



The Church and Housing Oppression: How the church should respond through their theologies  
and ethics of reconciliation, justice, and peace

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Housing oppression has been present throughout most of the United States' history, however, it has adapted and taken different forms. The church in the United States has played a role in housing oppression indirectly by doing nothing, either intentionally or passively. While housing oppression affects a wide array of persons from all backgrounds, ethnicities, and walks of life, the focus of this paper will be on how certain ethnic or racial groups have been, and still are profiled based on the color of their skin and feel the direct impact of housing oppression. Housing oppression deprives people of their humanity and creates unnecessary suffering. Because of the church's, through their theologies of reconciliation, justice, and peace as shown through Jesus' teachings and Old Testament wisdom, has a duty to reduce the effects of housing oppression and create a more Christ like community.

### **What is Housing Oppression**

Housing oppression often begins when there are affordable housing communities built wherever they can find space for them, which sometimes happens to be in the middle of a predominantly white community. Due to ethnic profiling economically, many ethnic groups generally have less money, which causes them having to live in neighborhoods with lower quality housing because this is all they can afford. This then leads to white families moving out because they feel the overall value of the neighborhood decreases with the increase of different ethnic and racial backgrounds moving in. Once this occurs, and the overall population of a neighborhood is non-white, white families won't move back in, and the neighborhood is marked as "poor or racially segregated"<sup>1</sup> and typically remains this way.

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<sup>1</sup> Gotez, *Integration Imperative*, 17.

This creates a cycle of housing oppression that is all but impossible to get out of once it begins and leaves most of the control to white majorities in neighborhoods. Because neighborhoods then become mostly non-white, or white with no integration, this leads to more racial profiling geographically in addition to economically.<sup>2</sup> There is less integration in neighborhoods which means resource are often spread less evenly. Poverty and housing oppression are directly linked from ethnic minorities having less money and able to afford less, and because it is difficult to build low-income housing that meets specific standard of living.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Federal Housing Association (FHA), recommended deeds be put into place on properties to maintain segregation, or as the FHA argued, to protect the value of the properties it insured.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the FHA gave less resources to mixed ethnicity neighborhoods, which lead to many whites moving out since they had the money to afford different housing in a predominantly white neighborhood, that would end up providing them with more resources, and thus continuing the cycle of housing oppression for non-whites. However, since the 1960's there has been a decline in housing oppression due to past unofficial and official segregation,<sup>5</sup> which means that segregation being written into laws and deeds has decreased, but there are still ways to segregation and oppress regarding housing. However, once neighborhoods become racial segregated, they often don't ever go back to being integrated, which leads to data that seems to show the intential housing segregation is lessening. In more recent surveys, there is more concentrated poverty in the United States, which means there are more pockets of low poverty and income, which is directly related to non-whites being affected

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<sup>2</sup> Gotez, *Integration Imperative*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Gotez, *Integration Imperative*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Gotez, *Integration Imperative*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Gotez, *Integration Imperative*, 23.

by housing oppression.<sup>6</sup> Even the FHA has contributed intentionally to housing oppression for non-whites.

### **The Christian Response to Housing Oppression**

It is not just the FHA that has contributed to and affected the widespread housing oppression that exists; the church has also contributed by being complacent in their actions towards housing oppression. Christians have been singled out as a group who is obviously not helping, which is evident through their absence in aiding solutions to combat housing oppression.<sup>7</sup> Not only is the church just looking away from the inhumanity of housing oppression, but they also don't have the correct mindset to even want to help in finding solutions for housing oppression. The church is preoccupied with the individualistic approach to Christianity and so Christians don't even realize, or want to understand, what is happening to others. Christians are "preoccupied with individual sin and need" which causes them to "miss the opportunity to participate in God's concrete redemption."<sup>8</sup> The church is unable, or more likely, unwilling to look beyond the needs of the individual person, or their individual church, and to look into the community to see that people are actively being oppressed.

### **Effects of Housing Oppression on Humans**

The intentional and unintentional ignorance of the issue of housing oppression has also caused avoidable harm to those affected by housing oppression. Those who are negatively affected by housing oppression often feel a lost sense of dignity because they are most likely already getting help from the state due to living in poverty, and now they struggle to find housing

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<sup>6</sup> Gotez, *Integration Imperative*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Ngueta, *King County*, 34.

<sup>8</sup> McBride, *Radical Discipleship*, 130.

that they can afford or find housing in a neighborhood where they feel accepted.<sup>9</sup> Often the head of the house feels a loss of dignity when they are unable to provide a house for their family. In addition, families affected by housing oppression don't feel a sense of community. When families are forced to move around constantly just to be able to afford living, or they are forced to move because of ethnic prejudice or judgment, it deprives them of getting to know the community around them or be able to build continuous relationships with those around them.<sup>10</sup> Those directly affected by housing oppression feel a psychological loss.

Housing oppression also causes people to be in less safe environments and have less opportunities readily available to them. In communities where there is a higher concentration of non-whites due to housing oppression, there is a lower chance of adequate health care and a higher chance of negative environmental issues.<sup>11</sup> There are also fewer public services such as buses and trains, which means in communities of non-whites who have been oppressed against, there are fewer job opportunities due to fewer means of transportation to jobs.<sup>12</sup>

The life expectancy of non-whites is lower than that of whites, partly due to fewer resources for communities that are predominantly non-white. There are higher rates of crime, and fewer grocery stores which leads to greater quantities of unhealthy foods being consumed by those affected by housing oppression. The environment in communities filled with people affected by housing oppression leads to a lower quality of life and a lower life expectancy.<sup>13</sup> In general, due to circumstances beyond many non-white's control, their quality of mental and physical life is less than that of whites. Housing oppression directly affects many people in all

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<sup>9</sup> Ngueita, *King County*, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Ngueita, *King County*, 27-28.

<sup>11</sup> Gotez, *Integration Imperative*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Gotez, *Integration Imperative*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Gotez, *Integration Imperative*, 20-21.

areas of the country, even though there are people who have the capabilities to change the issues causing housing oppression.

## **Reconciliation and Housing Oppression**

The idea of reconciliation is often simplified in church settings. Reconciliation usually gets narrowed down to the idea that one is told they hurt someone and results in a half-hearted apology. However, this is not an authentic reconciliation and never results in the true issue being reconciled. Authentic reconciliation has three main components, genuine acknowledgment of the wrongdoing, active participation in finding the root of the injustice, and working to create a long-term solution so the injustice doesn't happen again. This ensures that there is more than reparations happening, which are little temporary fixes to larger social issues.<sup>14</sup> This is all done through a belief in showing others and sharing with others the love Jesus gives us and teaches us to give to others through our actions.

For reconciliation to be effective, there needs to be an upheaval of social structures that result in long-term solutions and relationships with others, not temporary solutions. Temporary solutions, such as reparations, usually lean towards only helping an individual for a short time, while long-term solutions, such as changing social structures, lean towards helping large groups of people for long periods of time.

However, before social structures can change, there needs to be an acknowledgment of the wrongdoing. Regarding housing oppression, the church needs to acknowledge what they have done by being complicit in the social issue. Different churches have participated actively in housing oppression in different ways; some churches have benefited by the neighborhood

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<sup>14</sup> Boesak, *Subversive Piety*, 138.

growing in white population and therefore increasing the value of the neighborhood and church. Other churches have watched as non-whites are moving out of the very neighborhood the church finds itself in and do nothing. It is easy for churches to see that housing oppression is a problem, but the difficulty lies in naming how the church itself has played a role; this is genuine acknowledgement of the wrongdoing. Once churches realize their participation in housing oppression, they need to find ways to better understand the whole issue of housing oppression. While the church has most likely played a role in housing oppression, they are not the entire problem. The church needs to get to the root of what is happening. Once there is an understanding of the root issues of housing oppression, reconciliation needs to occur. An inauthentic reconciliation is not good enough. There needs to be action through making long-term solutions. These solutions, however, need to be decided in partnership with those who have been directly affected by housing oppression. The one who has participated in the wrongdoing needs to listen to those who have been, and are affected by housing oppression, in order to create solutions that are effective and long-term.<sup>15</sup>

Listening to those who have been directly hurt by housing oppression is a crucial component of reconciliation. It is essential for the church to respond with a listening ear and heart to those who are oppressed regarding any social issue. The church, as one of the wrongdoers, does not get to decide what needs to be done and what standards need to be put in place to stop housing oppression. The church needs to respond with love and care for those who have been hurt on behalf of the church. To do this, they need to put themselves lower than those

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<sup>15</sup> Pettit, *Blessing Oppression*, 307.

who have been hurt. The church's thoughts on housing oppression are less important than those who have been directly affected by housing oppression in order for reconciliation to be possible.

In 2 Corinthians we see Paul write to the church in Corinth about the intersection of love and reconciliation. In verse 15 we see Paul say, "those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."<sup>16</sup> Jesus, who died for us, teaches us and shows us about a life full of love and care for others. We are responsible to live out what Jesus teaches us, since he teaches us to love and care for others, it is our responsibility to do this for all people.<sup>17</sup>

In order to find genuine, authentic reconciliation, the church needs to live out their call to love and care for others. This looks like realizing how they have hurt others; and recognizing that it is not loving to continuously hurt others. Churches cannot say that they didn't realize they were hurting others, so it's not their fault they weren't acting in a loving and caring manner, because the love we are called to give is an active love, one that takes effort to ensure we truly are loving all those around us. To fully love someone, we also need to work to create an environment, neighborhood, and community that shows love. It is not enough to say we love the people who have dealt with housing oppression, our love is an action that calls us to help others.

True reconciliation is acknowledging that the church has hurt people by not living out the love Christians are called to act on. Reconciliation is also working to find the root cause of the housing oppression and find solutions while listening to those who have been affected by housing oppression. This is done through love, an active love which guides our actions so that we can express the love Jesus teaches us to give to others.

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<sup>16</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15.

<sup>17</sup> Best, *Second Corinthians*, 52.



## Justice and Housing Oppression

Justice follows reconciliation because one cannot bring about justice without first recognizing one's role in housing oppression. Justice for housing oppression will look different in each situation, depending on how the housing oppression has taken place in a given area. However, in each situation, justice will look like bending towards those who are marginalized. We see God express his bias towards the marginalized and then we see Jesus act on this teaching in society during his time on earth.

Justice is described to us in the book of Zechariah. In chapter 7 it says, “render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.”<sup>18</sup> God explicitly tells his people to not oppress, but instead care for the marginalized people in the world. This is how we bring about justice, when we are actively doing the opposite of oppressing others; when we care for others and give them what they deserve as humans made in the image of God. This call towards justice comes together in the life and work of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> God has a bent towards those who are marginalized which is evident in Jesus' life.

Jesus worked to bring justice to those who were seen as less than in society and were marginalized. We see Jesus do acts that involve him bending the law so that the greatest amount of justice could be brought about. For example, in Mark 3, Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, which was against the law. When Jesus is questioned, he asks “is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?”<sup>20</sup> Jesus bends the laws to ensure that the most

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<sup>18</sup> Zechariah 7:9-10.

<sup>19</sup> Salvatierra, *Faith Rooted Organizing*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Mark 3:4.

justice is being brought about. One could argue that it would be just to follow the laws, however, Jesus counters with the idea that saving a man's life is more just to the person, than making sure the laws are followed.

While breaking federal laws is not the best way to make changes to fight against housing oppression, pushing the boundaries of laws, and working to create change in laws, both implicit and explicit laws, is a step in the right direction. We need to be actively working towards justice, otherwise we are not following the teachings of God which are embodied through Jesus. This active work is done outside the church. Churches need to realize that justice cannot be achieved when people stay within the walls of their church. Justice is achieved when people leave the comfort of their church. Through God's teaching to not oppress, it teaches us that we need to do the opposite of oppressing, which is active work in creating justice and to create solutions to housing oppression beyond the walls of the church.

Believing that everyone is created in the image of God will aid in fighting for justice with housing oppression.<sup>21</sup> This belief creates a mindset that if we are oppressing humans created in the image of God, we are also oppressing God. All humans carry the image of God, and if we oppress a fellow human, we are also oppressing part of God. In the realm of housing oppression, by pushing people out of communities and creating neighborhoods where certain people don't feel like they have a place, we are essentially pushing God out of our communities. We wouldn't want to push God out of our communities and neighborhoods, but that is exactly what happens with housing oppression; we push people who are made in the image of God out of our communities.

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<sup>21</sup> Salvatierra, *Faith Rooted Organizing*, 18.

Once we realize how we have intentionally or unintentionally aided in creating housing oppression and realize that it is our duty as Christians to work towards not oppressing others, we realize that it requires active work to help our brothers and sisters who are made in the image of God. It creates a mindset where we want to help those who are made in the image of God and who are being oppressed, because God teaches us not to oppress others.

### **Peace, Shalom, and Housing Oppression**

Once we have realized our place in housing oppression and have worked to create justice in our communities so housing oppression is not prevalent, Christians need to work to live in peace with people who are different from them. This is where shalom comes in. Shalom is being able to live with others in harmony. It is not merely the absence of violence. In 1 John 4 it says, “for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”<sup>22</sup> As has been already established, it is not loving another by oppressing them. In order to live in harmony, love is essential, and you cannot truly love someone that you are actively oppressing.

It can be easy for a white person who has not been actively oppressed by housing issues to feel the need to fight back, however that is not living in harmony or peacefully. This goes against our instincts as humans though, since we are taught by society to fight back.<sup>23</sup> As for housing oppression, this could look like fighting the integration of communities and neighborhoods because that is not what it has previously been like. Retaliation is not what brings about shalom. It is a loving harmony that brings shalom.

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<sup>22</sup> 1 John 4:20.

<sup>23</sup> Allen, *God's Transforming Justice*, 404-405.

In order to love those around us and fully live in harmony, we need to be willing and able to build up those around us. True shalom is when we live amidst those who are different from us, yet we still work to build them up as fellow beings made in the image of God. In Romans 15 it says, “each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.”<sup>24</sup> This is Paul writing about Gentiles aiding Jewish people. This is what shows a truly healthy church; one that cares for those who are in need.<sup>25</sup> This is what shalom looks like, living with those who are different from us, like the Jews and Gentiles, and still loving them and aiding them in what they need, such as affordable housing and living in spaces where they feel safe and accepted.

Even if we have not fully come to reconcile what we have done to oppress people, and we don’t know the first step to working towards justice, our Christian beliefs tell us that “if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceable with all...if your enemies are hungry, feed them.”<sup>26</sup> Even if we don’t know what we have done, the first thing we can do as Christians is to live in peace and harmony with those around us. Not forcing people out of neighborhoods, but instead inviting them in and forming relationships with those around us. We are to serve and help those around us. If this had been the first step of people in society, we would not be having this discussion today about fighting housing oppression based off our Christian beliefs and theology.

Housing oppression has deprived people of their humanity and created unnecessary suffering; however, the church, through their theologies of reconciliation, justice, and peace as shown through Jesus’ teachings and Old Testament wisdom, is able to help and show love and care to those who suffer because of our actions. The church can, and should, play a crucial role in

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<sup>24</sup> Romans 15:2.

<sup>25</sup> Allen, *God’s Transforming Justice*, 406.

<sup>26</sup> Romans 12:18-20.

fighting against housing oppression. Once the church recognizes how their beliefs lead them towards finding reconciliation, justice and peace in their communities, the forces of housing oppression will begin to lessen.



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