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THE  
OFFENSIVE  
CHURCH

BREAKING THE CYCLE  
OF ETHNIC DISUNITY



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## CHAPTER ONE

# PLAYING OFFENSE

IN 1883, A REAL ESTATE DEVELOPER named Horace Wilcox moved his family from the Midwest to Southern California, where he purchased a plot of land nestled closely to the Santa Monica hills, a few miles from Los Angeles. A devout follower of Jesus, Wilcox envisioned living out his utopian visions of the kingdom there. Hoping the church would transform the culture, he later gave away parcels of this land to denominations so they could build their churches.

Wilcox's wife chose to name the place after her favorite Midwestern estate: Hollywood. Yep, you read that right. On the very ground where Wilcox and his family sought to advance a kingdom that would shake up the world, another cultural juggernaut arose whose forces we continue to feel to this day. While I wholeheartedly affirm the dignity of all work and the need for Jesus-loving people to be a part of what is now more metaphorically known as Hollywood, Wilcox's vision is undeniably at odds with Hollywood's reality.

Score one for the culture.

One afternoon many centuries before Wilcox took a gander at his property, Jesus marched into Caesarea Philippi with

his followers. To put it mildly, Caesarea Philippi was not synonymous with all things Christian, or even Jewish. At the center of the town stood a rock platform for the famous Festival of Pan, where all kinds of immoral acts were on full display for tens of thousands.

I've been to Caesarea Philippi, where not far from this rock platform is a little hillside. Perhaps the disciples sat there when Jesus asked them, "Who do you think the Son of Man is?" Peter nailed it by declaring Jesus to be the Messiah. Excitedly, Jesus responded, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). If you've been around church, you understand the nature of the rock in this verse is the subject of great debate. Catholics have historically said the rock is Peter, as he went on to preach on the day of Pentecost and saw thousands come to faith and the church come into being. On the other hand, Protestants have historically claimed the rock is Peter's confession. After all, Paul said Jesus is the cornerstone of the church (Ephesians 2:20).

These are good answers, but I think there's a better one. Sitting on the hillside not far from the prominent rock platform the afternoon I spent in Caesarea Philippi, I listened as our guide read from Matthew 16. When he got to the part where Jesus says, "and on this rock," he pointed to the rock platform—a simple but profound gesture that revolutionized my thinking on the text and on the church. Jesus' church would be built in immoral places. Jesus' church would not inhabit sterile environments where it would function as some foreign embassy detached from its surrounding culture. Jesus' church is meant to occupy the world

and transform the culture rather than the culture transforming the church.

Jesus could very well be saying, “Upon Ferguson, Charleston, and Minneapolis—sites of some of the most notorious racial conflicts in our time—I will build my church.” Jesus is saying the church cannot be silent about what is happening in the culture. Instead, it must bring answers to the problems that ail us—and for America, that especially means speaking up about race.

But there’s more. Notice Jesus says of the church that the “gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). We don’t have to spend a day in seminary or take a trip to Caesarea Philippi to get our arms around what Jesus is saying: Gates guard. Gates protect. Gates don’t play offense.

Gates play defense.

While the gates of hell are backpedaling, the church should be fast-breaking. While the gates of hell are reacting, the church should be initiating. The church Jesus envisions is a church on the offensive. Yet when it comes to the issue of race, hell is fast-breaking while we, the church, are backpedaling.

Until we learn to play offense by engaging in a robust discipleship in which followers of Jesus are being formed into a new humanity, we will always find hell snapping at our heels. I’ve seen it over and over again in my lifetime.

When Dylan Roof killed nine African Americans attending midweek Bible study in a Charleston, South Carolina, church, I was immediately hit up by well-meaning non-African American followers of Jesus asking what they could do. What books should they be reading? What should they say at their churches the following Sunday? While it’s hard for me to give homework while I’m grieving, I relented. For the next several

days, our attention was riveted on the subject of race. But then the uproar died down, and as is the case in the news cycle, something else captured our collective concerns. Then another racial event inevitably happened, and the same questions of what to read, what to preach, and what to do flooded my direct messages. I responded, and then came Ahmaud Arbery. Everything stopped. People posted the runs they did in honor of Arbery and asked the same questions. We went back to life as we knew it. Then Breonna Taylor happened. Then George Floyd. Then . . .

And in the midst of all this came a report that the two most divided groups are White evangelicals and Blacks. How can this be when we've talked about race as much as we have? This happens when we are used to reacting and not leading, backpedaling and not fast breaking, playing defense when Christ has called us to play offense. This book contends that the church must play offense by demonstrating a paradigm of discipleship that is both vertical and horizontal, showing people how to walk with God and with each other.

Christianity is at odds with America's obsession with the individual, for Christianity contends that transformation happens within the context of relationships. How does God change us? By connecting us sinners with him and with others. This is the fabric of the great commandment and the essence of the Bible.

Korie and I have been married for several decades. One thing I've learned through our years together is the inevitability of change. Someone once quipped that his wife had been married to five different men and all of them had been him. Understanding this, my and Korie's conversation turned one evening to how we had changed. She observed that I have

become much kinder and more compassionate. Because she is not at all given to flattery, I found her insights to be greatly encouraging and a true credit to both God and her. I was a completely different person on that late-nineties summer day when we said “I do” in a Southern California church. Words like *abrasive* and *sexist* were apt descriptors of me then. With great shame I admit the hurt I inflicted on my wife.

What interests me is how my transformation came about. We did go to some conferences and counseling sessions. And while those helped, I can say without hesitation that the most beneficial decision I made that led to my emerging kindness was to lean into close relationship with my wife.

As a man, I not only do not understand women, but I also carry deep biases in me that have manifested in patriarchal dispositions and are what Dr. Derald Wing Sue of Columbia University has popularized as “microaggressions.” I am convinced my maturation in my treatment of women could not have happened without being in close, meaningful proximity with a woman I deeply loved and being committed to seeing her flourish.

The church that plays offense when it comes to race is the kind of church that will never settle for diversity but will be committed to ethnic unity, nurtured through a relentless commitment to having substantive relationships with the other. We all harbor our own racial biases, which manifest as microaggressions (dare I offer: at times, “macroaggressions”), causing deep hurt and even trauma to our ethnically other siblings. The only way forward is a commitment to a healthy, proactive, and relational offense that seeks to bridge the ethnic divide, is quick to engage in hard but necessary conversations, dives deep into humility by admitting the wrong

and walking the road of repentance, and extends huge helpings of grace and forgiveness toward offenders—all in the hopes of emerging as the new humanity the church is to embody and model.

If transformation were boiled down to simply reading a book, God would have given us his Word, aborted the church, and said, “Read this and I’ll see you in heaven.” And God for sure would not have given us his Holy Spirit, whose very role is relational in guiding us and manifesting fruit in our lives, allowing us to be a blessing to those we come in contact with. The point is this: the Bible is essential, but so is its premise of Christians living in relationship with God and others. These relationships transform us from fleshly jerks filled with racial biases to a new humanity filled with love and empathy for others.

If you’re a University of Alabama football fan, September 12, 1970 should mean something to you. Not because you won, but precisely because you lost. Rather, Alabama got blown out—by a University of Southern California (USC) football team with a Black quarterback and an all-Black backfield. Alabama’s team was all White. Played in the Deep South, this game showed Alabama fans the value of people of color and what a multiethnic team looked like. It’s said that USC played so well and beat ’Bama so thoroughly that they did more for the cause of racial justice in Alabama in that single night than Dr. King and the civil rights movement did in decades. That may be an overstatement—but when it came to race, USC played offense while ’Bama had played defense for years, and the result was a stunning 42–21 defeat for the Crimson Tide.



Almost immediately, Alabama's legendary coach, Paul "Bear" Bryant, began recruiting players of color. And while it pains me to say this as a University of Georgia fan, Alabama began winning many more championships than they had before. The culture of college football was changed, precisely because of a USC team that refused to be limited by the culture.

It's time for us to play offense. The enemy has been wearing us out for far too long. Let's lean into this new humanity that God has called us to.

## **ETHNIC UNITY DISCUSSION**

We as the church play offense when we get into relationships with the ethnic other, which is easier said than done. What are some challenges people face when forming cross-ethnic relationships?

How have relationships with the ethnic other transformed you?

How might you encourage your church to play offense in the area of ethnic unity?

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