

## ABSTRACT

### Addressing Racism in the Church: A Historical, Sociological, Theological, and Practical Account

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In the past decade, a growing body of literature has examined the pernicious relationship between racism and Christianity, making it an increasingly pressing issue for modern-day ministers to address. However, many are either ill-equipped or unmotivated to take practical steps to address racial injustice and inequality in their church and community. This thesis is an interdisciplinary synthesis of cultural commentary on racism's structural embeddedness in American history and systems, and theological consideration of the church's complicity. The American church has discarded Scripture's robust understanding of God's redemptive Kingdom, embodied in Jesus' holistic ministry, for a hyper-individualized and disembodied theology unable to address the realities of racism in America. In doing so, the church has not only enabled, but historically supported racial ideology that is fundamentally opposed to the Gospel of reconciliation. Through critical study of racism's roots and modern ecclesial attempts to rectify its effects, this thesis suggests accessible and effective ways forward that account for common pitfalls, and go beyond well-intentioned colorblind approaches.

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ADDRESSING RACISM IN THE CHURCH:  
A HISTORICAL, SOCIOLOGICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND PRACTICAL ACCOUNT

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To my amazing family, I wouldn't be the person I am today without you all. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for being the first people to introduce me to Jesus, and for showing me what it means to live for Christ.

Lastly and most importantly, thank you God for guiding me to Baylor, even against my wishes, and for softening my heart to be convicted of my racism and pride. Thank you for showing me the truth, and graciously loving me every step of the way.

## DEDICATION

*To Mom, Dad, Elise, and Jessi, I know God more fully because of each of you. You are the greatest examples of Christ I have ever known.*

## INTRODUCTION

### My White Awakening

I came to Baylor as a missionary kid planning to follow my parents' footsteps in vocational ministry. My framework for faithfully witnessing to the hope of the Gospel available through Jesus was one of individual salvation and personal sanctification. My second semester course load was packed with religion classes, but as I explored other disciplines that might equip me for ministry, an introductory level social work class entitled "Human Diversity and Leadership" made it into my schedule. The class was at eight in the morning, which wasn't ideal for a night owl such as myself, but the class seemed interesting enough to be worth the groggy morning half-walk-half-jog to class. I had no clue just how transformative the course would be, and the trajectory-altering journey it would initiate.

The class, taught by Dr. Elizabeth Goatley, exposed me to a variety of identities, such as gender and disability, but the one that really captured my attention was race. In one of our earliest class assignments, we were asked to film a self-interview sharing our perspective on various marginalized identities. One of the questions asked me to describe my understanding of racism in the United States, and as I recorded myself, I realized the only concepts I had for talking about racism were slavery and the Civil Rights era. In my mind, racism was mostly a thing of the past, something we as a society had progressed beyond. Of course, there were still some bigoted people in the world, but most people I knew, including myself, "didn't see race." America was a colorblind melting pot and a

land of equal opportunity, because that was all I had ever experienced it to be. It didn't take long for me to realize that my conceptualization of racism couldn't be farther from the truth. What I had previously considered to be an issue of the past that primarily concerned individual prejudice, I was learning was more deeply embedded in my country's governing systems and within my own heart than I ever could have imagined.

As the semester went on and I continued to grow in my understanding of racism in America, I was simultaneously taking classes in theology and ministry. As my college career would continue, I would experience an unrelenting, nagging sense that the ministry I felt called to pursue couldn't be so easily separated from the social injustices for which my heart felt burdened. Somehow, I had to reconcile my conception of faith as primarily and individual affair and ministry as single-minded focus on evangelism and discipleship, with my expanding theology of Jesus as not just my Savior, but the Great Redeemer of all creation, whom the Lord anointed to "bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor" (Is. 61:1-2 NRSV). This thesis is the culmination of these past four years of wrestling and reconciling. I hope you find it provides the way forward you have been looking for, that affirms both a deeply personal God who knows you by name and redeems you, and a just God whose Kingdom privileges the oppressed and marginalized.

To this day, I vividly remember talking with a friend at the beginning of that spring semester about recent Black Lives Matter protests. I said something to the effect of "Of course black lives matter, but *all* lives matter. I don't think there's anything wrong

with the movement, but I don't think it's necessary. Isn't pointing out race just perpetuating racism and division?" Some of you may relate to or agree with freshman-year Jess. Maybe you're laughing at my naiveté and obvious prejudice. Or perhaps you are angered by my privileged ignorance and racism, and rightfully so. For myself, I think back on that conversation and see a completely different woman than the one writing this thesis. In the spring of 2017 when an honors thesis was an undaunting speck on the horizon, I never would have imagined I would dedicate a year of time and energy calling the church to reckon with racism that exists inside its four walls, and the racial injustice waiting on its doorstep.

Wherever you find yourself on the spectrum, I offer this thesis as an opportunity to join what is a deeply personal endeavor born from God's redemptive work in my life. I invite you to make my journey your own. Along the way, I encourage you to acknowledge whatever discomfort or defensiveness you may feel, and despite it, to engage with an open mind and softened heart. My prayer is that you would have the courage to embrace this as more than a purely academic or intellectual exercise, but as an opportunity to let the Holy Spirit work in you and through you to "transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2 NRSV).

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Chicken or the Egg: Systemic Exploitation and Racist Ideology

In this chapter, I will briefly trace the histories that make race such a vexed question in United States and the church. These histories begin with colonialism, continuing through slavery, reconstruction, the Jim Crow era, the Civil Rights movement, and mass incarceration. Lastly, I will consider modern-day racism, particularly systemic racism and colorblindness ideology. This chapter is not intended to be a comprehensive substitute for a history textbook. Rather, this chapter serves as a kind of highlight reel of significant moments in the history of racism that have built the pernicious foundation of racialization in the United States that we have today, particularly emphasizing Christianity's role in the production of racial categories. We must accurately understand the history of the social construction of racism, and its particular manifestations in the United States context to properly deconstruct its institution and prevent further permutations of the same evil in future generations.

My hope is this chapter makes the topic of racism in the United States accessible to anyone, regardless of prior knowledge of the subject, and captures what I believe to be the central realities of racism that our modern reconciliation attempts often miss. Contrary to popular explanations, racism's history does not begin with ignorant discriminatory attitudes of individuals that then progressed into systems of exploitation. From the beginning, prejudiced social constructions of race and their accompanying stereotypes have functioned as justifications for preexisting systems of exploitation,

specifically oppression that enabled the economic prosperity of its perpetrators. The systems of inequality precede and are sustained by prejudicial social constructions of race, and contribute to the development of racial prejudice on the individual level.

### *Colonialism*

In his award-winning work of non-fiction, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, historian and professor Ibram X. Kendi presents an comprehensive history of race and racism in America. Because of the exhaustiveness of his research, and the global praise *Stamped from the Beginning* has received, I will use Kendi as our guide for this section of research. I rely heavily upon Kendi because his conclusions compromise the synthesis of most reliable research within the field of study; much of what he concludes can be found in part in other works, but is strikingly woven together into a single narrative in *Stamped from the Beginning*.

Kendi identifies Gomes Eanes de Zurara as the first articulator of anti-Black racist ideology in his 1453 biography of Prince Henry, entitled *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*. From 1415 until his death in 1460, Prince Henry, the Grand Master of Portugal's wealthy Military Order of Christ, commissioned the search for the southern source of gold and African captives, envious of the wealth the Muslim traders had amassed. Zurara, a commander in Prince Henry's Military Order of Christ, chronicled the Portuguese's historic voyage to sail along the Atlantic beyond the Western Sahara's Cape Bojador as the first Europeans to bring enslaved Africans back to Europe on August 6, 1444.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), 31.

In his manuscript, Zurara also commissioned the construction of the category of blackness by combining numerous African ethnic groups into one inferior “black” people. Such a designation, though it did not explicitly state it, inferred the superior category of whiteness. Zurara also framed his Grand Master’s expeditions as missionary voyages, thereby evangelistically justifying his racist ideology, and obscuring Prince Henry’s economic motivations to trade African slaves exclusively.<sup>2</sup> From the beginning, Christianity has been complicit in constructing and propagating racist ideology for economic ends. As Kendi summarizes, “Zurara’s inaugural racist ideas, in other words, were a product of, not a producer of, Prince Henry’s racist policies concerning African slave-trading.”<sup>3</sup>

Through Zurara’s writing, which were widely circulated and increased curiosity in the African slave trade, the classification of Africans as a unified, inferior group, who were better off enslaved and Christianized than living like “beasts” in Africa, spread like wildfire, along with further differentiations and theories. In 1526 Leo Africanus likened Africans to animals, claiming they were hypersexualized and less reasoned.<sup>4</sup> During the mid 1500s, John Lok, William Towerson, and Robert Gainish, furthered such stereotypes, reinforcing animalistic comparisons and the Africans’ godlessness.<sup>5</sup> As contact between Europeans and Africans increased, attempts to explain differences in skin color did as well, including Gainish’s proposed climate theory, amongst others. Once again, anti-

<sup>2</sup> Kendi, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Kendi, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Kendi, 38.

<sup>5</sup> Kendi, 40.

black racial categorization found theological justification through George Best's interpretation of Genesis in 1578 in which he proposed black people were the cursed offspring of Ham.<sup>6</sup> The Puritans later used such theology to justify enforcing God's ordained social order by civilizing and Christianizing the world.<sup>7</sup> Violence and brutality against blacks could be masked or excused because of their inherent servant status in the Divine order. These are just a few of the scientifically and theologically unsound divisions and theories that created the foundation for slavery amongst the early American colonies.

Kendi argues that racist ideology did not arise because of prejudiced attitudes, but rather as a justification for the economic ends achieved through the trading and possession of slaves. As was the case for Prince Henry, slavery in the United States was similarly motivated by the idol of economic prosperity. The stories of John Punch, Elizabeth Keys, and Nathaniel Bacon each highlight this economic underpinning of racism as the American colonies shifted from multi-racial indentured servitude based to a more strictly racialized system of slavery.

The first codification of race-based perpetual servitude, the basis for slavery, occurred in the colony of Virginia in 1640 to a man named John Punch. Prior to this, servants were known primarily by their country of origin. Punch, a black servant, along with two other European servants, attempted to escape their servitude, but were caught. Whereas the European men were sentenced to four additional years of service, Punch was sentenced to permanent servitude. Though some Africans were essentially enslaved by

<sup>6</sup> Kendi, 43.

<sup>7</sup> Kendi, 26.

1640, Punch's sentence was the first explicit sanction of lifelong servitude, and one of the first recorded instances of servant punishment differing based on race. This is one of the inaugural incidents in which rich, European landowners privileged working class members who looked like them to prevent further worker uprisings. They essentially founded a multi-class coalition of white people to keep the lower class of indentured servants from uniting.<sup>8</sup>

Elizabeth Key was the daughter of a white, free man and unnamed African woman, and herself a Christian. Before his death, her father, Thomas Key, arranged for her freedom; yet, her subsequent masters kept her enslaved. She later successfully sued the plantation for the freedom of her and her children. At the time the English common laws stated that children derived their status from that of their father, and that Christians were entitled to free status. Key's freedom posed a massive threat to all previous substantiations of black enslavement, and at a time when labor demands were increasing substantially.<sup>9</sup>

In order to dissolve Key's loopholes, and maintain the labor force necessary for economic security, Virginia changed the law in 1662 to state that a child's status derived from the mother.<sup>10</sup> Having now successfully made it possible for white slave owners to economically profit from raping their enslaved black women, lawmakers also added severe penalties against white women having sexual relations with non-white men, since

<sup>8</sup> John Biewen, "How Race Was Made (Seeing White, Part 2)," *Seeing White*, n.d., <https://documentarystudies.duke.edu/podcasts/how-race-was-made-seeing-white-part-2>.

<sup>9</sup> Taunya Lovell Banks, "Dangerous Woman: Elizabeth Key's Freedom Suit-Subjecthood and Racialized Identity in Seventeenth Century Colonial Virginia," *Akron L. Rev.* 41 (2008): 799.

<sup>10</sup> Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 2016.

their children would be free under the new law, including a law passed in 1691, enacted for the "prevention of that abominable mixture and spurious issue" due to intermarriage of Black, mulatto, or Indian men with "English or other white women." This is the first documented use of the word "white" in place of European, another gradual step in the construction of race to maintain economic security and advantage.<sup>11</sup>

These laws, along with continued beliefs about black inferiority and sexual promiscuity, created a substantial ideological foundation by which to exonerate race-based violence against black men and women, and especially sexual violence against black women. Soon after, legislation was developed that also challenged the assumed freedom of all Christians, declaring that slaves would remain in bondage even after baptism, and that Christian freedom in no way impacted temporal slavery. This too increased the supply of labor to include African Christians, and enabled slave owners to freely expose their servants to Christianity without fear of losing their service.<sup>12</sup>

Bacon's Rebellion against Governor William Berkley from 1676-1677 revealed the catastrophic possibility of class solidarity across racial lines that threatened wealthy European landowners' ability to control and secure a stable labor force. To separate poor whites from blacks, those in power took a divide-and-conquer approach, giving small privileges and advantages to the poor who looked like those in power to switch their allegiance from the lower class to the upper class, and suppress further working-class uprisings.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Bacon's Rebellion, these privileges took the form of pardoning

<sup>11</sup> Biewen, "How Race Was Made."

<sup>12</sup> Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Biewen, "How Race Was Made."

the white servants involved in the rebellion, and instituting a policy of thirty lashes for any slave who lifted a hand “against any Christian.”<sup>14</sup> “All whites now wielded absolute power to abuse any African person.”<sup>15</sup>

Christian now meant white, inferring divine justification upon the developing racialized social hierarchy, and further complexifying the messy web of meaning of “white” or “black” to imply a lot more than someone’s skin color. Whiteness could now be implicitly associated with what the majority adhered to as orthodox, true, and in right standing with God. Blackness, as its inverse, implied spiritual need, sinfulness, and separation from God, adding a new layer of religious inferiority to whites. Its implications for Christianity as an institutionalized religion are numerous, too. Synonymizing “Christian” and “white” names the church’s parasitic idolatry of and submission to white normativity and social dominance.<sup>16</sup> When we wonder why eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in America<sup>17</sup> and are tempted to blame black people for isolating in black congregations, we must remind ourselves who pushed out whom first. Since the 1600s, white American culture has been equated with Christian orthodoxy—a cultural captivity from which the church has yet to be freed.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Biewen.

<sup>15</sup> Kendi, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Love LL, Sechrest, Johnny Ramírez-Johnson, and Amos Yong, eds., *Can "White" People Be Saved?* (P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Joe Aldred, “Black Churches Contributing to Cohesion or Polarising Christians and Other Faith Groups?,” *Churches Together in England*, June 15, 2007, [https://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/236173/Home/Resources/Pentecostal\\_and\\_Multicultural/Black\\_Church\\_in/Black\\_Church\\_in.aspx](https://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/236173/Home/Resources/Pentecostal_and_Multicultural/Black_Church_in/Black_Church_in.aspx).

<sup>18</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*. (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

Privileging the poor who looked most similar to the powerful elite continued legislatively, including the 1682 ruling that only Europeans were allowed citizenship in the American colonies.<sup>19</sup> As a result, only European settlers could own land. The Virginia slave codes of 1705 intensified this strict enforcement of race-based privileges and punishments, instituting that "All servants imported and brought into the Country...who were not Christians in their native Country...shall be accounted and be slaves. All Negro, mulatto and Indian slaves within this dominion...shall be held to be real estate. If any slave resist his master...correcting such slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction...the master shall be free of all punishment...as if such accident never happened."<sup>20</sup> The Virginia slave codes, which eventually served as the model for instituting slavery in other colonies, imposed other harsh physical punishments that furthered the dehumanization of black people and allowed the myths of black criminality and white supremacy to flourish.

### *Slavery*

For Southerners particularly, the need for a consistent, reliable labor force to maintain the economy was paramount. In the early 1700s, slavery was indispensable to the Southern agricultural economy; though some may have been morally or religiously unsure about the ethical nature of slavery, their economic dependence on it made slavery an unquestionable institution.

<sup>19</sup> Biewen, "How Race Was Made."

<sup>20</sup> "Virginia's Slave Codes," PBS, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p268.html>.

Christianity continued to be a major complicit force in maintaining the institution of slavery, particularly the theology of those like Cotton Mather and George Whitefield in 1740. Cotton Mather argued that the Bible made no indication that Christian slaves had a right to freedom, and that Christianization had no connection with temporal status. In fact, the institution of slavery was actually advantageous, providing slaves “the opportunity to cast off their heathenism and embrace the Christian religion.” This perspective was even written into the baptismal vows for slaves, instructing slaves to state that they did not seek baptism in order to free themselves from obedience to their Master, only for the good of their soul. Later, in a sermon in 1721 after a black freeman was hanged for murdering his wife, Mather addressed the slaves in his congregation directly, asserting it was pride that led a black slave to desire freedom that was not divinely ordained for him.<sup>21</sup>

Other Christian clergy took it even further, removing any limitations on the means of ensuring compliance. Christianity was good for slaves and permitted “any degree of ‘strictness and severity’ necessary to maintain mastery.”<sup>22</sup> In order to curb fears of chaos that would threaten social and economic order, racist and inhumane theology was developed to enforce racialized ideology and condone violent social control. The gospel, instead of a counter-cultural force for human dignity and justice, became a force for social control.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*.

<sup>22</sup> Emerson and Smith, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Emerson and Smith, 25.

George Whitefield, as one of the founders of American evangelicalism, is particularly important to study, as his theology has greatly influenced the American evangelical church, even as we know it today. Whitefield believed in the equal spiritual poverty of blacks and whites before God; however, he believed slavery was divinely ordained by God for the purpose of Christianizing black slaves. Whitefield thought slavery was the best means by which uncivilized Africans could ensure their salvation, and also condoned cruelty as a method by which to increase temporal suffering and make slaves more receptive to Christianity. Because he saw evangelism as the most important function of the church, Whitefield coopted his theology to emphatically encourage the social institution of the slavery and create divine grounds for this dehumanizing order.<sup>24</sup>

We cannot minimize these theological views as concepts that have come and gone, or trivialize the church's complicity as merely ignorance of a bygone era. Whether ignorant of self-serving bias or not, as theologian Ernst Troeltsch concludes, "the teachings and practice of the church constituted one of the main sanctions for [slavery's] perpetuation" and have been one of the most significant conduits and perpetuators of systemic racism in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

Institutionalizing racism continued throughout the end of the eighteenth century. The first census in 1790 designated six categories: Free White males of 16 years and upward, Free White males under 16 years, Free White females, All other free persons, and Slaves, perpetuating the narrative of white superiority and the association of whiteness with freedom, and blackness with enslavement. The Naturalization Act of 1790

<sup>24</sup> Emerson and Smith, 26–27.

<sup>25</sup> Emerson and Smith, 24.

furthered institutionalized black enslavement, restricting citizenship to "any alien, being a free white person" who had been in the U.S. for two years, and effectively cutting off non-white people, particularly indentured servants and slaves, from the rights of citizenship.<sup>26</sup>

Christianity's complicity continued theologically, even within the abolitionist movement. Charles Finney provided a rich theological framework in which personal discipleship entailed social engagement and reform, including opposition to slavery. However, his views became more complicated as he began to understand the commitment required to oppose slavery as a hindrance to evangelism, his primary purpose.<sup>27</sup> Others, saw slavery and racialization as two separate entities, opposing slavery, but maintaining that prejudice and segregation.<sup>28</sup> The narrative of white superiority was still alive and well within Christian theology and church activism, and its pervasiveness was largely influential in laying the foundation for the black exodus from the church, and the Jim Crow era following Reconstruction.<sup>29</sup>

As the United States progressed, so too did the tension surrounding slavery. Various legislative decisions, such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and Dred Scott's denied appeal to purchase the slavery of he and his family lead to the Civil War in 1861, following Lincoln's election in 1860.<sup>30</sup> We typically think of Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator," but we often overlook that even he was not originally in favor of ending

<sup>26</sup> Biewen, "How Race Was Made."

<sup>27</sup> Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 32–33.

<sup>28</sup> Emerson and Smith, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Emerson and Smith, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Biewen, "How Race Was Made."

slavery. Even after proposing the abolition of slavery, Lincoln still didn't believe in the complete equality of blacks and whites, naturally, nor securing social equality.<sup>31</sup> Such an occurrence should illustrate that the racialized hierarchy of society that began centuries before the U.S. institution of slavery, could not and would not end merely with the elimination of slavery.

The Civil War (1861-1865) is still considered the deadliest war in U.S. history, with an estimated 750,000 people killed.<sup>32</sup> Without a doubt, the Civil War was about slavery; its motives have only been obscured after-the-fact to soften the blow of the Confederacy's defeat. It took the deadliest war in history to reorder to the United States' economic foundation of slavery, and supposedly defeat the deeply embedded narrative of black inferiority, and, by default, white supremacy.

Christians continued to remain divided on the issue of slavery, causing a number of denominational splits. Many Christians theologically justified the Confederacy's position with Biblical interpretation. One in particular, James Henley Thornwell, argued for the "spirituality of the church."<sup>33</sup> Thornwell believed the Bible was the one authority for the Church, and that the Church had no jurisdiction over political or social matters, only spiritual ones. The Civil War finally ended on April 9, 1865, and the Thirteenth Amendment officially abolishing slavery, was ratified on December 6, 1865. Though this

<sup>31</sup> Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> Guy Gugliotta, "New Estimate Raises Civil War Death Toll," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2012, sec. Science, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/science/civil-war-toll-up-by-20-percent-in-new-estimate.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Zondervan, 2019), 85.

was certainly a victory of massive proportions for black Americans, the death of slavery did not kill the racist notions that allowed for its initial institution.

### *Reconstruction (1863-1877)*

The years following the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment were some of the richest with opportunity for black Americans, as new spheres of political, economic, and social life suddenly became accessible. Lincoln established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, responsible for assisting newly freed slaves with food and clothing, locating family members, finding employment, and other services related to adjustment. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments granted citizenship, equal rights, and voting rights to emancipated African Americans. Black men and women pursued education, and black male political participation blossomed.<sup>34</sup> However, as whites and blacks started working together, rising social competition combined with deeply ingrained myths of white superiority and black criminality, left white citizens feeling threatened by these new social realities, and to harbor even more animosity towards black people. For example, President Andrew Johnson ordered that lands redistributed to newly freed slaves be returned to their former enslavers. As a result, many freed people returned to work the same lands as sharecroppers.<sup>35</sup>

Former Confederates, in response to losing their former, southern way of life, developed the “Lost Cause” narrative as an alternative history to explain their Civil War defeat. This narrative idealized the pre-Civil War south as a virtuous, private community

<sup>34</sup> Tisby, 89–90.

<sup>35</sup> Tisby, 91.

of Christians who only wanted to mind their own business and preserve their utopia. It was the irreligious North that disrupted this perfect community; the Civil War was a reluctant fight to preserve their way of life, not out of a desire to ruthlessly maintain slavery.<sup>36</sup> Twisted into this ideology were Christian beliefs, about God siding with the Confederacy, and using the Civil War as a punishing reminder to pursue God and holiness—a holiness that did not entail abolishing slavery or giving black people equal rights. According to Tisby, “White supremacy lurked behind the Lost Cause narrative and helped cement the practice of segregation in the church as the new normal”,<sup>37</sup> enabling the next segment in U.S. history: Jim Crow’s “separate but equal.”

Several groups sought to restore the South to its former glory, with white men atop the social hierarchy, calling this period “redemption.” One of their primary goals was to prevent black people from voting. They instituted restrictions to bypass the Fifteenth Amendment, such as a poll tax, the “grandfather clause”, “literacy tests”, and “understanding tests”, all merciless attempts to prevent southern black voters from claiming their new social power. This time period was also marked by a violent white reign of terror, in which “redeemers” did all they could to individually and systemically disenfranchise blacks. Explicit appeals to white superiority were also a common facet of political strategy.<sup>38</sup>

The era of Reconstruction effectively ended with the “Compromise of 1877,” in which President Rutherford B. Hayes withdrew federal troops from southern states,

<sup>36</sup> Tisby, 94.

<sup>37</sup> Tisby, 94.

<sup>38</sup> Tisby, 96–97.

leaving black citizens without protection from the government to enforce their civil rights, and at the mercy of the white supremacists who had previously abused them as slaves.<sup>39</sup>

*Jim Crow (1877-1950s)*

Conditions for black citizens in the South quickly deteriorated, as their civil rights as equal citizens were quickly abused. On May 18, 1896, the Supreme Court ruled against Homer A. Plessy in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, stating it was a misapplication of the Fourteenth Amendment to argue that “enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority,” validating the “separate but equal” doctrine and its many manifestations in public life.<sup>40</sup> Jim Crow—the name of which comes from a stereotyped, black character played by Thomas D. Rice in blackface—took the form of both legal and information practices.<sup>41</sup> “Sundown towns,” communities where black people had to be out before sundown, sprouted throughout the U.S., not the South.<sup>42</sup> Other laws restricted basic social realities, like playing a sport on separate field, being buried in separate cemeteries, dividing prison inmates by race, and prohibiting interracial sexual relations. These laws perpetuated the myth of black criminality, specifically that of bestial, untamed sexual impulses, ignoring the ongoing abuse of power by white men to

<sup>39</sup> Tisby, 97–98.

<sup>40</sup> Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Tisby, 103.

<sup>42</sup> Tisby, 103.

rape black women. During the Jim Crow era, rape functioned as a sexualized form of racial terror.<sup>43</sup>

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) engaged in other violent forms of racial terror, capturing the extreme racist ideology that was enabled to thrive during this era. Though it originated in response to Reconstruction in an effort to maintain white power, it took on a new, sinister form during the Jim Crow era. It “fused Christianity, nationalism, and white supremacy into a toxic ideology of hate.”<sup>44</sup> The KKK propagated a vision of a white, Protestant U.S., and was responsible for reprehensible acts of violence against black citizens. The release of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, the first feature-length film in the U.S, glorified the KKK, reflected a hugely distorted history of the Civil War and Reconstruction, largely built around the “Lost Cause” narrative and white supremacy, and instigated the use of film and media to sensationalize and perpetuate the myth of black criminality.

Racial terror of these kinds, along with lynching, became standard practice to enforce Jim Crow; the law did not offer enough terrifying incentive. Lynching could happen to anyone for the slightest offense. Lynchings were commonly neighborhood spectacles, in which entire families would come out to watch. Sometimes the lynching would be photographed and made into postcards for individuals to invite friends to attend the next lynching.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Tisby, 105.

<sup>44</sup> Tisby, 100.

<sup>45</sup> Tisby, 106–10.

One of the racially prejudiced practices that developed during this era was that of redlining in 1934. Redlining refers to the process by which the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), a federal agency, gave neighborhoods specific ratings to advise investment. The neighborhoods that were marked red, or hazardous, were predominantly non-white neighborhoods, making it a racially discriminatory practices guised under non-racist terms. Redlining limited loan access to people in red neighborhoods, making it difficult for residents of color to get a mortgage and own property, one of the primary methods for accumulating wealth in U.S. society.<sup>46</sup> Redlining has created lasting residential segregation and cycles of disinvestment for citizens of color.<sup>47</sup>

Convict-leasing developed during this era a “legal” rebranding of slavery, enabling today’s era of mass incarceration. Black men and women would be caught for minor crimes, burdened with substantial court fees they could not afford, and then forced to work for an independent company. The company would pay the local government to lease the prisoner, but not the worker. The work conditions were appalling, and many convicts died from the diseases they contracted, and buried in unmarked graves. Along with sharecropping, convict-leasing enabled white people to maintain their place in the social hierarchy and deprive black citizens of the economic access to accumulate wealth and achieve equal status or access.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Tisby, 123–24.

<sup>47</sup> Tisby, 198.

<sup>48</sup> Tisby, 105–6.

### *The Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968)*

The civil rights era was marked by nonviolent protests to draw attention to inequalities and challenge racial segregation and discrimination. A thesis all its own could be written to commend the bravery and determination of countless black men and women who risked their lives, and oftentimes lost them, to fight for the rights that always should have been freely given and systemically protected. I will elaborate on just a few of the key players and events of this brief, but critical era of U.S. history.

In 1954, in what is acknowledged as one of the greatest Supreme Court decisions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Brown v. Board of Education* unanimously voted against racial segregation in public schools, rejecting the “separate but equal” doctrine of Jim Crow.<sup>49</sup> Just one year later in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to relinquish her seat on the bus to a white man, which prompted the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott, recognized as “the spark that ignited the civil rights.”<sup>50</sup>

In 1957, now supported by the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the Little Rock Nine—Melba Pattillo, Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Minnijean Brown, Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls, Jefferson Thomas, Gloria Ray, and Thelma Mothershed—enrolled at the all-white Little Rock High School. Their attendance met extreme resistance and made national headlines. On their first day, a large white mob issued threats and threw stones, while approximately 270 soldiers from Arkansas National Guard blocked the school’s entrance, at the Arkansas Governor Faubus’ orders.

<sup>49</sup> Brian Duignan, “*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Brown-v-Board-of-Education-of-Topeka>.

<sup>50</sup> The Editors of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Rosa Parks,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rosa-Parks>.

After a lengthy window of deliberation, President Eisenhower sent in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and placed the Arkansas National Guard under federal command. The Little Rock Nine continued to face verbal and physical aggression. When Minnijean Brown retaliated, she was expelled. Governor Faubus was reelected in 1958, and, rather than permit desegregation, he closed all of Little Rock's schools.<sup>51</sup>

In February 1960, the Greensboro Four—Ezell Blair, Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond—organized a nonviolent sit-in at a local Woolworth's. Within weeks, national media coverage of the protest ignited other sit-ins across the country. Soon dining facilities across the South were becoming integrated, and by July 1960 the lunch counter at the Greensboro Woolworth's was serving black patrons.<sup>52</sup> The next year marked the beginning of the Freedom Rides, a series of political protests against segregation on public buses. The Freedom Riders got on two buses in D.C. on their way to New Orleans. In Alabama, one of the buses was firebombed and many of the Freedom Riders were beaten. Law enforcement was suspiciously late. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) renewed the effort, and the Freedom Riders traveled to Montgomery, where they were once again beaten. Twenty-seven Freedom Riders continued to Jackson, Mississippi, where they were arrested and jailed.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Gerald D. Jaynes, "Little Rock Nine," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Little-Rock-Nine>.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Ray, "Greensboro Sit-In," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/event/Greensboro-sit-in>.

<sup>53</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Freedom Rides," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Freedom-Rides>.

On September 15, 1963 the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama was bombed in a terrorist attack by the KKK. Fourteen attendees were injured, and four girls were killed. Local churches like this one, were integral to black social organization and protest activity. Homemade bombs planted by white supremacists in homes and churches became so commonplace that the city was sometimes known as “Bombingham.”<sup>54</sup> This is one of the events that prompted the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s (SCLC) Birmingham Demonstrations, during which Martin Luther King Jr. was imprisoned and wrote *A Letter From Birmingham Jail*,<sup>55</sup> and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom political demonstration. It was during these protests for civil rights legislation pending in Congress that King delivered what is now called his “I Have a Dream” speech.<sup>56</sup>

In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, guaranteeing equal voting rights by removing procedures biased against minorities and the underprivileged. Amongst other stipulations, it also enforced the desegregation of public schools, “and assures nondiscrimination in the distribution of funds under federally assisted programs.”<sup>57</sup> Shortly after in 1964, the Voting Rights Act was passed to further overcome legal barriers at the state and local levels the prevented blacks from exercising their Fifteenth

<sup>54</sup> Chelsey Parrott-Sheffer, “16th Street Baptist Church Bombing,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/event/16th-Street-Baptist-Church-bombing>.

<sup>55</sup> “Birmingham Demonstrations,” n.d., [http://crdl.usg.edu/events/birmingham\\_demonstrations/?Welcome](http://crdl.usg.edu/events/birmingham_demonstrations/?Welcome).

<sup>56</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “March on Washington,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/March-on-Washington>.

<sup>57</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Civil Rights Act,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Civil-Rights-Act-United-States-1964>.

Amendment right to vote.<sup>58</sup> In 1967 in the *Loving v. Virginia* case, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that anti-miscegenation was unconstitutional in the state of Virginia in light of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Supreme Court's ruling invalidated laws against interracial marriage in fifteen other states.<sup>59</sup>

The 1968 Fair Housing Act, otherwise known as Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, protects individuals and families from discrimination in the sale, rental, financing, or advertising of housing—a particularly important protection given the negative impact of redlining on black families. The bill passed in 1968, two years after it was put before Congress. The bill passed in large part because of the assassination of one of its largest supporters—Martin Luther King Jr. After King was shot and killed on his hotel balcony in Tennessee on April 4, 1968,<sup>60</sup> President Lyndon B. Johnson encouraged Congress to pass the bill as a memorial to King and his work as a civil rights leader.<sup>61</sup>

King's assassination in 1968 did not just reflect the racist outrage of a few radicals, but the growing discomfort and dissent towards King's social criticism, which many white Americans believed had gone too far. King's vocal opposition to the Vietnam War and his commitment to nonviolence had been building steadily since 1965, particularly when funding for Johnson's Great Society program—an extensive program

<sup>58</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Voting Rights Act," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2/26/20202, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Voting-Rights-Act>.

<sup>59</sup> Brian Duignan, "Loving v. Virginia," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/event/Loving-v-Virginia>.

<sup>60</sup> Jeff Wallenfeldt, "Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 28, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/assassination-of-Martin-Luther-King-Jr>.

<sup>61</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Fair Housing Act," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fair-Housing-Act>.

for social reform, that included increased enforcement of the Civil Rights Acts<sup>62</sup>—was redirected to the war effort, calling the Vietnam War “an enemy of the poor.”<sup>63</sup> King’s critique of the Vietnam War developed into a more radical critique of U.S. militarism and imperialism. He simultaneously began to criticize American capitalism and address economic inequality as implicitly interdependent with racial inequality. King’s concern with economic inequality led him, in partnership with the SCLC, to initiate the Poor People’s Campaign, which King would never get to see fulfilled in his lifetime. King synthesized his varied critiques in his address, “Beyond Vietnam,” that he delivered at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967—exactly one year before his assassination. Newspapers like *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* accused King of going too far, and the majority of whites labeled him a “dangerous radical,” while militant black groups began to grow impatient with his commitment to nonviolent protest.

Today, when we honor Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy once a year on the third Monday of January, we rightfully emphasize his commitment to racial equality and fighting for the civil rights of black Americans. However, we disregard his anti-militarism, his critique of capitalism and its influence on the growing economic inequality, and the interdependence of racial and economic inequality. We share quotes like “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that”<sup>64</sup>—beautiful, but uncontroversial statements that, detached

<sup>62</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Great Society,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Society>.

<sup>63</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *Beyond Vietnam* (New York, N.Y., 4/4/1967), <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam>.

<sup>64</sup> Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love*, [1st ed.]. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

from the far more radical social, and economic critiques of King that made him a threat to the white majority, enabling comfortable, colorblind moderation towards racism. A more faithful memorialization would wrestle with the less palatable perspectives of MLK, such as “it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily...freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed,”<sup>65</sup> or his political commentary that “the Negro’s greatest stumbling block in his stride towards freedom is...the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than justice.”<sup>66</sup> It would also necessitate active commitment to make lifestyle changes to achieve his vision of racial and economic equity and global peace. In our memorialization of MLK, and in our efforts to understand and address racism, we must guard against our biased inclinations to defensiveness and fear—the same prejudice that led King’s white contemporaries to label him a radical and a threat whose prophetic voice could only be reckoned with through his assassination.

### *Mass Incarceration*

“The United States now accounts for less than 5 percent of the world’s inhabitants—and about 25 percent of its incarcerated inhabitants. In 2000, one in 10 black males between the ages of 20 and 40 was incarcerated—10 times the rate of their white peers. In 2010, a third of all black male high-school dropouts between the ages of 20 and 39 were imprisoned, compared with only 13 percent of their white peers.”<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (Penguin Random House UK, 1964), 7.

<sup>66</sup> King Jr., 13.

<sup>67</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” *The Atlantic*, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/the-black-family-in-the-age-of-mass-incarceration/403246/>.

These are the staggering realities of our current criminal justice system, outlined by Ta-Nehisi Coates in a 2015 article in *The Atlantic* entitled, “The Black Family in the Age of Incarceration.” In the United States, we now have more African Americans under criminal supervision than all the slaves in the 1850s.<sup>68</sup>

Just as racist ideology did not begin with slavery, so too did its systemic and economic influence not. In her award-winning book, Michelle Alexander argues that the United States’ practice of mass incarceration—which is unparalleled in any other country—deprives black people from their rights as effectively as the Jim Crow laws and enforces the same “separate but equal” social reality.<sup>69</sup> The laws may have been revoked, but the unspoken prejudices that existed before the laws still remain. The modern-day criminalization of black people, which makes black people their crime instead of equals in dignity, rights, and power, is only a new adaptation of the mythology of black inferiority, articulated by Gomes de Zurarara in Portugal in the 1400s, applied in a different social context. This section will trace the contextualization of black criminalization, specifically focusing on the late twentieth century and the Thirteenth Amendment’s role in enabling the systemization of racial prejudice and its economic incitement.

The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servanthood, *except* as a punishment for a crime. Herein lies the loophole of the Thirteenth Amendment, by which the labor base that has fueled the U.S. economy from the very beginning could remain intact without violating the Constitution. Instead, by

<sup>68</sup> Coates.

<sup>69</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, NY: New Press, 2012).

criminalizing blacks, the U.S. economy could maintain its labor force, and black citizens could essentially lose the privileges of citizenship, including the right to vote.<sup>70</sup> In her documentary “13TH” Ava DuVernay argues that by nature of this clause, the criminal justice system operates as a form of racialized control and extension of slavery.<sup>71</sup> I will use DuVernay’s thorough and highly-celebrated documentary to guide this next portion of historical commentary.<sup>72</sup>

In 1970, during Richard Nixon’s presidency, and the beginning of the era of mass incarceration, the U.S. prison population was 357,292.<sup>73</sup> Black criminalization was preserved through Nixon’s war on crime rhetoric that emerged as backlash to the Civil Rights Movement and civil rights activists who intentionally broke the law to protest injustice. This “law and order” approach became known as the Southern Strategy, by which Nixon recruited poor and working-class whites, who had formerly supported for the Democratic Party, to vote Republican, by substituting the seemingly non-racist language of crime for that of race.<sup>74</sup> This is just another example of upper-class whites using poor whites as pawns to maintain the façade of white superiority and prosperity.

DuVernay quotes John Ehrlichman, one of Nixon’s advisors,

The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people... We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could

<sup>70</sup> Alexander.

<sup>71</sup> Ava DuVernay, “13th,” *A Netflix Original Documentary*. Sherman Oaks, CA: Kandoo Films, 2016.

<sup>72</sup> A list of awards “13th” has won can be found at <http://www.avaduvernay.com/13th>.

<sup>73</sup> DuVernay, “13th.”

<sup>74</sup> DuVernay.

arrest their leaders. raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.<sup>75</sup>

By 1980, the U.S. prison population increased dramatically to 513,900.

The Reagan administration perpetuated Nixon's "war on drugs", further punishing drug use as an issue of crime rather than health and playing on a sensationalized fear of crime. The particularly racist nature of this campaign becomes apparent with the introduction of crack cocaine. Crack, the smokable form of powder cocaine, was more commonly used by those in urban settings because of its accessibility, whereas powder cocaine was a suburban issue. Congress immediately established mandatory sentences for crack possession that were widely unequal to those for powder cocaine: one would spend the same amount of time in prison for 1 ounce of crack as 100 ounces of powder cocaine. This had a sweeping effect on urban communities of color, tearing families apart, and essentially criminalizing and magnifying hyper segregation and drastic income inequality. These policies, guised under economic and crime terms, had a drastically worse impact on black people than whites.<sup>76</sup>

Criminalizing black people continued to intensify with an overrepresentation of black people as criminals in television media. Alongside language of rapists, murderers, drug abusers, "super predators," fatherlessness, and joblessness were images of black men, continuing stereotypes of black criminality and inferiority, and further dehumanizing black bodies.<sup>77</sup> Black people in general, but particularly black men, instead

<sup>75</sup> DuVernay.

<sup>76</sup> DuVernay.

<sup>77</sup> DuVernay.

of people who committed a certain crime, become their crime. These stereotypes not only impact non-black perception of the black community, but has been internalized by black people, even creating rifts within the black community to disassociate oneself from the stereotypes.<sup>78</sup> In 1985, the U.S. prison population was 759,100, and by 1990, it had grown to 1,179,200.<sup>79</sup>

Bill Clinton's presidency continued the tough on crime mentality, introducing the Three Strikes law, the Truth in Sentencing law, and mandatory minimums, taking away parole to rehabilitate people out of prison, and shifting sentencing power from judges to prosecutors, the overwhelming majority of whom are white. Clinton's 1994, 30-billion-dollar Federal Crime Bill militarized law enforcement, monetarily incentivizing extreme and even abusive law enforcement tactics, and expanded the prison system and law enforcement infrastructure to increase the United States' capacity to incarcerate.<sup>80</sup> These laws, on top of the former policies that disproportionately criminalize and incarcerate black people, and are heavily responsible for enabling the disproportionate violence by local law enforcement against people of color that we see today. By 2000, the prison population expanded by over one million, to 2,015,300 inmates.<sup>81</sup>

### *Colorblindness*

A common response to racism today is the colorblindness route which claims, "I don't see race." Though touching to some degree, because it harkens to a world before

<sup>78</sup> DuVernay.

<sup>79</sup> DuVernay.

<sup>80</sup> DuVernay.

<sup>81</sup> DuVernay.

race was socially constructed and held such social power in daily life, this philosophy does more harm than good, and is another method of invalidating the realness of the narrative of white superiority and its ongoing impact.

The extreme abstraction of race language with social realities of crime and poverty has created a society in which the “narrative of racial difference,” with whiteness being superior and blackness being inferior, is still very much at work, while simultaneously spoken about in veiled, hinting language. Direct racial terminology is avoided. Whiteness remains the abstract and unclear center from which blackness deviates. Whiteness is ethnicity-less, origin-less, culture-less, whereas blackness is stereotyped and generalized under the guise of poverty or crime. These stereotypes are built on social realities that are the outcome of centuries-old narrative of racialization that created real effects, especially by white peoples’ abuse of power, not biological difference. As a result, the same power allotted to whites by whites is not nearly as obvious as in past eras. Instead of overt, it is structurally embedded in normal systems, creating cycles of benefits and privileges for white people that are frequently attributed to other factors.

The issue with the colorblind narrative is it requests a blank slate on the topic of race, that assumes an equal social reality. In reality, though it may be a well-intentioned move towards reconciliation, colorblindness ignores the reality that, though race is not real, because it has been socially constructed and enacted as if it were real, it is very real now; and its reality has immense, daily consequences for people of color. Colorblindness attempts to quiet racial discomfort and tension with a band-aid, instead of engaging in the

uncomfortable, messy, and painful work of surgery that will allow for sustainable healing.

The church remains complicit in maintaining these systems, particularly within evangelicalism in which the American ideal of hyper-individualism persists. The Gospel is only about individual salvation, ignoring social components of the Bible, including Jesus' ministry and teaching. Ignoring social issues like persistent, systemic racism is justified by this hyper-spiritualized gospel, and colorblindness at best, blatant racism at worst, is accepted as the Christian alternative to effective social action and holistic gospel witness.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Are We There Yet? Pressing Pause for Common Pitfalls

Learning about the history of racism in America can be shocking, paralyzing, angering, eye-opening, and guilt-inducing. For many, it has a motivating effect, leaving one with a distinct sense of wanting to do something, but not knowing exactly what to do. This passion, especially when coupled with guilt, can be a dangerous sustaining source when fighting racism. Detached from thoughtful theory and practice, many well-intentioned efforts at racial reconciliation go awry and reproduce the same centralization of whiteness that enables racism to persist. Racial reconciliation becomes unconsciously co-opted for white self-actualization, and in the church, white spiritual actualization. This chapter functions as a kind of pause button to develop a thoughtful, thorough, and sustainable activism before carelessly jumping to white saviorism, as well-intentioned as it may be. I will address common critiques of racial reconciliation initiatives at large, and the particular critique of racial reconciliation work in the Christian context. In the remaining chapters, I will then dive into our theological and practical next steps.

#### *The Narrative of Racial Progress*

For many, Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 presidential election, built upon the campaign slogan of "hope", signaled the inauguration of a post-racial era in the United States. It seemed to be proof that the U.S. was finally progressing past its ugly history of slavery and racism and discarding systems of race-based ideology. Donald

Trump's subsequent presidential campaign and eventual election in 2016, built upon racist rhetoric, xenophobia, and general intolerance, and supported by groups like the alt-right—white supremacists who promote an all-white nation state—came as an impossible shock to those who were assured of the United States' post-racial status.

These reaction to Obama's election, and Trump's subsequently, can be explained by what sociologists call the narrative of racial progress—the common concept that racism's downfall is guaranteed, and will come through a “linear process of slow, yet inevitable, improvement”.<sup>1</sup> This optimistic and simplistic narrative is the guiding framework for most work on race across academic disciplines, and within Christian thought on the topic. This narrative is tempting, particularly for Christians who profess to operate with an orientation of hope in the Kingdom of God and believe in God's active and powerful participation in the world through the Holy Spirit. However, this comfortable narrative of racial progress does not fit the convoluted historical narrative traced in chapter one. It negates the cost that must be incurred to achieve racial progress, and in doing so, does not foster faithful hope in God's redemptive will, but naïve optimism in the inherent goodness and capability of people and society. The reality is, though progress has been made in some arenas of racial injustice, racist ideology of white supremacy has persevered, adapting itself to new social and cultural realities, and morphing into new, more discreet manifestations, as illustrated in chapter one. The hypothesis that racism will inevitably fade does not fit the historical data, nor a Christian understanding of human nature.

<sup>1</sup> Victor Erik Ray et al., “Critical Race Theory, Afro-Pessimism, and Racial Progress Narratives,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 3, no. 2 (2017): 147.

The problematic implications of narratives of racial progress are numerous, the first being a tendency to passivity and inaction. If racial progress is assumed, individuals and groups need not take personal responsibility to enact social equity and racial justice, allowing an apathetic culture of bystanders to flourish. Secondly, if we interpret events and realities through a lens of progress, we may easily miss what is just a “reshuffling of relations in a racialized social system,”<sup>2</sup> believing we have sufficiently addressed the problem as we are familiar with it. This orientation allows racist ideology to adapt and persist, manifesting itself in new social realities, norms, and structures, as history has shown. We address symptoms, missing the root issue entirely, because we believe the problem must be gone since progress is inevitable and irreversible. The modern phenomenon of mass incarceration (outlined in chapter one) captures the devastating capacity of allowing racist ideology to re-manifest itself if not properly addressed and given social space to persist.

### *Alternative Narratives*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was developed in the 1980s as an alternative narrative to those of racial progress. It began as “an attempt to identify the ways in which race had either been ignored or minimized in the study of law and legal institutions, and to point out the consequences of that ignorance.”<sup>3</sup> CRT offers a structural critique of racial inequality, focusing on the embedded nature of the racist ideology and white supremacy within the United States. At its heart is an understanding of race as a social

<sup>2</sup> Ray et al., 148.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Torres, “Critical Race Theory,” 2013.

construct used to control the distribution of power. Derrick Bell, considered one of the original developers of CRT, proposes the ‘racial realism’ thesis, which considers racism a “permanent structural feature of the United States.”<sup>4</sup> Not only has racist ideology been present in the United States’ social and political fabric since the country’s inception, but it has been central in controlling the distribution of resources. Therefore, racial progress is not inevitable, but convoluted and reversible. Advocates of CRT argue that that which appears to be racial progress may in fact just be a structural adaptation of the same myth of white supremacy to new social conditions, allowing racist ideology and its resultant racial inequalities to persist unquestioned. Such a narrative explains the history presented in chapter one, in which racist ideology has continued in the United States despite the discontinuation of the social system of slavery, taking on new forms, such as redlining, the war on drugs, or mass incarceration.

Another counter narrative to racial progress is Afro-pessimism, one stream of CRT. Afro-pessimism has some features that distinguish it from other forms of CRT, but it shares many features and a genealogy with other forms of CRT. Like CRT, Afro-pessimism accounts for the adaptation of slavery through history. It argues that the United States has not really abolished slavery, but that its racist ideology and social control has re-manifested throughout history into new social institutions. Like CRT, it also recognizes the centrality of racism to the fabric of the United States, particularly that “Western democratic ideals are predicated on the exclusion of racialized others.”<sup>5</sup> The key difference between Afro-pessimism and other streams of CRT, however, is that Afro-

<sup>4</sup> Ray et al., “Critical Race Theory, Afro-Pessimism, and Racial Progress Narratives,” 148.

<sup>5</sup> Ray et al., 150.

pessimism forgoes a narrative of white supremacy for that of antiblackness. Within the field of thought, white supremacy and antiblackness are treated as two distinct topics.

Most formulations of race-based systems of domination treat the subordination of specific racialized groups as branches off the tree of white supremacy... Afro-pessimism suggests that antiblackness is its own tree that intersects with white supremacy but is always operating by its own logic of dehumanizing blacks. Other racial groups achieve their subjectivity and citizenship through 'othering' blacks, because humanity is measured through distance from blackness.<sup>6</sup>

White supremacy is too universal to encompass the distinct racial prejudice experienced by black people in the United States, because blackness is consistently the most dehumanized and degraded of non-white racial groups. Though it may never be explicitly articulated, black people are socially never considered full citizens with equal rights, harkening back to the Three-Fifths Constitutional compromise of 1787 that only considered blacks to be three-fifths of a person. The narrative of antiblackness articulates how 'black' still equals 'slave' in the United States<sup>7</sup>, though its social and political manifestation has shifted over time. "It is a transformation of the social death of the slave into the civic death of the ghetto dweller as 'prison-slave-in-waiting.'"<sup>8</sup>

Other racial minorities can reject the narrative of white supremacy, and the assimilationist paradigms that come with it, while still adopting a narrative of antiblackness, in which they attempt to separate themselves from blackness. In other words, rejecting white supremacy does not inherently entail rejecting racist ideology about black people specifically—one can reject one and maintain the other, to their

<sup>6</sup> Ray et al., 151.

<sup>7</sup> Sebastian Weier, "Consider Afro-Pessimism," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 59, no. 3 (2014): 420.

<sup>8</sup> Weier, 420.

personal or collective cultural advantage. As a line of thought within CRT, Afro-pessimism explains the historical phenomenon traced in chapter one, but does so by further particularizing the black experience from that of other racial minorities, centralizing a narrative of antiblackness instead of white supremacy.

### *The Centrality of Whiteness*

The alternative narratives of critical race theory and Afro-pessimism make clear that narratives of racial progress operate as incognito assimilationist paradigms that “assume a common set of cultural standards” and glorify “the melting away of all original ethnic cultures and traditions,”<sup>9</sup> rather than their acceptance and celebration. Assimilationist paradigms fail to question the legitimacy of institutional power and cultural norms. As a result, whether purposefully or subconsciously, whiteness is centered as the norm to which everything and everyone else must adapt, perpetuating the myth of white superiority. Even the best-intentioned efforts to address racial inequality and work towards racial equity are deeply entangled around the centrality of whiteness.

Benevolence is often grounded upon an unarticulated White Savior Industrial Complex, in which racial minorities are further othered as the objects of help. Racial minorities are portrayed from a deficit perspective as lacking, in poverty, and being in need, while white people are seen as those who have, who are wealthy, and who, resultantly, are needed. This attitude toward benevolence can create a dangerous misjudgment between the needs as *perceived* by those in power, as opposed to *actual* needs as experienced by a community. Because white people are assumed to be needed

<sup>9</sup> Rod Janzen, “Five Paradigms of Ethnic Relations,” *Social Education* 58 (1994): 349–349.

and to have resources, mechanisms of helping are not adequately vetted to see if they actually meet real needs. Additionally, these mechanisms can operate along an assimilationist paradigm, in which a community's improvement is understood to the degree to which they conform to white or American cultural values. Such attitudes have existed since early Christian missionary interactions with Native Americans, in which antebellum benevolence relied heavily on "distancing rhetoric" that assumes an inherent, hierarchical difference between the privileged donor and the needy recipient.<sup>10</sup> Though benevolence is aimed at erasing inequality, it exists upon a foundation of othering and dehumanizing those helped, particularly racial minorities. While benevolence efforts may be well-intentioned, they may also cause harm when the mechanisms by which one is helping are not questioned, particularly without the input of the community.

The centrality of whiteness also manifests itself in what is called white guilt and white fragility. When confronted with the reality of racism in the United States, many white people feel a deep sense of guilt about the existing inequalities and injustices. However, this feeling of guilt can become the central narrative, and addressing racism becomes centralized upon erasing a sense of guilt, instead of comprehensively addressing injustice. Shelby Steele, author of *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* and a race relations expert, argues that the United States culture has swung from a culture of white supremacy to one of white guilt<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Theresa Strouth Gaul, Elias Boudinot, and Harriett Gold Boudinot, *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriett Gold and Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823-1839* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>11</sup> "White Guilt' and the End of the Civil Rights Era," NPR.org, n.d., <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5385701>.

which, ironically, maintains the problem of white centrality. White Fragility is, according to Robin DiAngelo,

a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.<sup>12</sup>

DiAngelo argues that White Fragility further centralizes the conversation about racism around whiteness by prioritizing a white person's comfort with the discourse. Racial prejudice can only be discussed within the parameters of white comfort, preventing necessary progress.

### *Christian Critiques of Racial Progress*

These perspectives of skepticism towards supposed moments of racial progress are not limited to the sociological sphere. Questions like, 'To what degree can white citizens of the United States be dis-embedded from the power of antiblack sentiment and the myth of white supremacy?' are being asked across disciplines, and increasingly within the Christian tradition on both the pastoral and theological levels. As much as Christians may wish to think faith has somehow set them outside the audience in question, the reality is that the cultural and social realities of the United States have deeply infected those in the church, as well as those outside of it. From a theological standpoint, Christians in their fallen human state are just as susceptible to the sin of racial prejudice and idolizing a narrative of white supremacy, intentionally or subconsciously.

<sup>12</sup> Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 57.

“Can White People Be Saved?” is the startling title of an essay by Willie James Jennings, an American theologian and associate professor of systematic theology and Africana studies at Yale University, which analyzes how “whiteness as a way of being in the world has been parasitically joined to a Christianity that is also a way of being in the world.”<sup>13</sup> Jennings is not posing a soteriological question, but rather a question of if the Christian tradition’s complicity in preserving racist ideology and centralizing whiteness can be unwound from what we now call Christianity, particularly of the white, evangelical variety. It is an abrasive question, but an important question to consider as Christians engage in the work of addressing racial injustice. Jennings’ first argument is that this fusion of whiteness and Christianity is largely unnoticed by the Christians that practice it—to address it is the first step in making theological progress.

Jennings articulates this centralization of whiteness through the language of maturity. “Whiteness is an invitation to a form of agency and a subjectivity that imagines life progressing toward what is in fact a diseased understanding of maturity, a maturity that invites us to evaluate the entire world by how far along it is toward this goal.” In the absence of land ownership, and the identity it secures, whiteness was developed to promote three movements of as indicators of mature identity formation: moving (1) from being owned to being an owner, (2) from being a stranger to being a citizen, and (3) from being identified with darkness to being identified as White.<sup>14</sup> Jennings outlines how each of these three standards—which have been mercilessly imposed on other racial and cultural groups through missions—have melded themselves with Christian theology, and

<sup>13</sup> Sechrest, Ramírez-Johnson, and Yong, *Can 'White' People Be Saved?*, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Sechrest, Ramírez-Johnson, and Yong, 35.

have become central to the understanding of mature Christian formation and development. Jennings does not think the centralization of whiteness, and its many ramifications, can be undone, but he does argue they can be redirected and redeemed by forming spaces that are no longer segregated. Jennings admits it is just the first step of many necessary to disentangle whiteness from Christianity, but advocates for intentionally weaving lives together that have been historically been segregated, inviting in those who are left behind by the values of ownership, citizenship, and whiteness.

Soong-Chan Rah examines this same centralization of whiteness in the North American church's "captivity to Western cultural trappings," calling the church too "embrace a new evangelicalism that is diverse and multiethnic."<sup>15</sup> Rah identifies racism as one of three Western cultural realities that has seeped its way into Christian theology and Church culture (alongside individualism and consumerism and materialism), labeling it "the residue of Western, White cultural captivity"<sup>16</sup> and "American's original and most deeply rooted sin."<sup>17</sup> Using the language of idolatry, he argues that white privilege, as the subtle expression of racism, is a system which centralizes and idolizes white, American society while marginalizing and relegating all other cultures. Whiteness is equated with being human, and becomes the standard to which all other cultures must progress, enabling white people to "construct the world in their own image...set[ting] standards for humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail."<sup>18</sup> Rah argues that

<sup>15</sup> Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*.

<sup>16</sup> Rah, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Rah, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Rah, 72.

centralizing of whiteness is an act of idolatry that worships the created instead of the Creator, and looks to oneself as the standard for values and norms.

Rah's conclusion is that, for predominantly white evangelical churches to experience spiritual revitalization, they must embrace a more multiethnic vision of Christianity that decentralizes whiteness. This expression of church welcomes the immigrant, embraces theology of corporate responsibility (liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, etc.) as normative instead of contextual, draws upon global and minority theological voices, rejects the draw of homogeneity, and learns from the African American and Native American communities' theological vision of suffering and celebration and the second generation's multiracial reality.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Diversity Initiatives: A Case Study of Sociological Theory*

This centering of whiteness and othering of blackness are often subtle, residing just beneath the surface of seemingly progressive and beneficial initiatives, making it all the more dangerous and difficult to uproot. A current example are 'diversity' initiatives, focused on increasing visible representation of racial minorities, particularly in positions of authority or influence. Diversity initiatives can produce positive outcomes, while still necessitating critical analysis and skepticism. From a racial progress perspective, diversity initiatives are helpful steps that inevitably further racial equity by increasing the representation of people of color at all levels of organizational authority. Critiques of racial progress narratives, however, compel us to question how diversity initiatives may be the products of white creation and deeply embedded with the myth of white

<sup>19</sup> Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*.

supremacy or antiblack sentiment. The immediate gains of such initiatives must be held in tension with the long-term consequences of enabling racist ideology and white supremacist ideas to persist.

Attention to the visible presence of diversity emphasizes the intent on the part of those in power (predominantly white people) rather than the actual impact of the initiative on people of color. Data shows that white people benefit more than minorities from diversity initiatives because racial minorities are treated as outside contributors or “add-ons” to white life.<sup>20</sup> Diversity initiatives promote a kind of consumption of black bodies;<sup>21</sup> instead of slavery-era exploitation of black bodies for labor or economic gain, white people use racial minorities to benefit from personal or organizational exposure and enrichment. People of color become tokens to prove an individual or organization’s open-mindedness or “wokeness.” Though they genuinely can educate their white counterparts about issues of racism, they are fundamentally silenced by unaltered structures centered around the myth of white supremacy and the dehumanization of black bodies.

The unspoken lie of diversity initiatives is that visible diversity necessarily equates to just distribution of power and resources across races. The centrality of whiteness is enabled to flourish because diversity initiatives “[position] all structural locations as equal, obfuscating the unique histories of oppressed racial groups. Individual or organizational avowals of support for ‘diversity’ are thus not necessarily declarations of support for racial equality.”<sup>22</sup> The specific privilege and superior social location allotted

<sup>20</sup> Weier, “Consider Afro-Pessimism.”

<sup>21</sup> Weier.

<sup>22</sup> Ray et al., “Critical Race Theory, Afro-Pessimism, and Racial Progress Narratives,” 153.

to whiteness is never questioned, and the particularity and severity of black oppression by white supremacy is never acknowledged. These initiatives, instead of facilitating the deconstruction of racial ideology and enabling racial equity, instead allow white superiority to flourish undetected beneath a multicolored mask. The presence of non-white faces at the table is superficial and ultimately meaningless without intentional action to alter the most foundational levels of thought and structure. Afro-pessimism would suggest, too, that these initiatives favor representation of minorities who are deemed hierarchically further from blackness (i.e. closer to whiteness), disproportionately aiding non-black individuals and communities, while never adequately addressing the injustices experienced specifically by black people and communities. The universalizing of the racial minority reality further serves to perpetuate a racial hierarchy predicated on antiblackness, under the guise of leveling the playing field.

Ironically, this hyper-focus on observable diversity produces a kind of colorblindness. An environment can appear more aware of and sensitive to issues of race while enabling its leaders to “wash their hands” of racial ideology and injustice, all while ignore their ongoing existence. When they come up against white fragility, diversity initiatives cater to white comfort—white people can ask questions and learn when convenient, but still have the majority influence to compartmentalize minority voices for personal edification instead of structural change. Ignorance and passivity thrive, since those in power have already made well-intentioned efforts to diversify and include people of color, necessitating no further action or sacrifice on the part of the privileged and powerful. New “woke” ideas are accepted as peripheral beliefs, and only to the extent in which they fit within and substantiate the preexisting core value structure of white superiority. Black

representation is inhibited from ever changing this personal or organizational core value system. Black people are put in the position of bearing the burden of educating non-blacks on the realities of modern racism, rather than the responsibility resting on white individuals, the creators and perpetrators of racist ideology.

### *What Are We To Do?*

On the whole, sociologists and Christians alike paint a bleak picture. Christians can faithfully lament with these narratives of the world's brokenness—the Psalms, for example, provide a beautiful template of how one can faithfully lament that which is fundamentally opposed to God's goodness. However, within the Christian tradition, lament is held in tension with the hope of Christ's proclamation of the Kingdom of God that

bring[s] good news to the oppressed...bind[s] up the brokenhearted...  
proclaim[s] liberty to the captives...the opening of the prison to those who are  
bound” and “proclaim[s] the year of the LORD's favor, / and the day of vengeance  
of our God; / to comfort all who mourn.<sup>23</sup>

Christians live within the tension of an already, not-yet Kingdom, that Christ not only speaks of, but embodies as God Incarnate on earth. His crucifixion affirms the depth of brokenness in the world, while his resurrection testifies to the power of God to redeem what is broken, to right what is wrong, and to enact justice and mercy. The Christian hope for redemption of both personal and societal evils does not rest in a naïve optimism about human ability or goodness—some narrative of inevitable progress— but in the power of God as manifested in Christ and indwelling through the Holy Spirit.

<sup>23</sup> Isa. 61:1-2 (NRSV).

Reconciliation is now possible across all relationships—with God, neighbor, and all of creation—not because the world is inevitably oriented to improve (in fact, Scripture foreshadows increased disorder and wrongdoing before Christ’s second coming) but because faith is placed in a God who is “making all things new.”<sup>24</sup> Jesus’ resurrection, which first required his violent death on the cross, is proof that this is not a naïve or ignorant hope that ignores the broken realities of the world, but one that fully accounts for even the most entangled and ugly sins, like that of racism. If Christ’s atoning sacrifice and resurrection to defeat the powers of evil is not sufficient to ultimately heal the evils of racism in all its individual and systemic manifestations, then we must question the sufficiency of Christ in all arenas of life.

This orientation of hopeful reliance upon God’s redemptive will for all of creation, and His ongoing work to fulfill it, manifested in Christ’s ministry, death, and resurrection, and now accomplished through the Holy Spirit’s indwelling, is crucial when engaging the in discussion of racism in the church. The tendency toward discouragement and becoming overwhelmed by the complex, ever-shifting narrative of white supremacy burns-out the best prepared advocates. On the other side of the spectrum, Satan loves nothing more than well-intentioned Christians attempting to fix the world’s problems in their own strength, without continually seeking God’s will and without taking proper steps to exercise discernment and take thoughtful, constructive action. These guilt-reducing efforts of self-reliance may make us feel better about ourselves and give the appearance of making great strides, while we have actually been running in place on a

<sup>24</sup> Rev. 21:5 (NRSV).

treadmill, and potentially inflicting more harm in the process.<sup>25</sup> Our fight for racial equity must be grounded by thoughtful, Spirit-led theory and application.

Now that we have paused to consider the complexity of addressing racial injustice, and humbly recognized that our good intentions do not necessarily equate to redemptive outcomes, we can take the next steps to positively address racism in the church. The purpose of chapter three will be to more fully flesh out the uniquely Christian positive perspective on racial justice and reconciliation, while chapter four will be to explore how disciples of Christ can practically apply this hope of the Gospel to the work of racial justice and reconciliation.

<sup>25</sup> Steve Corbett, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012).

## CHAPTER THREE

### Your Kingdom Come: On Earth as It Is in Heaven

Having addressed some of the common pitfalls that plague anti-racism efforts, it is now appropriate to begin constructing a comprehensive theological framework of why and how the church should address racial prejudice. As illustrated by Chapter Two, even the best-intentioned attitudes and practices can go awry and perpetuate the problem, further complexifying the manifestations of racism. Good intentions do not necessarily equate to redemptive outcomes. To anyone with an adequate knowledge of the doctrine of sin, this conclusion comes as no surprise—sin means that human beings are wired to instinctively serve the self and reject God’s intended order. The solution to our sinful nature is not good works or self-improvement, but faith in Jesus Christ’s atoning sacrifice and resurrection. Hence this sinful propensity of the human will, Christians who desire to engage with anti-racist advocacy must constantly orient their efforts around this proper understanding of God, and consequentially, of other and of self—to preach the Gospel to yourself every day. This theological framework will serve as the foundation from which to develop practical and effective solutions that address the complex and systemic manifestations of racism. This chapter will focus only on a theological approach, while chapter four will develop practical strategies.

### *The Imago Dei Theological Framework*

I want to begin by outlining an approach that is tempting and historically popular, but ultimately inadequate if applied in isolation from a more robust, communal vision of God's work. I will first expound the *imago Dei* theological approach and its constructive applications, before explaining its insufficiencies to address the systemic realities of racism in the United States. Latin for “image of God,” the term *imago Dei* is used in Christian theology to capture the created reality of human nature in the image and likeness of God.<sup>1</sup> The *imago Dei* understanding of human nature serves as a theological equalizer across the variety of human difference—culture, ethnicity, sex and gender, age, ability, race, and more. It is one of the most frequently used theological frameworks by which racism is addressed as a sin against neighbor and God, and Christians are exhorted to avoid racial prejudice. To judge another based upon race is to create a self-centered, self-serving, arbitrary, racialized human hierarchy in which some are created with more inherent dignity and value than others. Racial prejudice is a sin of pride against neighbor, in which one does not love one's neighbor of color as one ought. The perpetrator obfuscates their created identity and prioritizes one's personal judgment of another above God's. Additionally, it is a sin against God in which one and rejects God's created order and fails to properly honor and love the reflection of God in the other.

Though the *imago Dei* is certainly an important theological tenant and has some constructive appeals to address racial injustice, the *imago Dei* framework is an inadequate one apart from a more holistic theology. For starters, it has historically proven insufficient to address racism. Early Christian slaveholders in the 1600s and onward

<sup>1</sup> Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6 (NRSV).

likewise believed all human beings, regardless of race, were created in the *imago Dei*; and yet, they still theologically justified not only slaveholding, but the many horrific abuses that accompanied the practice. The *imago Dei* was framed as the spiritual reality of human nature, which could be separated from a person's temporal social reality.<sup>2</sup> The *imago Dei* served as a spiritual equalizer from which social inequality could be extricated. Ironically, it can thus function as the Christian theological form of colorblindness, that wrongly centralizes spiritual equality, while ignoring social, economic, and political inequality. The *Imago Dei* solution to racism attempts to quiet racial discomfort and tension without engaging in theological solutions to the unspoken narrative of white superiority and its ongoing impact.

Outside of the failure of *imago Dei* reasoning to end racial prejudice and injustice, the theological framework targets the symptoms of racism, not the root. As explained in Chapter One, racist ideology did not originate in a vacuum as a conceptual account of human nature; race was socially constructed to justify preexisting economic exploitation of people who so happened to have a different skin color. To ground anti-racist efforts in a theology of the *imago Dei* is to inaccurately understand and address the problem of racism in the United States, particularly to deny its economic roots. To address racism is to not only address how racist ideology negates the theology of the *imago Dei*, but also to theologically confront greed, the prosperity Gospel, fear, power, the separation of the spiritual and temporal, privatization, and individualism. Racism is a wicked problem that requires complexifying the solution, not simplifying it. An understanding of the *imago Dei* addresses one strand of the web of racism, but is not sufficient on its own. The

<sup>2</sup> Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 23.

remainder of the Chapter Three will outline existing theological frameworks and their application to anti-racist efforts, while also synthesizing them to create a holistic and unified theological foundation from which to design practical efforts.

### *A Prophetic Vision of the Kingdom of God*

Crucial to constructing a theological framework for anti-racism efforts that centralizes the marginalized is to first deconstruct the heretical notions of Christendom that have enabled ongoing oppression and marginalization by distorting the church's understanding and embodiment of God's reign. The concept of Christian Empire began with the reign of Emperor Constantine (AD 306 – 337), when he instituted Christianity as the official religion of the powerful and expansive Roman Empire. In uniting the church and the state, formerly persecuted Christians finally experienced relief, but relief that stood in clear contrast with Jesus' repeated exhortations to expect persecution as the fruit of faith. In AD 325, Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea, chronicled this shift in Christian history in such a way to institute this new barometer of prosperity. Writing after Constantine's death, Eusebius constructed a history of the emperor undergirded by divine ordination and favor, justifying the conflation of the kingdom of God with an earthly empire.

In seeking to end the persecution of Christians, Eusebius allowed Constantine to fundamentally alter what membership in the church looked like. Instead of joining the church intentionally, sacrificially, and in opposition to empire, membership in the church now depended upon citizenship in, and allegiance to, one of the most powerful and historically oppressive empires in the world.<sup>3</sup>

This vision of a nationalistic, prospering Christendom stands in stark contrast with the vision of God's Kingdom as displayed in the Gospels. In his book *Reading the Gospels*

<sup>3</sup> Charles and Rah, *Unsettling Truths*, 58.

*Wisely*, Pennington makes two key assertions about the New Testament use of the word gospel (*euangelion*). First, is its reference to

the oral proclamation about Jesus the Christ (meaning the anointed Davidic King)—who he was; what he accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection; the promise of his future return to establish God’s reign; and the concomitant call to repent and have faith...a proclamation of God’s grace and the invitation to hope.<sup>4</sup>

This may sound like the familiar spiritual dimension associated with the gospel.

However, Pennington further propounds that the Gospel as proclamation of Jesus as King and establisher of God’s reign would have had unmistakable political—not just spiritual—salvific implications in the Greco-Roman world. The New Testament authors “define the ‘gospel’ as Jesus effecting the long-awaited return of God himself as King” and “inaugurating God’s comprehensively restorative kingdom.”<sup>5</sup> This kingdom vision is grounded in the eschatology of Isaiah, particularly chapters 40-66, which describe God enacting both spiritual and earthly redemption. God comforts the brokenhearted, judges God’s enemies, and forgives sins; but God also heals the blind and deaf, helps the poor, and frees the enslaved and imprisoned. This Kingdom that Christ proclaims and embodies has both spiritual and social significance that necessitates addressing injustice against God, but also injustice against neighbor, and the social and political systems that stand opposed to the restorative and just Kingship of Christ.

As Christians, we are now “in Christ”—followers of the Way, no longer identified with our sinful human nature or earthly identifiers. As such, in our unity with Christ, like

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Baker Books, 2012), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Pennington, 16–17.

Him we are transferred from one realm of power to another: from Sin to Spirit, from Death to Life.

Being ‘in Christ’ and living within the story of Jesus, Jesus-followers are participants in that process of divine triumph, whose lives are continually to be transformed by the Spirit as miniature advertisements and embodiments of the eschatological rectification of the whole of the created order, to the glory of God.<sup>6</sup>

This narrative framework for understanding the Gospel is called the apocalyptic matrix or interpretation of the Christ event, which some scholars argue is the primary theological framework used by the apostle Paul in his letters. In Christ, we become ambassadors of this restorative Kingdom of God, both a sign of what has already come in Christ, and a foretaste of what is to come with Christ’s return. Believers participate in Christ’s new creation through acts of self-giving love in community—by dying to self with Christ and becoming individual pockets of God’s transformative, redemptive power in all of Creation (called participationist eschatology).

Though elements of the ‘already-not yet’ Reign of God, which Christians are called to embody in unity with Christ, will remain a mystery until Christ comes to restore a new heaven and a new earth,<sup>7</sup> Scripture gives many indications. One of the most important theological shifts about God’s reign from the Old Testament to the New, is a new “barometer” of divine favor, in which suffering and persecution become the signposts of God’s Kingdom, in place of wealth (or land) and prosperity.<sup>8</sup> The Beatitudes of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 would not have been received as by the

<sup>6</sup> Bruce W. Longenecker and Todd D. Still, *Thinking Through Paul: A Survey of His Life, Letters, and Theology* (Zondervan, 2014), 302.

<sup>7</sup> Rev. 21:1 (NRSV).

<sup>8</sup> Charles and Rah, *Unsettling Truths*, 48.

crowds as comforting statements, but as offensive to their Messianic expectation of God's Kingdom. The political implications of the Gospel would have entailed an expectation of a triumphant Messiah reestablishing the Davidic kingship and the empire of Israel, and restoring the land to the Jewish people by overthrowing the Roman Empire. Instead Jesus focuses his attentions on the margins, blessing the poor in the spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and lastly, those who are persecuted.

Jesus harps on this point of persecution, elaborating in two more verses that "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."<sup>9</sup> Jesus reinterprets the Old Testament prophetic history to foreshadow the persecution he is about to endure as the Messiah, and the upside-down reality of the Kingdom of God he is instituting. Being aligned with God's Kingdom no longer will manifest itself as favor in the worldly sense, but with that which is typically avoided.

This difference of Messianic expectation is at the heart of Jesus' intense confrontation with Peter—Peter rebukes Jesus for teaching that the Messiah will suffer, be rejected, and killed. Jesus, in response, rebukes Peter, saying "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not divine things, but on human things."<sup>10</sup> To misunderstand the values of God's Kingdom and expect prosperity,

<sup>9</sup> Matt. 5:11-12 (NRSV).

<sup>10</sup> Matt. 16:23 (NRSV).

triumph, approval, comfort, and wealth is not a spiritually neutral act, but one that acts in opposition to God’s redemptive work in Christ; it is to align oneself with Satan.

Philosopher Arthur Holmes summarized the prophetic vision as *shalom*—a world characterized by peace that necessitates “the full prosperity of a people of God.”<sup>11</sup> This peace is dependent upon justice, without which there can be no real peace, and vice versa. Such a Kingdom vision is grounded in the Gospel of reconciliation, in which God “reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”<sup>12</sup> As God reconciled us as the unholy other to God’s self, so too are Christians intended to reflect the reconciliation of those who are most “different” or “other” to one another.<sup>13</sup> *Shalom* occurs when, in Christ, we become ambassadors and agents of this reconciliation in the world. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul expounds the socially reconciliatory implications of the Gospels when addressing the ethnic divide between Jews and Gentiles.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy

<sup>11</sup> George R. Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 56.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor. 5:18-20 (NRSV).

<sup>13</sup> Teresa Okure, “‘The Ministry of Reconciliation’ (2 Cor 5: 14–21): Paul’s Key to the Problem of ‘the Other’ in Corinth,” *Mission Studies* 23, no. 1 (2006): 105–121.

temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.<sup>14</sup>

In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul similarly describes the unity to which the Christian community is called, using the extended metaphor of a body.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many ...If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”...If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.<sup>15</sup>

Paul extends Christ’s reconciling power beyond the ethnic divide between Jews and Gentiles to all include forms of social difference as well, referencing “slave and free.” In Galatians 3:26-29, Paul shares an even more radical iteration of this social reconciliation, explaining how in Christ, all are grafted into covenantal relationship with God and heirs to the promises given to Abraham, previously reserved only for the Jews. Paul explains that “...in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

This social reconciliation is not just a good moral norm, but is foundational to a holistic Christian witness to God’s character, and the validity of God’s power in Christ,

<sup>14</sup> Eph. 3:13-22 (NRSV).

<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor. 12:12-14;17-21;26 (NRSV).

as manifested in community. Following his explanation of the mystery of the Gospel that has been revealed in Christ, Paul exhorts the church in Ephesus to

lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called...making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.<sup>16</sup>

As God has designed humanity to be both body and spirit, as Christ has united divinity and humanity, and as God has grafted in all people to God's one covenantal promise, so too should the church be a united, indivisible "one." This is not a uniform oneness that requires assimilation but is made more powerful by spanning that which is seemingly most at odds. Paul goes on to say that the church's ability to reflect the unifying power of God is a sign of spiritual maturity, and a testimony to the watching, skeptical world of the power of God and the truth of the Gospel.

This unifying power in which Paul calls believers to walk stems from God's very essence, reflected in the act of Creation, in which God lovingly united God's self to that which God created.<sup>17</sup> In John's Gospel account, Jesus prays

that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.<sup>18</sup>

The church is designed to reflect the relational unity which is at the core of the Trinitarian God: the constant, self-giving love of each person within the Trinity to one another. The

<sup>16</sup> Eph. 4:1;3-5 (NRSV).

<sup>17</sup> Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Westminster John Knox Press Louisville, KY, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Jn. 17:21-23 (NRSV).

unity of the body of Christ is not just ‘proof’ that the church is set apart because of God’s action on her behalf, but that the Christian, Trinitarian God is set apart and distinct from all other articulations of divinity: not just capable of being loving, but whose essence cannot be anything but self-giving, unifying love. The costliness of the church’s disunity is not only high for the world, but marks a disgusting misrepresentation of God.

The argument that a focus on the gospel’s implications for social justice is as a distraction from evangelism as the real work of Christian witness is Scripturally unsupported, detracts from the overall effectiveness of Christian witness, and paints an incomplete picture of God’s will for God’s church, and most disquieting, God’s character. When the church fails to embody Christ’s ministry of reconciliation, we not only hurt ourselves and those we desire to know God; we create an idol for ourselves and the world of a God who is less than God is—a God who does not demand complete and total surrender to God’s redemptive will, and who allows personal comfort to trump the righteousness to which we are called in Christ.

### *Spiritual and Social: Two Sides of the Kingdom Coin*

As this call to radical social reconciliation suggests, this upside-down Kingdom which Christ ushers in is marked by spirituality that is intrinsically social. Liberation theology, which is commonly attributed to Gustavo Gutiérrez’s seminal text, *A Theology of Liberation*, asserts that to proclaim Christ is to proclaim “his integral liberation”—that “no dimension of human existence—which itself is lived in the midst of complex social situations—escapes the condition of being a disciple of Jesus.”<sup>19</sup> To be a disciple of

<sup>19</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez and Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Muller, *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 2015), 2.

Jesus, which is to identify oneself as a citizen of the Kingdom of God, cannot be divorced from political action to defend and assert the human rights of the poor. When solidarity with the poor—affirming their dignity, fighting for their justice, uplifting their voices, and empowering their actions—is not embodied in the church, the church is capable of “producing clamorous situations of injustice, social inequality, and violence.”<sup>20</sup> To act in solidarity alongside the “least of these”—the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned<sup>21</sup>—is to align oneself with Christ and His Kingdom.

Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the key figures of the Social Gospel movement in the early twentieth century, similarly argued that, though the social ends of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection cannot be an end unto themselves, they are a logically and unavoidably interwoven with the hope of the kingdom of God. Jesus “was not a Greek philosopher or Hindu pundit teaching the individual the way of emancipation from the world and its passions, but a Hebrew prophet preparing men for the righteous social order”<sup>22</sup> that would embody the hope of the Kingdom of God. This understanding of Jesus, as God Incarnate united perfectly with human nature, the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, and the inaugurator of God’s reign—not one of Jesus as purely a social reformer or respectable teacher—is what led Rauschenbusch to argue that in the ethics of the Kingdom of God “All human goodness must be social goodness.” God’s Kingdom is one that revolves around the reality of love that begins with God’s self, and the fellowship it creates.

<sup>20</sup> Gutiérrez and Muller, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Matt. 25:35-40 (NRSV).

<sup>22</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (Macmillan, 1907), 55.

Peter Goodwin Heltzel ethically responds the privatization and individualism of faith in the United States in a manner similar to that of Rauschenbusch. Heltzel maintains that a Christian ethic is meant to be both personal and social. Drawing from Tim Keller's *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*, Heltzel explains how what is typically translated as "righteousness" in Scripture—associated with personal piety—is more accurately translated at "social justice" when paired with *mishpat*, or "justice."<sup>23</sup> The church in the United States skews strongly towards personal piety in place of, instead of alongside, collective responsibility. Taking into account this cultural slants towards individualism and privatization, Heltzel suggests prophetic ethics "as a model of Christian ethics that discerns and partners with the Holy Spirit's movement in [the] world, transforming lives and communities, witnessing to Christ and the kingdom, and holding out hope for the restoration of God's good creation."<sup>24</sup>

As its name suggests, prophetic ethics is rooted in the prophetic witness of the Old Testament, and Jesus as the "revolutionary prophet"<sup>25</sup> whose ethic we are to imitate in the power of the Spirit. The prophets "deeply feel the pain of the people and the pathos of God, and seek to disturb the peace of the powerful to address the people's pain." They continually "criticize royal power and energize people to fight for justice"<sup>26</sup>. This prophetic act of speaking truth to power does not end with the prophetic books, but is continued in Jesus' Incarnational ministry. When officially proclaiming his identity as the

<sup>23</sup> Ps. 33:5 is an example in which "social justice" is an appropriate replacement for the translation "righteousness."

<sup>24</sup> Steve Wilkens, ed., *Christian Ethics: Four Views* (InterVarsity Press, 2017), 165.

<sup>25</sup> Wilkens, 172.

<sup>26</sup> Wilkens, 171.

Messiah and Son of God in the temple, Jesus uses Isaiah 61:1-2 to declare the beginning of the Sabbath Jubilee Year, in which, slaves were to be freed, debts cancelled, the land allowed to lie fallow, and the land (wealth) returned to its original owner.<sup>27</sup> The prophets of the Old Testament, and Jesus, the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, are deeply concerned with restorative justice, which entails the communal restoring of relationship and resources alongside, and as a consequence of, the internal transformation of an individuals' heart. The Law, the Prophets, the early church, and most importantly, Jesus, all demonstrate that God's Kingdom is concerned with both eternal and earthly realities; love of God is inextricably linked with love of neighbor; the Great Commission always entails ministering in word (evangelism) and in deed (mercy and justice).

Heltzel particularly draws upon Micah 6:8 as his Scriptural foundation for the practices of prophetic ethics: "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." To "act justly" is to participate in faith-rooted organizing: gathering people together to address the structural sources of oppression. To "love mercy" is to practice embodied solidarity with the poor, oppressed, and marginalized, in imitation of Christ's general embodied solidarity with humankind in the incarnation, and his specific solidarity with the outcasts of society in his ministry. As addressed in Liberation Theology, compassionate solidarity is to make the struggles of those on the margins our struggles, despite personal inconvenience or sacrifice. Finally, to "walk humbly with God in prayer" is to acknowledge that to be transformed moral agents for the moral norms of biblical justice and righteousness, we need the Holy Spirit's guidance to reveal God's Kingdom vision. Through prayer, we are not only

<sup>27</sup> Lev. 25:23-24 (NRSV).

spiritually sanctified and reconciled to God, but our hearts are aligned with and empowered to enact God's will for communal sanctification and restoration.

### *Theology of Abundance*

One of the social inequalities of racism, which our theological framework must address, is that of wealth disparity across race in the United States. In his article addressing the topic of reparations—the political justice proposal of paying economic amends to descendants of slaves to compensate for the 250 years of uncompensated labor under slavery—Ta-Nehisi Coates outlines some of the most striking economic realities along the racial divide. The income gap between black and white households has only minorly fluctuated since 1970, and the percentages of children that have grown up in poor neighborhoods has not changed in a generation: 62% of black children and only 4% of white children.

The Pew Research Center estimates that white households are worth roughly 20 times as much as black households, and that whereas only 15 percent of whites have zero or negative wealth, more than a third of blacks do. Effectively, the black family in America is working without a safety net. When financial calamity strikes—a medical emergency, divorce, job loss—the fall is precipitous.<sup>28</sup>

The subject of reparations is an important one and will be further addressed in chapter four. However, it is worth mentioning that the case for reparations was frequently considered and acted upon in the early foundation of the United States. Notably, Quakers in New York, New England, and Baltimore went so far as to make “membership contingent upon compensating one's former slaves.”

<sup>28</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, n.d., <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

As the history of racism (traced in chapter one) reveals, greed and economic exploitation have consistently been the driving forces maintaining racist ideology. Even though many Southerners were morally or religiously unsure about the ethical nature of slavery in the early 1700s, their economic dependence on it to maintain the agriculture industry made owning slaves indispensable. Instead of first aligning first Christian doctrine to the character and moral imperatives of God, particularly as revealed in Jesus, theology and exegesis of the Bible were consistently misused to support the practice and bolster the institutions that relied upon the slave trade. These various theologies were born out of an economic practicality grounded upon the principle of scarcity, instead of a theology of abundance that trusts in God's power to provide sufficiently.

This tendency towards scarcity and fear is not a new development in the human psychology. The Gospel accounts of Jesus feeding the 4,000 and 5,000 from a few fish and loaves of bread demonstrate that even the apostles—those who interacted with and knew Jesus most intimately, and witnessed his countless miracles—quickly forget God's power to provide when every logical and practical analysis say there isn't enough to go around. However, both the Old Testament and New, are full of stories of God's abundant provision, and the exhortation to remember that God can and will provide, if they would only trust God's power and remember God's faithfulness. For example, in 1 Kings 17, God keeps a widow's jars of flour and oil from running empty until the rain comes, replenishing them enough every day to feed Elijah, and the woman, and her family.

One of the most famous examples is that of God's provision of manna for the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Every day, God provides just enough for that day and each family's specific needs. This story has two different

functions. The first is as a theology of abundance, in which Israel and the reader are reminded once again to trust in God's faithfulness and power to provide. The history captures God's character, as a loving and attentive shepherd who will provide for the wandering and helpless flock, but particularly God's distinct nature as Creator. If anyone can be trusted to provide, it is the Creator God who creatively and powerfully creates out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. As Creator, God is set apart from the created; that which is created may temporarily satisfy one's needs, but ultimately is not powerful enough to upset the normal laws of distribution of scarce resources. God, on the other hand, can provide when it seems logically impossible, whether it be God the Father raining bread from the sky in the Old Testament, or Jesus Christ, the Son of God, multiplying a few fish and loaves of bread to feed thousands in the New Testament.

Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. The one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed. And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning."<sup>29</sup>

The second function of the Exodus history of God's provision is as a morally-formative narrative in which Israel and the reader are habituated to approach resources differently in light of who God is. In the economics of God's Kingdom, abundant provision does not equate stockpiling or accumulating wealth; God's abundant provision comes in the form of daily sufficiency that can be trusted day by day. The Israelites cannot save manna from one day to the next—any from the day before rots and is overrun

<sup>29</sup> Ex. 16:15-19 (NRSV).

with maggots by morning. Instead, each is given just enough to satisfy for the day, and must trust that God will provide again the next day.

Additionally, the Israelites must trust that God will provide in light of particularities. First, Exodus 16 goes on to outline that God will provide a double portion on the sixth day that the Israelites can save in order to obey God's command to rest on the Sabbath. God provides uniquely in order to enable faithful obedience to all of God's commands—but it requires faith that this special provision will not rot as the daily, general provision does. Secondly, God does not provide the same exact amount to each person, so that those who better distribute or save their resources accumulate wealth overtime. God provides enough to satisfy each person according to their needs, but without leftovers. Imagine if the Israelites began to disregard God's command to gather one omer each—other individuals would then be in want if the stipulations for God's provision were not obeyed, while that which was hoarded would go to waste. God's provision is only enough if we live from a place of faith in God's daily sufficiency and power to provide, and if we live to meet needs, not satisfy wants. Only from this place of faith can generosity and communal flourishing for all be possible, because that which is gathered is rightly acknowledged as both sufficient and a gift from the Giver, not personally owned to be accumulated for selfish ends. Resources are always intended to be stewarded as communal gifts for the social flourishing of all, not rewards for individuals to hoard to their own advantage.

This call to generosity that trusts God's abundance, in place of greed that fears scarcity, is prominent in the New Testament teachings. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, the story of the widow's offering articulate both commend the widow's radical act of

trust in God's provision and abundance, embodied in her generosity, while also critiquing the greed of the religious leaders who perpetuate systemic poverty, as experienced by the widow.<sup>30</sup> In the Synoptic Gospels, when asked how to inherit eternal life, Jesus tells the rich young ruler "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."<sup>31</sup> Not only does this interaction highlight the interconnectedness of spiritual and economic liberation, but it calls those in the church to operate within a worldview of God's sufficiency and abundance as our treasure. This theology of God's abundance explains the early church's economic functioning, in which "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common,"<sup>32</sup> and Paul's campaign to the Galatians to raise funds in the Gentile churches to send to the struggling Jewish churches. In light of God's power to abundantly provide, the greed that results from fear of scarcity has no authority. There is no need to hoard or possess for oneself, and particularly no space for contextualizing generosity only within specific identity groups. As an understanding of God's abundance and a call to economic generosity is crucial to Paul's exhortations for unity amongst the Gentiles and Jews, so too is it necessary for approaching reconciliation between white and black Christians in the United States.

<sup>30</sup> Mk. 12:41-44; Lk. 21:1-4 (NRSV).

<sup>31</sup> Mk. 10:21 (NRSV).

<sup>32</sup> Acts 4:32 (NRSV).

### *Theology from the Margins*

When constructing a theological framework, it is important to consider whose perspective a theology prioritizes, and those around whom a theology is centered. The narrative of white supremacy centralizes whiteness as normative and relegates all other racial realities to the margins, and anti-blackness particularly disenfranchises the voice of black experience. The realm of Christian theology is not magically exempt from these powerful narratives. The white, cultural norms of the United States—such as individualism, and prosperity—have subtly, yet nefariously, yet, interwoven themselves into Christian theological frameworks and constructs, as the normalcy and centrality of whiteness has continued unquestioned.

In response to the ongoing abuse of power by the wealthy elite in Latin America, Peruvian Catholic priest Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote *A Theology of Liberation*—what would become the revolutionary inception of the Liberation theology movement. Gutiérrez sought to approach theology in such a way that would prioritize those who were the victims of economic and social inequality from unjust systems of power. One of the guiding theses of Gutiérrez’s work is God’s preferential option for the poor: the premise that, throughout Scripture, God judges the justice of a society by its treatment of the materially poor, and similarly vulnerable groups. In the Kingdom of God, as seen in the Law, the Prophets, and Jesus’ teaching and ministry, the poor are pulled from the margins, prioritized, and centralized. Scripture continuously affirms that is those on the margins who see God and the world rightly—those in bondage to money and power have a distorted perspective. The question for Gutiérrez, then, as one constructs and applies

theology, is “how to say to the poor, to the least of society, that God loves them?”<sup>33</sup> It is only through solidarity with the poor, marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed that the church and its theology can be liberated from bondage to the money and power that corrupt it and distort its embodiment of and witness to the Kingdom of God.

James H. Cone and W.E.B. DuBois are famous for similarly articulating an epistemological preference centralizing the black experience of oppression, suffering, and marginalization in the United States. In his short story, *Jesus Christ in Texas*, DuBois paints a picture of Jesus as a misidentified stranger, who confronts cultural norms, inciting chaos. Jesus historically aligned himself with the “other” of society—today, embodied in black community who are racially marginalized by narratives of white supremacy—and was misunderstood and misidentified by those aligned with the cultural norms of power and prosperity. Likewise, theology must operate from an accurate perspective of Christ as marginalized and misunderstood “other,” which necessitates the centralizing of black voices and experience in the context of the church in the United States.

For Cone, theology is tied to specific, historical contexts. Like Gutierrez, Cone asks the question “who sees the world as it really is?” By comparing Jesus’ cross to the lynching tree on which Black Americans have been martyred, Cone concludes that Black Christians participate in the reign of God insofar as they suffer, and are even unjustly killed, like Christ. Black Christians see the world rightly from the perspective of oppression, suffering, and martyrdom—like Christ—while white Christians claim Christ in word, but without truly being conformed to the image of Christ. Cone compares white

<sup>33</sup> Gutiérrez and Muller, *On the Side of the Poor*, 4.

Christians to Pontius Pilate, attempting to claim anonymity and innocence for murder and injustice against the “least of these.” Citing the poem “Christ Recrucified” by Countee Cullen, Cone imagines that “the South is crucifying Christ again” as they lynch black Americans. Cone firmly asserts that “the cross of Jesus and the lynching tree of black victims are not literally the same—historically or theologically,” and likewise affirms “the profound mutual love and solidarity that flow deeply between [Whites and Blacks]” and their shared history.<sup>34</sup> However, “The lynching tree is a metaphor for white American’s crucifixion of black people. It is the window that best reveals the religious meaning of the cross in our land.”<sup>35</sup> Our theology must orient us around the realities of those who are most socially conformed to the cross of Christ; in the United States, there is no question that this includes blacks, as well as other racial minorities who are likewise impacted by racist ideology, institutions, and systems. We must question our methods of exegesis and theological construction when they prop up narratives of Christendom instead of prophetic witness, and further oppress those whom Christ calls blessed by Kingdom standards.

### *Will We Surrender?*

In the Christian tradition reconciliation does not come without paying the cost for injustice. As Jesus had to pay the price for sin through his death on the cross, so too must the church be willing to pay the price for racism, including its economic dimensions. If we refuse to acknowledge racist ideology and root it out of our hearts, our practices, our

<sup>34</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Orbis Books, 2011), 165.

<sup>35</sup> Cone, 166.

systems, our churches, and our theology, we are intrinsically at odds with God's Kingdom vision of mercy and justice, of complete social and spiritual, communal and individual reconciliation and redemption. To acknowledge Christ as Lord requires total surrender to earthly comforts and treasures, and complete submission to his Kingdom-enacting will. It is painful, uncomfortable, and necessitates that we will lose the privileges and comforts—earned and unearned—that are near and dear to us. Yet, like the apostle Paul, we can rejoice amidst suffering, dance for joy amidst loss, and shout the glory of God from the rooftops because to know and be found in Him is enough to satisfy our emptiness. He is everything and promises more than we could ask or imagine, if we would only have the faith to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,”<sup>36</sup> including racist ideology in all its personal and systemic manifestations.

Do we take the call of Philippians 3:7-10 seriously? Do we believe in the sufficiency of Christ, not just to save our souls and get us into heaven, but to meet every desire of our heart and our every need? If so, then we will consider every privilege of whiteness and anti-blackness garbage, every dollar (inherited or earned) worthless, every source of power meaningless, all prosperity empty, and every security blanket of this world an illusion, in comparison to the “surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus [our] Lord.” It is for Christ's sake that we will readily and joyously “suffer the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that [we] may gain Christ and be found in him.

<sup>36</sup> Heb. 12:1 (ESV).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Faith Without Works Is Dead: The Call to be Antiracist

“So now what?” may be the question on many of your minds. In light of what I have learned, how can I, my family, church, organization etc. participate in the fight against racism? The purpose of this chapter is to provide practical applications of the theology outlined in chapter three, mindful of the common pitfalls of pursuing racial justice (chapter two), and aware of historical narrative in which we operate (chapter one). This chapter will provide a myriad of accessible avenues of pursuing anti-racism on the individual level, and a case study of one church’s contextualized efforts to be anti-racist.

#### *A.R.C. of Racial Justice: How to Be Anti-Racist*

In his book *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church’s Complicity in Racism*, author and historian Jemar Tisby introduces a three-part approach for “taking decisive action against discrimination”<sup>1</sup> and confronting racial ideology and prejudice on the individual and corporate levels: ARC (Awareness, Relationships, Commitment). It is not formulaic or one-size-fits-all, but presents an array of possible approaches that should occur alongside one another. Tisby frames this approach as necessarily anti-racist. In a country and culture that is heavily skewed in favor of propping up racially discriminatory structures, to be non-racist is not enough; one must

<sup>1</sup> Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 194.

commit to the proactive path of anti-racism, that does not merely criticize the current systems, but work to dismantle them and construct new, racially equitable structures.<sup>2</sup>

### *ARC: Awareness*

The first element of ARC is increasing one's awareness about the scope, complexity, and manifestations of racism. For my white readers, this is a call to actively bear the burden of educating yourself and those in your sphere of influence, rather than relying solely on black leaders and friends to be the primary educators on racism. The multitude of resources at our fingertips, whether it be websites, books, movies, documentaries, or podcasts, presents us with the unique opportunity to relieve the burden our black brothers and sisters carry everyday of explaining the reality of racism in America. For many black Americans, explaining and defending their lived experience as a black person to white critics to whom racism is an abstract concept instead of a deeply personal reality, is an intense and emotional investment of time and energy. Writing in the context of institutions of higher education, Critical Race Theorist William Smith coined the term "Racial Battle Fatigue" to explain

how the social environment (e.g., institutions, policies, practices, traditions, groups and individuals) perpetuates race-related stressors that adversely affect the health and academic achievement of Students of Color and the health, professional productivity, and retention among Faculty of Color.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas D. Hartlep and Daisy Ball, *Racial Battle Fatigue in Faculty: Perspectives and Lessons from Higher Education* (Routledge, 2019).

Whether on a college campus, or in any other social environment, black people are required to endure countless micro and macroaggressions, that have negative psychological, emotional, and psychophysiological symptoms. Pursuing life-long self-education and embracing the role of educating those in your sphere of influence is one helpful act of solidarity and advocacy.

Expanding your racial awareness can take a variety of forms. The list below offers a few suggestions. The first two activities focus on increasing awareness about your personal prejudice and racial identity. The next three focus on intentional action and exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences on the personal and systemic level, and the last activity prompts you to act by sharing your exposure with your sphere of influence, and participating in someone else's journey of racial awareness.

- Take Harvard's Race Implicit Association Test at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/user/agg/blindspot/indexrk.htm>.
- Check out "Be the Bridge" (BTB) at <https://bethebridge.com/>. Take advantage of their numerous resources, register for their Whiteness Intensive course, or host a nine-week racial reconciliation discussion group using BTB's "The Bridge to Racial Unity" discussion guides that you can order on their website.
- Follow diverse voices on social media, especially People of Color. Intentionally follow people with different social, religious, or political convictions, and pursue civil discourse. Be open to questioning your stances.

- Plan a vacation to Montgomery, Alabama and visit The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, The Legacy Museum, the Civil Rights Memorial, the Rosa Parks Museum, or the Freedom Rides Museum.
- Attend a conference focused on racial justice, such as The Justice Conference.
- Start a book club or host a watch party.

Below are listed possible resources with which to start. Consider using these resources as vehicle to facilitate group discussion and reflection. These books, movies, and podcasts span multiple decades of antiracist reflection and action and include various genres with which to engage with the topic of racism through different lenses and with increased specificity beyond the scope of this thesis. These lists are not exhaustive but include some of the most highly regarded resources within each category, drawing significantly from authors and creators of color.

### *Books*

- *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King Jr.
- *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism*, Jemar Tisby
- *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, Austin Channing Brown
- *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates
- *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, Bryan Stevenson
- *Kindred*, Octavia Butler

- *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation*, Latasha Morrison
- *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison
- *Beloved*, Toni Morrison
- *Let Justice Roll Down*, John M. Perkins
- *White Awake: An Honest Look at What It Means to Be White*, Daniel Hill
- *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, Beverly Daniel Tatum
- *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, Christian Smith and Michael O Emerson
- *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, Ibram X. Kendi
- *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi
- *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander
- *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*, Soong-Chan Rah

*Movies and Documentaries*

- *Just Mercy*
- *13TH*
- *Zootopia*

- *12 Years A Slave*
- *American Violet*
- *Selma*
- *Get Out*
- *Hidden Figures*
- *Remember the Titans*
- *Malcolm X*
- *42*
- *Marshall*
- *Black Panther*
- *The Hate U Give*

*Podcasts*

- “Pass the Mic”
- “The Liturgists Podcast, Episode 34 - Back and White: Racism in America”
- “Love Thy Neighborhood, #1: Where the Gospel Meets Racial Reconciliation”
- “Speaking of Racism”
- “Seeing White” series on “Scene On Radio”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> More resources can be found at <https://bethebridge.com/we-recommend/>.

### *ARC: Relationships*

The second pillar of ARC is relationships, which entails intentionally developing interracial relationships to combat our mostly homogenous social networks.<sup>5</sup> According to a study done by the Public Religion Research Institute, in a one-hundred friend scenario, the average white person had just one black friend, one Latinx friend, one Asian friend, and one mixed race friend. The average black person had eight white friends, two Latinx friends, and zero Asian friends.<sup>6</sup> Building cross-racial relationships does not mean singling out people of color and forcing friendship inorganically. It does mean thoughtfully changing daily routines to expose yourself to more racially diverse environments in which you may be the minority, and engaging organically within those environments, as you would in environments when you are in the majority. This could look like pursuing new activities at your local community center, going to a different gym, switching up your go-to coffee shops or restaurants, attending an intentionally multicultural church, or engaging intentionally with people of color already in your life. Within these environments and relationships, the potential for misunderstanding or offense is heightened, and the temptation can be to disengage. This is when it is most crucial to press into the relationship rather than withdrawal to what is comfortable or familiar. These are a few of my suggestions for engaging in interracial relationships:

- Operate with humility.

<sup>5</sup> Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 195.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Ingraham, "Three Quarters of Whites Don't Have Any Non-White Friends," *Washington Post*, n.d., <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/08/25/three-quarters-of-whites-dont-have-any-non-white-friends/>.

- It's okay to be uncomfortable. Embrace it.
- Don't overcomplicate it!
- Don't avoid conversations about race. Ask questions.
- Be quick to listen.
- Apologize if you accidentally say or do something offensive.
- If a non-white friend tells you that you have said or done something racially insensitive, regardless of your intent, listen to them, trust them even if you don't understand, and apologize. If you don't know why something was offensive, gently ask if they could explain it to you.
- Ask for and receive feedback.
- Read Be The Bridge's *16 Bridge-Building Tips for White People*.

### *ARC: Commitment*

The hardest, and perhaps most important, step of the ARC model is committing to action that reflects an internal attitude shift from pursuing antiracism, to becoming antiracist.

Developing awareness and relationships may create a burden for the struggles of others, but does that burden move you to act? Are you willing to set aside preferences and prestige to take the side of the marginalized and despised? More to the point, are you willing to address the systemic and institutional aspects of racism rather than solely work on the interpersonal level?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 196.

Commitment demands making antiracism a way of life that infuses how you live out your faith and invest your resources, whether that be time, talent, money, or something else.

Commitment will look different in every person's life, but a few examples of concrete action that Tisby suggests include:

- Vote in your local elections. In terms of impacting the criminal justice system, identify your local prosecutor. Ask about their perspectives on racial justice and the policies they advocate for to address injustice and inequality.
- Support the take-down of confederate monuments and flags in your area.
- Choose to read theological works by authors of color. Use theologians of color in your sermons, and authors of color for your discipleship group.
- When you witness them, courageously call-out microaggressions or overt racism.
- Participate in local marches or protests. Raise awareness for it and widen the net of exposure. Invite friends and people from your church to come with you. Post about it and start a conversation.
- Celebrate Juneteenth. Short for June nineteenth, Juneteenth is an unofficial holiday to commemorate the end of slavery in the United States in 1865. Support instituting Juneteenth as a national holiday.
- Attend a black church, or another minority congregation. Stay after the service to get to know people. Ask them what they love about their church. Ask them what problems they see in the church today. Talk with the pastor and explore opportunities to build relationships or partner in the community.

- Create something that speaks to racial justice. Write a blog. Create a piece of artwork. Write a research paper. Write a song. Write a sermon. Host a forum.
- Donate money to organizations that advocate for racial and social justice. A few trustworthy organizations who actively fight against systemic racism include Be the Bridge (BTB), Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), Innocence Project, The Marshall Project, Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), Vera Institute of Justice, Prison Fellowship, and Black Lives Matter.

### *Mosaic Waco: A Case Study*

Started in 2019, Mosaic Waco is an Acts 29 church plant committed to intentionally fostering a multicultural community that reflects the diversity of their Waco neighborhood, and acting with justice and mercy as witnesses of God’s Kingdom. This is just one example of how to faithfully apply the Gospel and pursue antiracism. Because racism is a wicked problem that manifests itself in complex and particularized ways, its solutions must necessarily be multi-faceted, complex, and contextualized. Antiracism is not one-size-fits-all.

Mosaic’s model for community engagement as a church draws upon John M. Perkin’s Three R’s of Christian Community Development: Relocation, Reconciliation, and Redistribution. Described in detail in his book *With Justice for All*, Perkins draws upon decades of personal experience addressing racism and poverty as a civil rights activist, community developer, and minister. Perkin’s model reflects what he believes is a

uniquely Christian approach that will qualitatively different results, as the Gospel is holistically lived out in peoples' lives.<sup>8</sup>

*Relocation: You Just Had to Be There*

The first principle of relocation asserts that, to best address the needs of the community, one must be embedded within that community. If the church is to be a redemptive agent that confronts the injustice of racism and the other social realities that can accompany it, the community's needs must become the church's needs. Perkins believes this can only occur through proximity that necessitates living through and within the same social realities.<sup>9</sup> Without proximity, well-intentioned efforts can quickly become paternalistic, enabling white savior instincts to drive solutions, creating new racial rifts and perpetuating white superiority. Solutions developed from a distant frequently hurt the community more than help. Additionally, relocation precipitates commitment, that rightfully prevents a church from choosing a new passion project community when initial efforts fail, or interracial relations create discomfort. Relocation fosters a relational foundation that facilitates Perkin's second R: reconciliation.

From its inception, Mosaic knew that to be a multicultural church would require not only making multiculturalism a stated value and mission, but choosing an accessible location for Waco's minority populations and being personally invested in the

<sup>8</sup> Michael Barkley, "Models of Effective Compassion: Dr. John M. Perkins and 'The Three R's of Community Development,'" Acton Institute, June 29, 2000, <https://www.acton.org/pub/commentary/2000/06/29/models-effective-compassion-dr-john-m-perkins-and>.

<sup>9</sup> Barkley.

community. In Waco, this meant being located in East Waco—the part of town across the Brazos River that is predominantly black<sup>10</sup> and has a median household income of \$22,047.<sup>11</sup> In Waco, being antiracist necessitates addressing the extreme economic disparity that exists along racial lines in Waco and considering the realities of gentrification that have pushed minority communities out of Waco’s developing downtown and into East Waco, and other ethnic enclaves. Mosaic intentionally did not purchase its own building in the neighborhood, so as to not take valuable property, and to avoid driving up the surrounding housing and rental costs. Mosaic instead holds its Sunday morning church services at a local elementary school in East Waco. Pastor Slim Thompson, Mosaic’s lead pastor, and his family moved into the neighborhood as well.

When I interviewed Thompson about the relocation process, he said that, before starting the church, it was crucial to first get to know the community, do thorough research, and build trust. Thompson got to know local business owners, pastors, school officials, and neighbors by initiating personal conversations without an agenda. Rather than making assumptions about the community, Thompson asked questions and incorporated the community’s perspective into the vision for Mosaic. When members of the community were rightfully skeptical or distrustful of why he had moved into the neighborhood or his vision to start a new church in the neighborhood, he wasn’t defensive or impatient, but rather listened to concerns, answered questions, and asked

<sup>10</sup> “Race and Ethnicity in Waco Texas,” n.d., <https://statisticalatlas.com/place/Texas/Waco/Race-and-Ethnicity>.

<sup>11</sup> “Household Income in Waco, Texas,” accessed April 17, 2020, <https://statisticalatlas.com/place/Texas/Waco/Household-Income>.

questions about the community's wants and needs. Most importantly, Thompson approached the community from an asset-based mindset, asking community members what they love most about their community and what they consider to be the community's best resources and strengths. In other words, Thompson willingly cooperated in the community vetting process and privileged the community's feedback and perspective into the vision for Mosaic.

Part of Mosaic's commitment to making the East Waco community's needs the church's needs is prioritizing community partnerships, some of which came unexpectedly and organically just by nature of living in the same community, and others through intentional effort. In an effort to make Mosaic's Sunday gatherings accessible to homeless members of the community, those without transportation, and those for whom church is already an intimidating concept, Mosaic originally chose to meet in a local recreation center. When Mosaic outgrew its original location in the Bledsoe Miller Recreation Center, Thompson talked with the principal of J.H.Hines Elementary School, one of the local public schools that Thompsons' children attend, and Mosaic was given permission to meet in the school's cafeteria for Sunday morning gatherings. Other partnerships include providing volunteers for local non-profits like Mission Waco's King's Club, a Saturday morning program for kids in low income apartment complexes around Waco. When people visit Mosaic for the first time, they can choose one of several local non-profits Mosaic's community partnership not only engages what many might consider the "spiritual" spheres of the community, but also those considered "secular."

Whether meeting in local community spaces that are not church buildings or catering from small businesses.

In a neighborhood in which many residents are facing economic hardship, part of solidarity with the community's needs is operating as cost-effectively as possible. By saving money where possible, Mosaic can not only allocate more budget towards the community in place of internal costs, but also take economic pressure off of congregants because they are less dependent on their financial giving.

### *Reconciliation: The Heart of the Gospel*

Perkin's next foundation of Christian community development is reconciling people to God and neighbors to one another<sup>12</sup>: the heart and the fruit of the Gospel. These two facets of reconciliation are not in competition with one another; they are interdependent and equally foundational to the Christian faith. Mosaic draws its inspiration from the AND Campaign, whose goal is to embody the truth and love of Jesus Christ. Christians are called to faithfully share the Gospel and preach Christ as the only way to be reconciled to God, and also engage civically in active commitment to redemptive justice.<sup>13</sup> Mosaic's mission statement and core values reflect both of these commitments to reconciliation.

Mosaic's driving values are being Gospel-centered, multicultural, and Spirit led. As a Gospel-centered community, Mosaic is committed to plainly clearly sharing the

<sup>12</sup> Barkley, "Models of Effective Compassion."

<sup>13</sup> "About (&)," AND Campaign, n.d., <https://andcampaign.org/about>.

message of salvation and reconciliation available through faith in Christ every Sunday through liturgical rhythms. In addition to a time of worship and the sermon, every Sunday the church body together makes a confession of sin, affirms a confession of faith, and rejoices in the hope of the Gospel. More recently, Mosaic has jumped on board with an online movement called #JesusChangedMyLife, in which Christians were encouraged to share a brief video on Easter Sunday 2020 of their personal testimony of encountering Christ. Mosaic shared the movement, providing resources to equip congregants to narratively share the good news of Jesus through God's presence and action in their personal life.<sup>14</sup> On a more consistent basis, congregants are equipped and encouraged to vocally and lovingly share their faith with others, whether it be coworkers, family members, or even strangers, especially through weekly men's and women's small groups.

Mosaic's commitment to the Gospel doesn't end there. Mosaic affirms that a right understanding of the reconciliation Jesus offers us with God should produce a heart for social justice that seeks out and celebrates diversity. Mosaic is a multicultural church that is designed to be a refuge for minorities, where they do not have to check their culture at the door to belong. Mosaic is not multiethnic. Mosaic does not just tolerate diversity or make space for it within a majority culture, but intentionally celebrates it, and is structured so that one majority culture does not overshadow minority experiences.<sup>15</sup> Diversity is not only welcomed, but given a platform with a microphone, and real power to shape the overall culture of the church. Mosaic's commitment to multiculturalism is

<sup>14</sup> "#JesusChangedMyLife Easter 2020," Mosaic Waco, n.d., <https://mosaicwaco.org/jesuschangedmylife/>.

<sup>15</sup> "About | Mosaic Waco," Mosaic Waco, n.d., <https://mosaicwaco.org/about/>.

not simply a convenient add-on to a preexisting monolithic church culture and vision, but has been at the heart of Mosaic vision, mission, and structure from the very beginning. For all of Mosaic's staff and members, commitment to multiculturalism is a non-negotiable, even if its costs membership or has negative economic ramifications.

For Mosaic, this is what it means to be anti-racist. It means proactively addressing racial injustice and instituting systems and structures of accountability to push against cultural norms and the tendency to pursue comfort over justice. It means derailing the myth of racial progress that the current trends toward reconciliation justice, and instead actively and intentionally pursuing justice. It means acting with humility and corporately acknowledging complicity, historically and currently, with racist ideology. It means contextualizing the problem and proactively addressing the complex web of injustices in which racism exists, such as economic disparity, greed, and American hyper-individualism that resists acknowledging corporate sin and lamenting communally.

How does Mosaic pursue multiculturalism? Foundationally, it is listed in Mosaic's core values and mission statement, enabling public and corporate accountability. Mosaic's multiculturalism begins with its leadership. Of Mosaic's six full-time staff, five are non-white.<sup>16</sup> For the congregation as a whole to embody multiculturalism, it must begin with access to and distribution of power to a diversity of cultural representations. Racism and the importance of multiculturalism is regularly pursued and addressed in a Sunday morning service. Worship frequently features songs

<sup>16</sup> "Leadership | Mosaic Waco," Mosaic Waco, n.d., <https://mosaicwaco.org/leadership/>.

in Spanish, a language spoken by many of Mosaic’s congregants, and the biblical passage from which the pastor will be preaching is read aloud in various languages reflected in the congregation. When asked how often he would preach about race, Malcolm Foley, Mosaic’s Director of Discipleship, shared “I will preach about race whenever the Bible talks about race.” Mosaic’s pastors do not prepare topic-based sermons and only talk about race, but they intentionally read, interpret, and teach with a keenness for the text’s historical context and modern application, including any racial or ethnic undertones that may otherwise be missed by the average reader. Mosaic’s pastors also intentionally draw upon black theologians and thinkers in their sermons.

On their website and social media accounts, Mosaic provides a variety of resources to equip Christians to apply the Gospel faithfully through antiracist acts of mercy and justice. Some of these include a PDF entitled “Three Ways to Fight Racism”<sup>17</sup> and a blog featuring submissions on topics of race from leaders in the church.<sup>18</sup> During Sunday services, Mosaic also has a table selling discounted books. These cover a variety of subjects including discipleship and parenting, but a majority of the books address racism in the church and feature minority authors. This is a creative way to expose congregants to trustworthy theology that integrates the Gospel with social justice, and at a more affordable cost. Mosaic’s website also provides an option to translate it to Spanish,

<sup>17</sup> “3 Ways to Fight Racism,” Mosaic Waco, n.d., <https://mailchi.mp/e59ff30c643d/mosaicwaco>.

<sup>18</sup> “Blog | Mosaic Waco,” Mosaic Waco, n.d., <https://mosaicwaco.org/blog/>.

not only making it more accessible for many in Mosaic’s neighborhood, but in reflection of the diversity present in the Mosaic community.

Mosaic’s mission statement is to adore Christ, apply the Gospel, and act with mercy and justice.<sup>19</sup> Commitment to redemptive justice is the natural overflow of a right understanding of God and a personal experience of reconciliation through Christ. Mosaic pursues redemptive justice practically through a variety of community partnerships. Along with running Mission Waco’s King’s Club program once a month, Mosaic encourages congregants to volunteer with STARS Book Clubs, a collaboration of volunteers from churches across Waco to help at-risk students succeed through encouraging mentoring relationships and academic support.<sup>20</sup> To celebrate Black History Month, every Sunday this past February, Malcolm Foley, Mosaic’s Director of Discipleship, shared about a significant figure in black history. More recently, in response to anti-Asian discrimination surrounding COVID-19, Mosaic has been vocally in opposition this behavior and signed on with the Asian American Christian Collaboration’s response to discrimination, sharing action steps churches and individuals can take to combat rising discrimination.

*Redistribution: Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is*

Redistribution refers to specifically to apportioning power and resources to empower people of color to create enduring, structural, and equitable change within an

<sup>19</sup> “About | Mosaic Waco.”

<sup>20</sup> “STARS Book Clubs,” STARS Book Clubs, n.d., <https://www.starsbookclubs.com/>.

organization or community.<sup>21</sup> Redistribution can function as a way of offsetting the economic costs and dangers of gentrification, by pouring outside economic resources and directing internal resources into the preexisting establishments, rather than building new establishments. Mosaic's leadership takes redistribution very seriously and has created intentional structures of accountability as it pertains to race. As mentioned before, of Mosaic's six full-time staff members, five are non-white. Of the three pastors who started Mosaic, Slim Thompson is white, Malcolm Foley is black, and Lorenz Villa is Hispanic. All three have authority to preach and hold one another accountable to pursue justice and mercy and foster multiculturalism, each representing a different culture reflected in the congregation.

In terms of economic redistribution, Mosaic intentionally supports local businesses, particularly those operated by minorities, and participates in strengthening the local economy. For its monthly congregational picnics, Mosaic caters local, minority-operated businesses, even when less cost effective. Mosaic also actively advertises local events, particularly the monthly "East Waco" gatherings designed to bring together and support businesses that strengthen the East Waco community and economy. Every month, a large group of people from Mosaic go to the East Waco gathering together and eat lunch there after church. Mosaic is also in the midst of developing a microfinance ministry to provide small loans to entrepreneurs, alongside a discipleship program specifically for young entrepreneurs, modeled after North Coast Calvary Chapel's

<sup>21</sup> Barkley, "Models of Effective Compassion."

Bottom Line ministry.<sup>22</sup> This program would provide economic support in tandem with the mentorship of a business professional, a support network, and discipleship in biblical values as they pertain to the business world. Most recently, Mosaic has set up a benevolence fund from which one hundred percent of proceeds will go towards aiding individuals and non-profits significantly impacted COVID-19. Mosaic has also challenged congregants who are financially able to consider donating ten percent of their recent COVID-19 stimulus check either directly to non-profits, or to Mosaic's benevolence fund.

### *Pressing Forward: Carrying the Torch*

Mosaic presents a helpful model of pursuing antiracism as a church, but its efforts represent the beginning of a relatively new movement in evangelicalism that other churches must choose to further and improve. I will briefly introduce two topics which Mosaic has not addressed directly in its ministry, and suggest potential action steps for Mosaic and other churches to pursue.

### *Gentrification*

When pursuing community-based development and social justice work, the negative impact of gentrification within the community, and the church's potential to contribute to it, must be adequately and thoughtfully considered before beginning ministry. In his

<sup>22</sup> "Bottom Line | North Coast Calvary Chapel," North Coast Calvary, n.d., <https://www.northcoastcalvary.org/bottomline/>.

dissertation *Can Churches Change a Neighborhoods?*, Dr. Dave Kresta researches the impact of churches on their neighborhood's socioeconomic trajectory.<sup>23</sup> In a 2019 interview, Kresta summarized five of his key research findings:

1. White churches in non-white neighborhoods are associated with more gentrification.
2. Church social services do not reverse neighborhood decline, but they do help slow down gentrification by stemming displacement.
3. More geographically dispersed congregations result in less white influx and less gentrification, but these churches are also less helpful in declining neighborhoods.
4. Churches in the USA are 1.6 times more segregated than our neighborhoods.
5. Church planting practices have changed dramatically from the 1980s to the 2000s. In a "back to the city" movement, new church locations have shifted from predominantly up-and-coming higher income neighborhoods in the 1980s, to "grittier" and perhaps "cooler" lower-income neighborhoods in the 2000s, some of which were already gentrifying or on the cusp of gentrifying, while others remained in the throes of decline.<sup>24</sup>

Overall, churches face a difficult dilemma. They have the potential to play an important role in slowing the displacement caused by gentrification and provide beneficial social services that benefit the local economy. However, promising outcomes are held in tension with Kresta's first conclusion that white churches in predominantly non-white neighborhoods are complicit in intensifying the effects of gentrification. This flies in the face of Perkins' principle of relocation, and the many favorable outcomes of relational proximity in community development work. Churches can opt for more of a commuter

<sup>23</sup> David Kresta, "Can Churches Change a Neighborhood? A Census Tract, Multilevel Analysis of Churches and Neighborhood Change" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2019), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/2273955774/?pq-origsite=primo>.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Louis Metzger, "Can Churches Change Neighborhoods? An Interview with Urbanologist Dave Kresta," *Uncommon God, Common Good* (blog), September 19, 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/uncommongodcommongood/2019/09/can-churches-change-a-neighborhood-an-interview-with-urbanologist-dave-kresta/>.

style, in which congregants travel from greater distances to attend church, but as Kresta's third conclusion affirms, this significantly diminishes the church's capacity to provide helpful social services and revive a declining neighborhood.

When asked how churches might guard against the negative effects of church planting in his interview with Patheos' Paul Louis Metzger, Kresta offers a few helpful suggestions. First, he contends that understanding the community's history and its present residents' perceptions of and hopes for the neighborhood is vital to existing in harmony with the community. Second, he suggests that every team conduct a community impact study before deciding to plant a church. An impact study can provide valuable data about the community's assets and needs, and provide guidance about whether a new church plant will contribute redemptively, or if partnering with a preexisting church is a more sustainable and advantageous option. Additionally, a community impact study can help determine if white congregants moving into the neighborhood is preferable to commuting or vice versa. Thirdly, Kresta encourages providing social services, particularly economic ones designed to enable low-income residents to stay in their homes and help suspend the displacement impact of gentrification.

### *Reparations*

The second topic which churches will increasingly need to address is the hot-button issue of reparations: making amends for the economic exploitation and injustice of slavery by paying money to descendants of slaves in the United States. Black Americans have been placed at an extreme economic disadvantage historically, first by exploiting

their unpaid labor during the slavery era, and again by denying equal access to educational, employment, and asset accumulation opportunities during the Jim Crow era of segregation. These are all factors in the current wealth gap that exists between black and white citizens. According to a 2009 study, the median wealth of white households was \$113,149 compared to \$5,677 for black households.<sup>25</sup> According to a 2014 report, for every dollar earned in a white household, a black household earns less than seven cents.<sup>26</sup> A 2013 research and policy brief for the Institute on Assets and Social Policy determined that over a twenty-five year period, the total wealth gap between the same white and black households nearly tripled, increasing from \$85,000 in 1984 to \$236,500 in 2009.<sup>27</sup> The question, clearly, is not whether there are adequate grounds for considering reparations, but what if any role churches should play in making financial amends to the descendants of slaves.

In his discussion of reparations, Tisby grounds his perspective in biblical precedent in both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>28</sup> Under the Old Testament law, wrongdoers were expected to not only “make full restitution for the wrong they have done,” but also “add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the person they have wronged.”<sup>29</sup> Luke’s gospel

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Shapiro, Tatjana Meschede, and Sam Osoro, “The Roots of the Widening Racial Wealth Gap: Explaining the Black-White Economic Divide,” 2013, <https://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/24590/racialwealthgapbrief.pdf?sequence=1>.

<sup>26</sup> William Darity Jr et al., “What We Get Wrong About Closing the Racial Wealth Gap,” *Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and Insight Center for Community Economic Development*, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Shapiro, Meschede, and Osoro, “The Roots of the Widening Racial Wealth Gap.”

<sup>28</sup> Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 198.

<sup>29</sup> Num. 5:7 (NRSV).

documents that when Zacchaeus, a Jewish tax collector, accepted Jesus as Lord, he repaid those he had exploited “four times over”<sup>30</sup> In response to residual hesitancy to consider making reparations, Tisby notes that black descendants of slaves are the only severely exploited and wronged people group to whom no financial amends have been made. The United States government, though not adequately, has compensated both Japanese Americans who were confined to internment camps during World War II, and Native American nations whose land was stolen. Though not within the context of the United States, Germany has also paid about \$50 billion to Holocaust survivors and their families.<sup>31</sup>

Tisby urges the church to not wait for rest of society to begin making reparations, but instead to courageously lead society by independently acting with Christ-like generosity. Tisby suggests a number of ecclesial approaches to reparations that address the numerous contributing factors to the growing wealth divide: homeownership, household income, underemployment, college education, inheritance, preexisting family wealth, and access to financial support from social networks. Churches could gather resources to fund a variety of different needs: debt-forgiveness plans for black families, college tuition funds for black youth, down payments on homes, black-led church plants, non-profits, and for-profit businesses, a black pastor’s salary so they can pastor full time instead of bi-vocationally, trust funds for black youth, or local public schools that predominantly serve black students. Tisby’s suggestions are not exhaustive but are a helpful practical

<sup>30</sup> Lk. 19:8 (NRSV).

<sup>31</sup> Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 199.

introduction for how a church can incorporate economic solidarity and advocacy to their justice work, to be holistic ministers of the Gospel and active participants in God's redemption of all parts of society. The contributing factors listed above can serve as a useful litmus test to ensure a church is adequately complexifying its solutions and seeking holistic approaches that address all the contributing social injustices that enable racial inequality to persist.

#### *General Take-Aways*

Mosaic Waco is just one example of practically applying the Gospel through antiracist action, but it is not a one-size-fits-all model. Mosaic's approach works in its context, but some of the practical applications may not transfer constructively to a different environment. Racism is a multifaceted and complicated problem, therefore successful solutions require complexification, not simplification. Though the specific approaches may require contextualization, Mosaic Waco's approach exemplifies key guiding attitudes that will enable effective problem-solving and community engagement. Mosaic is community-based, grounded in proximity and relational trust with the surrounding neighborhood. Its vision and methods are not the result of assumptions about the community, but from thorough inquiry through personal conversations and relationship formation.

Other possible steps for churches to pursue could include hiring a licensed social worker to be on the church's staff as an integral part of developing and implementing the church's social services and directing community development work, providing pro bono legal services, free mental health services, hosting a monthly book club that reads authors of color, or hosting educational and equipping classes on a variety of topics related to racial injustice. Though it can be a touchy subject, churches should thoughtfully and prayerfully consider being politically involved in their neighborhood as well. A church could host a voter registration drive, or compile information about candidates in local elections, and encourage voting in these often-overlooked elections. Though I think churches should seek to remain bipartisan, extreme situations could be grounds for speaking against or for particular candidates—this is something a church's leadership team must approach with tact and prayer. Additionally, churches must continually to thoughtfully engage the ways in which race intersects with other identities, like class, gender, sexual orientation, language, education or disability, to create interdependent systems of discrimination and inequality. To effectively minister to those experiencing injustice, churches cannot treat them as one-dimensional issues, but as complex people with complex identities, histories, assets, and needs. To effectively address racism will necessitate confronting the other webs of injustice with which it is interdependent.

Most importantly, Mosaic's leadership reflects a continuous and humble reflection on their heart posture, the "why?" driving the work that they do. In his famous passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul writes

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand

all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.<sup>32</sup>

The church could do all the “right things” to address racism—ask all the right questions, choose the perfect location, put on the best programs, form the ideal partnerships, volunteer consistently, support minority-owned small business, make the wisest financial decisions, avoid all the worst pitfalls—but if it is not done in love, these efforts are in vain. The churches efforts will amount to nothing, and the church itself will be nothing without love. Apart from abiding in the life-changing, unconditional love of Christ and being led in the Spirit to extend that same, God-given, unending, bridge-building love to our neighbors, our attempts at pursuing perfection, redeeming brokenness, and setting things right are corrupted to the core by sin. Apart from God, we can do nothing<sup>33</sup>, because we any love that we give, any mercy we grant, any justice we offer is the extension of that which has already been offered to us in Christ Jesus. “We love because he first loved us.”<sup>34</sup>

Yes, one pursues justice and fight against racism because one is convicted it is the right thing to do, because one chooses to obey God and Scripture, because one desires to right the wrongs of the past and present, because one believes it stands in opposition to the redemptive will of God, loving character of God and created design of God. But most importantly, one pursues justice because it is the outpouring of the unconditional love one

<sup>32</sup> 1 Cor. 13:1-3 (NRSV).

<sup>33</sup> Jn. 15:5 (NRSV).

<sup>34</sup> 1 Jn. 4:19-21 (NRSV).

has received through Christ's undeserved death in our place, that has reconciled one to God unalterably and undeservedly. Justice, when driven by love, becomes an act of worship that glorifies God for God's steadfast love and faithfulness, and reflects God's character to the world. This love must be what fills, motivates, drives, and sustains. No other force can sustain one in the battle, because to some degree they are all sustained by a self-centered desire to make oneself right before God and others—to work one's way into God's good graces or the good opinion of others. Only the selfless love of Christ can empower one to fight against racism, even when all self-interest has run dry. That is when the church has the opportunity to pursue antiracism that is particularly Christian, infused with the power of the Holy Spirit that transcends human capability to enable divine and miraculous redemption to save us from this perverted plague of our own creating.

## CONCLUSION

### Our Hope: He Who Calls You Is Faithful

As you consider the pervasiveness of racism in America and within the church, you may find yourself, like I often do, feeling overwhelmed by the scope of the problem. Even if you were to do to all the antiracist things you could think of, it seems like a few drops in the bucket compared to a sea of injustice. You may find yourself feeling much like the disciples did by the Sea of Galilee in Mark 6, surrounded by a restless and hungry crowd waiting to be fed. You look to Jesus, the one who you have seen perform miracles, to explain the impossibility of the situation, your limited capacity and inability to possibly meet all the needs of all around you. To your shock he says, “You give them something to eat” (Mk. 6:37). You stand there paralyzed by the burden of an incomprehensible task you are being asked to bear. He asks you to go and see what resources are out there— “How many loaves have you? Go and see” (Mk. 6:38). It seems pointless. Maybe there will be enough to feed just a few, but what difference does that make? You likely question if it is even worth your time, and all the while you feel the pressure to obey a seemingly impossible responsibility from God. Despite your doubt and helplessness, you take the small step of faithful obedience. You go, you collect what you can find, and you bring it to Jesus. Perhaps you are annoyed at Jesus for wasting your time. You want to say “see, I told you so, there isn’t enough.” Maybe you’re ashamed that you couldn’t do more, or afraid of his judgment if he’s disappointed. You are at the end of your rope, faced with an impossible need by all human standards, but you take

what little you have and hand it over to your Savior, and He is faithful to provide, just as He said.

This is how we pursue justice. Not as fully capable and resourced individuals or communities who can solve the problem all on their own, but as disciples who, despite doubt, confusion, fear, anger, and skepticism take a small step of obedience in faith, surrender all that they have to Jesus, and trust in the power of God to show up and do “abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20 NRSV). As we pursue justice, our hope is not in our own efforts to overcome our prejudice and fix our institutions. Our hope is that “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1Thess. 5:24).

To become antiracist is not an invitation just to do antiracist things, but a call to soften your heart to be formed into the likeness of Christ—a heart that is yielded and surrendered, humble and poured out for others, obedient and faithful. Justice is not only a virtue to pursue, but a way of being in the world. To become just as a reflection of God’s justness is to experience a shift in consciousness that decenters your experience and empowers you to see the world from a different embodied reality. To be just is to see the world as God does—from the perspective of the margins; of the oppressed; of the dehumanized; of the abused; of the exploited; of those whose dignity has been stripped; of the least of these. To be just is to join in lament in solidarity with the oppressed as they cry out under the weight of injustice, “Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?” (Ps. 44:23-34). When we reflect God’s just character in our own, it is then

that we become participants in God's just Kingdom, as we will find ourselves being antiracist not primarily because we willed ourselves to it, but because of the power of the Holy Spirit in us; we just can't help but imitate our Savior.

“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:4-5 ESV).

I pray that this would be your hope and your vision. Our King is coming to restore all that has been broken by sin, and to make all things new once more. Let Him return to find us eagerly participating in His redemptive work, “running with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Heb. 12:1-2 NRSV).

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