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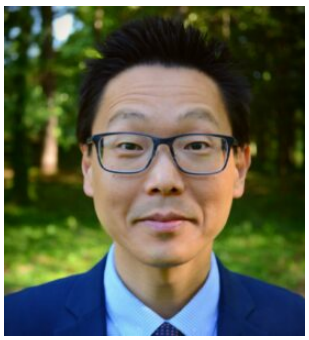

Does Theological Education for Purple Churches Require a Purple Seminary?

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I think every theological educator asks themselves some form of the following question: What is the raison d'être for my teaching? Sometimes this reflection manifests in a functional way amid the immediacy of constructing a syllabus as we interrogate our learning objectives. But there are also moments where we take a step back and think about the ultimate aims of our vocation. We render for ourselves an accounting of dreams fulfilled, deferred, and denied.

I teach at a denominational seminary with an increasingly diverse student population such that there are many ecclesial and social contexts represented in my classroom. One context is the "purple church." The simplest definition of the purple church is a congregation in the United States with red Republicans and blue Democrats worshiping together. Other articulations extend the metaphor beyond political polarization to encompass a community of faith with Christians who disagree on a variety of social issues, theological matters, and worship styles. Some believe that a necessity for pastoring in a purple church is the capacity to simultaneously exercise pastoral care and prophetic leadership. One interpretation of purple church ministry finds the "pastoral" focus addresses the personal needs of congregants and the "prophetic" focus seeks to inform congregants on how to faithfully engage their civic responsibilities. Yet even clergy themselves concede that effective ministry in this context requires biting one's tongue sometimes and purposefully steering clear of some societal injustices.

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As an historian of Christianity in the United States, I encourage my students to examine the fullness of the past in all its wonders, horrors, complexities, and contradictions. In thinking about the purple church now, I want us to discern what it meant to pastor such a congregation then. In 1961, Jimmy Gene Peck, a graduate of Columbia Theological Seminary (where I teach today), accepted a call to serve as the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Enterprise, Alabama. At that time, every graduate was a white man and most were in their twenties and thirties. Peck was born in 1934 and enrolled at Columbia in 1958 upon completion of his undergraduate degree from Presbyterian College. The town of Enterprise in southeastern Alabama had roughly 13,000 residents and First Presbyterian Church drew members from the town and from the military community at nearby Fort Novosel (formerly Fort Rucker). Prior to Peck's arrival, the church had split as several members departed over their frustrations with what they viewed as the leadership's lack of attention to military families. Peck therefore began his ministry feeling the deep wounds of division and promised to pursue a "healing ministry in Enterprise."

But there were other pains and divisions in Enterprise, a town in which thirty percent of the residents were Black, and the young pastor could not ignore the realities of anti-Black discrimination and white opposition to integration. On February 10, 1962, eight months into his ministry, Peck preached on racism. He selected several passages from the New Testament about Jews and Samaritans. He explained how Jesus conversed with a Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:9 and observed how opponents of Jesus in John 8:48 derisively called him a "Samaritan." Peck compared the usage of Samaritan in the latter scriptural verse to "our popular terms of disrespect" – "*nigger*" and "*nigger lover*" – and hoped that white Christians would cease uttering these hateful racial slurs. He continued with a few words about the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37 and an exposition of the risen Christ's promise in Acts 1:8 that the message of God's love will spread across Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

Peck's seminary professors surely would have been proud of his skillful deployment of the Bible to compellingly connect how Jesus addressed enmity between Jews and Samaritans in the first-century Greco-Roman world to the twentieth-century context of Black and white Americans in Alabama. Peck was also careful to balance the pastoral alongside the prophetic in his sermon. He shared that he did not "speak excessively on the race question" from the pulpit because he too was wary of freshly minted seminary graduates who aspire "to redeem the world before the ink of his diploma is dry." And Peck understood how the congregation was still hurting from the trauma of painful infighting. Yet he did not see how he could remain silent about the "race question" because it was omnipresent in schools, restaurants, newspapers, and everyday conversations. Peck desired to lovingly help prepare his congregants for civic engagement with gospel instruction: "Hard days are ahead, and God is counting on the church to lead society, not to lag behind it. May God grant us convictions which honor Christ, and grant us the courage of our convictions."

The quandary Peck encountered was that the convictions of some of his congregants as well as other local white Christians did not align with his. In an era before the internet and social

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media, the “Letters to the Editor” section within printed newspapers was a significant avenue for public discourse. After reading a letter from a segregationist Presbyterian minister in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, Peck submitted his own letter to express that he and some other white clergy supported integration. He noted that he did not speak for his congregation and did not wish to express political opinions. Rather, Peck simply wanted readers to know about the existence of white pastors who believed segregation was antithetical to the Christian gospel.

Though Peck was cautious in his writing, the *Montgomery Advertiser* made an editorial decision that led to the demise of his ministry in Enterprise. When publishing Peck’s letter in 1963, the newspaper included its own title for the letter, “Christians Should Speak Out,” in bold print. The newspaper subsequently published an angry response to Peck. Annie Laurie Reaves, a white woman from Eufaula, criticized Peck for misconstruing the “plain teachings of the Bible,” which endorsed “the separation barriers between the races,” and admonished the pastor for deficient theological training: “I urge him, as his sister in Christ, to attend a better school, one where he can be taught of Holy Spirit.” Word spread about Peck’s letter, especially the backlash to it, and created the conditions of whatever the equivalent of going viral today was in the 1960s. After eighteen months of tumult in the church, which included lay leaders advising Peck to cease speaking about race, Peck submitted his resignation and asked the East Alabama Presbytery in 1964 to dissolve the pastoral relationship between him and the congregation.

As a theological educator today, I wrestle with the lessons to be learned from Peck’s experience as a young pastor. Peck and other white clergy certainly ministered in a challenging context of intense political polarization and pressing societal injustices. It is clear to me that Peck’s ministry simultaneously reveals a shining example of individual courage and a searing condemnation of institutional sinfulness within the broader white Church. Yet I also wonder if some of my students treat Peck as a cautionary tale more than an imitable witness. More than a few clergy colleagues have recommended to me that Columbia and other seminaries like it must do better about educating students for leadership in purple churches. I am aware that one potential application, in view of the purple church, is to explore with my students what Peck might have done differently. But the more obvious lesson to me from this history is that the problem is less about the pastor’s capacities and more about the purple church’s limitations.

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