context.

King listed three reasons in his address at the Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations in 1957 for renouncing segregationist belief, policy, and practice. These reasons are informed by a distinctly theological rationale, and give a model for Christian engagement with social issues. As King stated, “segregation is a tragic evil which is utterly unchristian.”¹⁸

The primary motivation for renouncing segregation is that “segregation inevitably makes for inequality.”¹⁹ Inequality, as an inescapable consequence of segregation, was a problem of Christian conviction for King. To ignore the disproportionate accumulation of wealth by certain groups while others barely survive at subsistence levels is to agree that some people are inherently more valuable than others; an utterly unchristian idea. If all people equally image

¹⁸ King, *A Testament of Hope*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

God, then they ought to have the equal opportunity to actively refract that image; the equal opportunity to flourish.

The second reason to reject segregation according to King is because, “it scars the soul of both the segregated and the segregator... Segregation is evil because it brings about a tragic distortion of human personality.”²⁰ Today the soul of the United States is arguably more deeply scarred than at any other time in its history. According to Smith,

“Residential segregation by income has increased during the past three decades across the United States and in 27 of the nation’s 30 largest major metropolitan areas... these increases are related to the long-term rise in income inequality, which has led to a shrinkage in the share of neighborhoods across the United States that are predominantly middle class or mixed-income—76% in 2010, down from 85% in 1980—and a rise in the shares that are majority lower income (18% in 2010, up from 12% in 1980) and majority upper income (6% in 2010, up from 3% in 1980).”²¹

Our society has been altered significantly by the legacy of Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. However, since that time wealth inequality and economic segregation have only increased in the urban context. The false senses of superiority and inferiority which King referenced has become the normative assumptions of America’s people, and have led to incredible amounts of division and violence.

In our labor and housing market-driven society, the poor, and especially poor minorities, have been dehumanized and exploited for their utility in market mechanisms. Therefore, the third

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Smith, “Income Inequality.”

reason King gives against segregation is that, “it ends up depersonalizing the segregated... the segregator relegates the segregated to the status of a thing, rather than elevate [them] to the status of a person.”²² The definition and spatial separation of ethnic or racial difference assigns individuals included in minority groups to specific urban districts, apart from opportunity, education, and employment. By so doing, their identity is reduced to nothing more than statistics in the cultural imagination of the majority, thus ignoring the personhood of the segregated.

All people, at all times, and everywhere, bear the image of God. By virtue of their mutual God-imagining, all people are both equally dignified and deeply connected. King describes this connection as being “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”²³ The sufferings of a few are not only theirs to bear; Christ has borne them in his death, and calls Christians to bear them today. This is what he means when he says injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.²⁴

According to King, segregation creates inequality, scars the soul of both segregated and segregator, and dehumanizes the segregated. Integration, on the other hand, serves as a mechanism through which equality, healing, and humanization take place. If Christians take seriously the command of Jesus to love their neighbor, they cannot ignore this issue. King’s critique of racial segregation provides Christians a theological basis on which to oppose the injustices of both racial and residential inequality and implies avenues of personal action.

However, individual applications of Christian theological conviction fail to address the structural or institutional aspects of public life. The church, as an institution, shares the

²² King, *A Testament of Hope*.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

obligation to oppose inequality and encourage integration, but must do so through more institutional means. While individual Christians may apply their convictions through utilizing their privilege as citizens of the United States, as Stanley Hauerwas says, “it is not the task of the church to try to develop strategies to make America work; rather the task of the church in this country is to become a polity that has the character necessary to survive as a truthful society.”²⁵

The Church as Alternate Polity

Hauerwas, in his book *A Community of Character*, proposes to “reassert the social significance of the church as a distinct society with an integrity peculiar to itself.”²⁶ The church as an institution, according to Hauerwas, exists outside of the typical structures of society and is not bound by the authority of external powers. This means the church is essentially different from and relates differently to the world.

In contrast to many interpretations of the church’s distinctiveness, this separation is not synonymous with seclusion or withdrawal from the world. As Hauerwas puts it, “the service that Christians are called upon to provide does not have as its aim to make the world better, but to demonstrate that Jesus has made possible a new world, a new social order.”²⁷ The primary function of the church is to prophetically speak to the majority from the margins; to embody God’s Kingdom as a witness to the world. The church, as a distinct polity, is not primarily concerned with fixing the world but making a new world visible, not simply arguing for change in systems, but embodying entirely new ways of being.

²⁵ *A Community of Character*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *A Community of Character*.

All communities operate from and orient themselves around narratives; stories of what is going on in the world. Stories are what contextualize personal experiences within conceptual frameworks.²⁸ The first distinction then, between the church and the rest of the world is the narrative by which its members orient their lives and operate in the world.

The dominant cultural narrative in the contemporary US says that inequality is an unfortunate but natural result of individual shortcomings. Poverty, the story goes, is caused by personal irresponsibility, and is remedied through hard work and determination. This capitalist narrative has been a fundamental tenant in Western culture for centuries.²⁹

The story of Christ stands in stark contrast to the narrative of capitalism. Unlike the cultural accounts of our day which place responsibility for both sin and salvation in the hands of the individual, the church interprets reality through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The gospel says that humanity is liberated by the grace of God through the work of Christ, that salvation is not by any individual merit. This radically different narrative empowers those who assume it to forgive and to serve, to trust and to hope. Faith, practiced through the personal adoption of Jesus' story as one's own, defines the community of faith in the context of the world.

The church must practically operate in terms consistent with its divergent, Christocentric, understanding of reality. This means that the church must actually disregard the systems of meritocracy and economic liberalism, and must instead organize itself according to the vision of the Kingdom of God seen in the life of Christ and in the scriptures. Particularly in the context of inequality, the church must embody the difference it believes to be and represent. The church

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Stark, *The Victory of Reason*.

must not only, or even primarily, be involved in advocating for equality and integration; it must embody them.

Embodied equality and integration for Christian churches and organizations is the intentional decision to diversify leadership, membership, service, and location. Preferential treatment must be withheld from those who would normally receive it outside of the church; the wealthy, the highly educated, the white, the male. Such members of congregations do not possess any more value or worth than disempowered, poor, minority women, and should not receive undeserved privileges. In God's Kingdom, all are one under Christ; in Kingdom of God, blessed are the poor.

Conclusion

Segregation is the spatial actualization of the central tenant of capitalist economic ideology; inequality. Inequality is not only a disparity of wealth, resources, or opportunity, it is the basic assumption upon which our national economy is built. Therefore, the perpetuation of inequality is inevitable at the social/systemic level.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s theological anthropology and critique of segregation provide individual Christians with a foundation for opposing the injustice of inequality. Christians can therefore participate to the utmost politically as citizens of the United States in order to make a more just union. However, individual actions are ultimately insufficient to fight the institutional nature of inequality and segregation. The work of the church, according to Hauerwas, is to model to the world a distinct society with integrity unto itself. To provide the world with an entirely different example of what life could be; to be a witness to the world concerning the Kingdom of God. The free markets may currently rule America, only Christ rules the Church.

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