DAILY BEAST

Segregation Is Still Alive at These Christian Schools

Diversity is sorely lacking at many private Christian schools, some of which were originally founded to keep blacks out.

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09.18.16 12:01 AM ET

Nothing dismantles claims of "post-racial" colorblindness quite like white Christian schoolchildren casually debating how to say the n-word. A student from the First Academy in Orlando, Florida, was criticized recently on social media for an Instagram post asking whether it was more "respectful" to use the n-word with an "er" or an "a" at the end.

While the question was originally posted in June, it got renewed attention earlier this month when a *New York Daily News* columnist posted it on Twitter. Leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement quickly spread it, decrying the post as another example of the racism bubbling up across America. The furor prompted the private Christian school to release a statement on "race relations."

Sadly, the Instagram post is not that surprising, given the typical racial makeup of many Christian schools and their history of segregation.

While Catholic schools have existed throughout U.S. history, private Christian schools emerged en masse in the aftermath of the civil-rights movement. The Supreme Court declared public-school segregation unconstitutional in its unanimous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Many school systems, particularly across the South, resisted compliance while some families saw the handwriting on the wall and decided to act.

Fearful at the thought of their children mingling with black students, many white Christian families founded private "segregation academies" to skirt the law. Many were "Christian" institutions, and fundamentalist evangelicals founded several of the most prominent ones. Non-Catholic Christian schools doubled their enrollments between 1961 and '71.

Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell, for example, started Lynchburg Christian Academy in 1967, when his town's public schools integrated. Because *Brown* did not apply to private schools, institutions like Falwell's could practice segregation while still receiving federal tax benefits. But all of this changed with the series of Supreme Court decisions in the late '60s and early '70s that forced public schools to integrate and declared racially discriminatory private schools ineligible for tax-exempt status.

Despite pressure from the government, these private Christian schools refused to go quietly into the night. Some refused to cooperate with IRS inquiries, hiding their internal operations behind the banner of "religious freedom." Others, such as Bob Jones University, proudly declared their racist policies. But most knew they needed to change their rhetoric in order to survive.

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"During this period, private Christian schools had to construct a bigger rationale for their existence than wanting an all-white classroom," says Seth Dowland, a religion professor and author of *Family Values and the Rise of the Religious Right*. "Leaders outside the South helped construct the rationale as combating secular humanism and their inculcating secularism and liberalism, even though the racial component was a huge part of the story as well."

This 'anti-liberalism' line was enough to provide cover for these private Christian schools. Only a few actually incurred penalties from the IRS. And similar institutions flooded the American marketplace, positioning themselves as viable alternatives to public education for white families.

Between 1970 and 1980, enrollment in non-Catholic religious schools more than doubled, to 1.3 million from 561,000. And by the early 1980s, religious right leaders like Jerry Falwell and Tim LaHaye, bragged that evangelical Christians were opening new schools at a rate of three per day. While they figured out how to win the culture wars, these white Christian leaders figured they could retreat to private schools where they could teach children as they pleased.

These schools thrived throughout the following decades with predominately white student bodies and leadership. In a sweeping survey of Christian schools, journalist Paul Parsons estimated that minorities constituted less than 3 percent of the student population in most of these schools during the mid-1980s. In 1987, the Association for Christian Schools International's executive board included 29 white people and exactly zero racial minorities.

That history has proven difficult to shake for today's private Christian schools. The institutions are still overwhelmingly attended by children from wealthy white families. Forty-three percent of these private schools have student bodies that are at least 90 percent white. In many Southern Christian schools, not a single black person can be found. At others, only a handful of minority children attend.

These students are shaped by Christian schools curricula that purport to teach "traditional values." Randall Balmer, a historian of religion at Dartmouth College and author of *The Making of Evangelicalism*, said many popular textbooks used in Christian schools teach American history in ways that privilege white culture. For example, the books often downplay the displacement of Native Americans or minimize slavery by noting its "positive effects," such as introducing slaves to Christianity.

"Ideas matter, and they have consequences," Balmer says. "If children are taught to heroicize European settlement in North America, it is inevitable that you're going to have a particular view of people who are not a part of that wave of settlement."

Dowland also surveyed major Christian school curriculum publishers and found "complaints about multiculturalism as a goal of public education." As the University of New Hampshire historian Jason Sokol noted, "[Christian school] supporters wanted to create a world where racial tensions did not exist, so they built schools where racial differences had no place."

While the civil-rights movement forced most Americans to deal with our distinctions and tensions, the advent of private Christian schools often allowed children to avoid confronting it. This doesn't mean that Christian schools today teach racism or overtly try to promote white privilege, but their homogenous classroom and curricula often incubate these attitudes.

"We assume that a racist is a bad, old bigot. That's not how racism operates. It happens because whiteness is the unnamed water we sit in," says Dowland. "So you have these largely homogenous student bodies where you don't get defiant segregation like you might have in the 1960s, but whiteness is still quietly privileged in these settings."

Children are not born racist. But the words kids hear from their parents and authority figures can instill prejudice. And walled fortresses that keep children from interacting with children of other races can, too.

Perhaps the most telling part of the First Academy student's racist post was the way other students casually weighed in with their opinions. One student commented, "Lmao both. If you're best friends, you can say it with a hard 'r'. But if you regularly chill, then you just say ni—a." Which prompted another student to respond, "Ya. But if you're driving down the road and you see a dark person, what would you say?"

After the *Daily News'* Shaun King posted the thread on Twitter, he received a flood of letters from First Academy alums and former students revealing a deep-seated bigotry. "The student body is very racist," one First Academy student said. "They, for example, hang Confederate flags from their cars, and place them as their iPhone backgrounds. They even, believe it or not, sculpt them and submit them into TFA art shows."

The First Academy incident is not an isolated case of one immature student posting insensitive ideas online. It is a stark illustration of how racism can echo across generations, and a call for private and Christian schools to become more diligent in promoting diversity and policing students' prejudice. It is also a reminder that Americans are not as colorblind as some assume. Even the most "pious" among us have quite a way to go.