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Whatsoever…Think on These Things

By Patrick R. Anderson, editor

Philippians 4:8, KJV: *"Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."*

Friends of Foy Valentine, the founding editor of *Christian Ethics Today,* remember his enduring good humor and optimism, among other stellar qualities. For each of the issues of the journal which he edited (which can be found on our website), he wrote an essay that called readers to remember Philippians 4:8. He collected 35 of those essays in a volume published in 2004, titled, *Whatsoever Things Are Lovely.* I will be happy to send you a copy if you ask.

Foy did not live in a bubble, or inhabit an ivory tower or wear rose-tinted glasses. He saw things as they were. As a Christian ethicist, he tackled the ugly pressing and difficult issues of his day. Yet he continually found peace and pleasure in life's lovely things. He must have felt a kindred spirit with the Apostle Paul's admonition in this much-loved passage.

Sometimes, I wonder how Paul and Foy did it: how they managed to exhibit good humor and optimism when so much pain and pessimism surrounded them, as it does us. Paul wrote his words from prison, for crying out loud!

So, I have resolved to not let the bad stuff get me down. Whatsoever…think on lovely things.

In that regard, this issue of the journal has some very inspiring and encouraging essays from some terrific writers...beginning with J. Alfred Smith, Sr.

Beloved professor and church historian, Walter (Buddy) Shurden, has written the fourth of a six-part series on books written by the late John Claypool.

Texas pastor, George Mason, was honored to be invited recently to address the Texas Legislative Black Caucus, a signal honor indeed. His address is printed in its entirety here and sets forth insightful words from a white man to black legislators.

Darvin Adams' essay on the methodology of James Cone in speaking truth to power, highlights the work of a great African-American liberation theologian.

Raphael Warnock, the pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church and first-term U.S. senator from Georgia, in his first speech on the floor of the senate chamber, demonstrated his skills as a preacher and his deep understanding of the importance of the vote. "Voting, like praying," he says, "calls us to a higher purpose." The full text of that speech is included in this issue of the journal.

Wendell Griffen, an Arkansas judge and pastor, shares his reflections of the killing of George Floyd, with legal knowledge and prophetic insights.

Then Yale Divinity School professor, Joel Baden, analyzes the stories of famine in the Bible, explaining how famine was interpreted and understood in antiquity and the implications for us today.

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The last article by British historian and Ohio State University professor, Sara Butler, offers interesting analysis and interpretations of botched executions in Medieval history and today's death penalty practices.

Finally, two timely books are introduced and reviewed. First, Christian ethicist and scholar, Ray Higgins, describes Jamar Tisby's terrific book, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice*.

Then, Presbyterian pastor, Decherd Guess, reviews a Lenten study book of 40 devotions written by Cheri Mills, entitled *Lent of Liberation: Confronting the Legacy of American Slavery*. I was blessed to participate in the study group that Guess facilitated on Zoom.

Whatsoever….I hope you will read and benefit from these writings. ■

Reflections on the Derek Chauvin Verdict

By J. Alfred Smith, Sr.

We watched and watched, wore our eyes out looking for help. And nothing. We mounted our lookouts and looked for the help that never showed up.
Lamentations 4:17 (The Message)

Lamentations describes the Black experience of waiting for sleeping justice to wipe sleep from her eyes. Justice never showed up for many others, specifically Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, but on April 20, 2021 dead hope was resurrected to a living reality with the verdict of Chauvin being guilty on all three counts. The *Message Bible* reminded us in the faith community that *God's loyal love couldn't have run out, his/her merciful love couldn't have dried up. They are created new every morning.*

The saying, "God moves in mysterious ways" ceases to be trite and threadbare when we reflect on the teenager who filmed George Floyd's death. Without her deep sense of right and wrong and her quick thinking of recording the video and sharing it on social media justice would not have been served. Prior to this event she was just an unknown, unrecognized 17-year-old wearing flip flop sandals and blue pants who lived a quiet but ethical life. The police version of Brother Floyd's death was "man dies after medical incident during police interaction." The official report did not mention officer Chauvin's knee on Mr. Floyd's neck for nine minutes. But people around the world saw the video and heard the voice of the helpless Floyd saying, "I can't breathe.''

Martin Luther King Jr. reminds us that "everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace and a heart generated by love."

Some years ago, as an activist pastor for justice I served with others to persuade the mayor of Oakland to hire within the department Captain Joseph Samuels as the first Black Chief of Police. He was very well educated and progressive in his thinking. He was an active deacon in the Allen Temple Baptist Church and was loved in the city by all racial groups.

Captain Samuels' priority was community policing among other forward moving policies. He was blocked in making these changes by The Police Officers Union, conservative politicians, and a new power-hungry mayor. Chief Samuels left and ascended the ranks in law enforcement where he now serves as an official in The Department of Homeland Security. The police culture across this nation resists change and is supported by strong politicians who preach law and order *minus* justice.

Unfortunately, some white supremacy groups have infiltrated police departments and the military of our nation. In 2020 the Southern Poverty Law Center tracked 838 hate groups, which was a decrease over the previous year of 11 percent. Yet, the January 6th attack on the US Capitol is evidence that divisive rhetoric and hate still remain.

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Thanks be to God for seminaries and schools like Berkeley School of Theology that equip emerging leaders and pastors with the skills for replacing groundless conspiracy theories with reconciling action to heal fractured communities that delay the coming of the beloved community. ■

Rev. Dr. J. Alfred Smith Sr. is pastor emeritus of Allen Temple Baptist Church and professor emeritus at the Berkeley School of Theology. He is a friend to Christian Ethics Today and its editor. When he speaks or writes, we should listen.

Reading Claypool: Parables and People Stories Jesus Still Tells, Glad Reunion, and The First to Follow

By Walter B. Shurden

Anyone who knew Dr. John R. Claypool understood two things about him. He was a people person, and he was a parable person.

He received much of his energy in life from relationships, from interfacing with other people. When you talked with him, you felt his focus, his eyes like lasers. But this was not an intimidating focus, not that kind of presence that tongue-tied you or created awkwardness or discomfort. To the contrary, Claypool's presence welcomed. It said, "I'm here, I'm interested, tell me more."

More often than not, when focusing on you, he was encouraging you, affirming you, or learning from you. He was fond of asking, "What's keeping you alive?" This was not chitchat or small talk, no fishing expedition for brag. He genuinely wanted to learn from you. He wanted to know what kept you going and growing, what kept you afloat during life's storms.

And his presence encouraged. After I had spoken to a group where he was present one day, he came up afterwards, and we had a brief conversation. He brought up the topic of a position in denominational life that was vacant. "Might that be the shape of your obedience?' he quietly asked. I am not sure how he intended the question to be heard. But I know how I heard it. I heard it not so much as a question of my vocational intention as his statement of personal affirmation. He encouraged, complimented and lifted with language hard to forget. "Might that be the shape of your obedience?" he asked.

While Claypool was a people person, he was, as all knew who heard him preach or read his sermons, a story person. Of his generation of preachers in America, maybe only Fred Craddock exceeded him in story-telling. They said of the great Hal Luccock of Yale Divinity School, "He had homiletical eyes." So did John Claypool. He saw nuggets of truth in events in which others paid little attention. I often read him and ask, "Why didn't I think of that?" or, "Why didn't I see that?"

Before I ever met him personally, or heard him preach, a close friend of mine, a member of Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, where Claypool was then pastor, wrote me of his preaching. *"He takes a text, tells a story, often a very cornpone story, and then applies that text and story in a theological way to the lives of his hearers. It is remarkable for both its simplicity and its profundity."*

I concentrate on three of his books here that deal specifically with parables and people. In 1993, McCracken Press published his *Stories Jesus Still Tells: The Parables.* Cowley Publications issued a second revised edition in 2000, and this is the edition that I will work from in this article. Also in 2000, Insight Press published a revised edition of *Glad Reunion: Meeting Ourselves in the Lives of Biblical Men and Women.* Again, any quotations or references I have will come from this revised edition. Claypool's wife, Ann Wilkinson Claypool, edited and published his last book in 2008, three years after his death. Another book about biblical people, it was entitled *The First to Follow: The Apostles of Jesus*. Morehouse Publishing released this volume.

"He takes a text, tells a story, often a very cornpone story, and then applies that text and story in a theological way to the lives of his hearers. It is remarkable for both its simplicity and its profundity."

When ranking Claypool's books, for me it goes like this. His first, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, was his best. In that seminal little book he recounted the heartrending death of his young daughter along with the hopeful birth of a theology that said, "Life is Gift." His Beecher lectures on preaching, *The Preaching Event,* is his second most important book. In that book he tells how he did what he so skillfully did in the

pulpit. That book will live, especially for preachers. Claypool's book on the parables, *Stories Jesus Still Tells,* is the third most important of all his published works. It shows Claypool at work with the Bible and his astonishing ability to make applications to contemporary life.

In the "preface" to *Stories Jesus Still Tells,* the great preacher said, "No part of the historic biblical canon has blessed me more thoroughly than the parables of our Lord." The parables, he pointed out, usually began as portraits of other people and suddenly became mirrors in which people saw things about themselves that they had not seen before.

Recalling how King David eventually saw himself reflected in the parable of Nathan, Claypool said, "This is how Jesus worked the miracle of reconciliation again and again. People would come to him in all degrees of panic, fear, and anger. Yet instead of confronting them head-on and driving them deeper into their defensiveness, he would, like Nathan, defuse their anxiety by saying, 'Let me tell you a story . . . " Then drawn in by the narrative and with their defenses down, the listeners would see the story as a mirror, and its light would make their personal darkness visible" (5).

But this was not only Nathan's approach with David or Jesus' approach in his parables; it was also Claypool's approach to preaching and to pastoral ministry. He never came across as the mad prophet, excoriating his hearers because of their moral shortfall. Their spiritual power and surprising endings have caused some to refer to the parables of Jesus as "spiritual hand grenades." The parables certainly uprooted, but Jesus, said Claypool, did not use them to "blow people up" but to "calm people down." Ditto Claypool!

With 10 chapters in his book, Claypool included all of the major parables of Jesus, including, among others, the parables of the Talents, the Petulant Children, the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Pharisee and the Publican, and the Final Judgment. Each of Claypool's expositions contains dazzling spiritual insights, memorable lines and marvelous stories about the stories that Jesus still tells.

One reason ministers and laity alike read Claypool so regularly and enthusiastically was because he often had some slightly different angle on scripture. For example, in his exposition of the parable of the Good Samaritan, he asked the question as to why the Samaritan rather than the priest or the Levite stopped to give aid to wounded one. "What keeps us," he asked, "from acting out of our highest and best identities?"

With artistic imagination, something that always enriches the preacher's work, he gave five responses. We fail to stop and help the wounded in life because (1) we lack courage, (2) we lack time, (3) we lack compassion, or (4) we lack the things that can be of help. Each is a sermon in itself! But Claypool's fifth reason for why we fail to move toward suffering was his most creative. (5) We lack deep hurt in our own lives.

Samaritans knew what it was like to be hurt, to be ignored, and to be insulted and forgotten. People who have suffered terrible injustices in life respond in one of three ways. They give up; they fight back; or they give back. This Samaritan took the third approach. He took the injustices and sufferings of his own experience in life and transformed them into acute awareness and sharp sensitivity to others lying on the side of life's road.

Personally, I have never been surprised at the anger of African Americans, given their tormented history in our nation. What surprises me most is the deep compassion of so many Black people. More often than I would ever imagine some have taken deep personal pain and transformed it into concern for the wounded, just like the Samaritan. Remember your own suffering, Claypool seemed to say, and you will find ways to ease the suffering of others. You can find this kind of creativity in each chapter of his book on the parables.

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Claypool published two books about biblical people. *Glad Reunion* contains 17 sermons on characters in the Old Testament. These sermons include two women, Rebekah and Ruth, and 15 men, stalwarts such as Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

After describing a Thanksgiving reunion on his old family farm in Kentucky, Claypool said,
"I have come to believe that what is true in a physical-

family sense is also true in a religious sense; that is, in order to understand ourselves as the people of God, we need to look back across the centuries to all that lies behind us. And this, of course, is where the Old Testament fits so beautifully into the scheme of things, for the Old Testament is to the church what that family farm in southern Kentucky was to my particular family---namely, a place of remembrance, a repository of history and tradition. It can even be thought of as a family scrapbook in which pictures and memorabilia of the past are preserved. The Old Testament is where we get in touch with our religious root system, and this is as important to our faith as family stories are to a particular family heritage."

You do not have to read much of Claypool to realize how important the Old Testament was to him as a Christian preacher. He harks back constantly to the lessons of Genesis 1-11, especially 1-3. One is not surprised, therefore, that he spent extensive sermonic time with the major personalities of the Old Testament, people who lived their faith in light of those early biblical chapters.

The last book that has John Claypool's name on it was assembled, edited and published posthumously by his wife, Ann Wilkinson Claypool. Consisting of studies that he presented to Saint Luke's Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1992, the book profiles New Testament personalities, specifically the apostles of Jesus. Appropriately, the book bore the title *The First to Follow*, including material on Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, Nathanael, Thomas, Simon the Zealot, Matthew, Thaddaeus, Judas, James the Greater, James the Lesser and John.

In *The First to Follow* as in *Glad Reunion,* Claypool often provides helpful historical background for understanding the Bible. For example, pages 82-85 of *The First to Follow* contain a lucid overview of the history of Israel as background for understanding the Zealots, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and other groups of first century Judaism.

But one can never forget who Claypool was. He was not primarily a technical biblical scholar. He was a preacher. As so many have said, "He was the preachers' preacher." Regarding the apostles, he said, "As I write about these twelve individuals who lived long ago, my concern is more personal and contemporary than it is historical." Citing Brueggemann, he said, "If 'the Story' does not connect with our own stories, then studying the Bible is only a spectator sport."

Claypool preached and taught about both Old and New Testament characters because he believed that "one of the best ways to understand ourselves is through stories about other people." And he noted about the apostles, "Jesus did not wait for people to be perfect in order to call them into the circle of God's love." Innocence is gone. What remains is a guilty self and what to do with it.

Perfectionism, he asserted, is one of the highest forms of self-abuse. We are frail and flawed beings. To try and hide that reality only separates us from an authentic relationship with God. "As I look at these disciples Jesus chose," he said, "it is clear that there is hope for every one of us, for they were far from perfect."

You can read Claypool for information alone. But that is not why he preached and taught. You can read Claypool for inspiration alone. But neither was that the reason he preached and taught. You can read Claypool for interpretations alone. But he neither preached nor taught to be unique. He preached and he taught to help you realize that creation is a huge party God gives so you can find joy and self-worth. He preached and taught to urge you to use your power and freedom to bless others. He preached and taught to help you understand that you can't pay too much for the right things in life but that you can pay too much for the wrong things in life. For all those reasons and more, "reading Claypool" makes you want to live more deeply, more devotedly, and more lovingly. ■

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Walter "Buddy" Shurden is a Baptist scholar, preacher, writer, connoisseur of good preaching, and mentor to many. He is an emeritus professor at Mercer University and lives in Macon, GA with his wife, Kay. This essay is the fourth in a 6-part series which he has written for Christian Ethics Today.

Words of Challenge from a White Pastor to the Texas Legislative Black Caucus

By George A. Mason

Introductory Words

Many thanks for the invitation to speak to you. I imagine this is an unusual thing for a white Baptist pastor to offer words of challenge to Black legislators. I want to thank my friend and fellow minister, Rep. Carl Sherman, for the trust this invitation represents. And it's a double honor to be joined in this effort by my friend and colleague in the struggle for justice, the Rev. Frederick Douglass Haynes III (be sure to spell Douglass with a double-S on the end to recall the former slave who told enough truth to Abraham Lincoln to move him toward a more moral view of the Civil War than just keeping the Union together). Freddy and I have been doing Teach-Ins together at Friendship West Baptist Church for the past four years on Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend. So, this seems right.

One thing I have learned from showing up in traditionally Black spaces is to be a learner first. Listen to the experience of others before offering solutions that don't meet the lived experience of the people you are talking to—lest you end up talking down instead of to. Much of what I want to say today comes from what I am learning from Black pastors, writers and theologians.

To that point, let's begin with this important charge from African American Episcopal priest and womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas:

A moral imagination is grounded in the absolute belief that the world can be better. A moral imagination envisions Isaiah's "new heaven and new earth," where the "wolf and the lamb shall feed together," and trusts that it will be made real (Isaiah 65). What is certain, a moral imagination disrupts the notion that the world as it is reflects God's intentions. . . . [It] is nothing other than the hope of black faith. Such hope trusts that the arc of God's universe does in fact bend toward justice.

There's so much in that one paragraph that we have to take it apart and put it back together.

The Vision of a Better World

Imagination can be good or bad, helpful or harmful. But we all use it in our political life one way or another. The question is how?

My purpose here is not to pander to my audience by making ad hominem attacks on white people generally or white Republicans particularly. Black politicians have some of the same temptations as white ones. And you also have some white allies in the Legislature you can count on to have your back.

But we have enough history to say that white politicians have active imaginations. They are political shapeshifters, changing their convictions to meet any challenge to their assumed right to power and control.

For instance, white Republicans have long advocated for local decision making. Their theory of democracy was that culture is a durable thing and shouldn't be tampered with from above. That means that states should have priority over the federal government and local communities should have precedence over state governments. Until, that is, States' rights and localism don't work in their favor. Then, lo and behold, preemption!

A moral imagination is grounded in the absolute belief that the world can be better. A moral imagination envisions Isaiah's "new heaven and new earth," where the "wolf and the lamb shall feed together," and trusts that it will be made real (Isaiah 65). What is certain, a moral imagination disrupts the notion that the world as it is reflects God's intentions. . . . *Kelly Brown Douglas*

The city of Boulder, Colorado, enacted a ban on the sale of assault weapons in 2018. Naturally, the NRA sued. And just 10 days before the mass shooting in the grocery store there, a judge overturned the ban based on state preemption. The shooter was able to buy an AR15 as a result and then murder 10 souls. That's pre-

emption.

And that is also now what our governor, lieutenant governor and attorney general want to do any time a municipality wants to imagine a different way of policing that would shift money from the blunt response of gun-toting officers that leads to arrests as the only alternative, when many situations call for more humane attention that mental health and social workers can aid with. And who do you think gets overpoliced most?

We have seen the same with COVID vaccines and mask mandates and drop-off locations for early voting. We are seeing it again with bills that would prevent local zoning boards from stopping charter schools they don't want in their neighborhoods. Never mind local decision making when the decisions might go against those in power.

The problem goes back to the use of imagination to manipulate systems to maintain the status quo rather than for the purpose of a more just society. I am not saying that white politicians are consciously doing this the way they did in the era of Jim Crow, but that is also the point: they don't have to.

It used to be that if you asked a white person what it meant to be white, he would answer "not Black." I would submit that that is still what many of us think but no longer will say. Nowadays, we have moved on to the idea that color doesn't matter. Do you know this line of reasoning? White is not a color; it is colorless. It used to be a color for us in the eras of slavery and segregation. Now, white people like the idea of colorblindness, and we misappropriate Dr. King in support of that. If you make something about color, you are race-baiting, while we are simply trying to be colorless and neutral and principled.

The fact is, when I wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, I don't see a white man, I just see a man. Because I don't have to. I can go about my day without consciously pretending that I am doing anything insensitive. But I am not white and most of you are not Black. We are various shades on the spectrum. The language of colorblindness is now meant to mask the fact that people who look like me still have massive social advantages. If we are colorblind, we can pretend that there is a level playing field we all play on. Which is why white politicians work overtime to convince themselves and their constituents that all they are doing is keeping things fair.

Like voter integrity or security, as they call it. This is baloney, of course, since the attorney general's office spent 22,000 investigative hours to determine that there were 16 false addresses on registration cards from a voting pool of nearly 17 million. That is a solution in search of a problem. But there is no limit to the lengths some will go to preserve power. Governor Kemp of Georgia just signed voting laws that will make it harder for people to vote—including limiting the impact of the Black church's Souls to the Polls movement and making it illegal even to give water to people standing in long lines. Of course, those long lines are not in predominantly white districts. And then the governor scoffs at accusations of racial motivation. It's happening here in Texas too, unless we stop it. This reflects a never-ending exercise in political imagination to keep the world as it is, which is not the way a moral imagination rooted in the faith of the Black church works.

In the meantime, the net worth of Black American families remains 10-12 percent of that of white families. Black males have been warehoused in prisons by what Michelle Alexander called *The New Jim Crow*. The War on Drugs, mandatory sentencing laws, and a bail system that is punitive toward poor people have all devastated the Black family and made second chances nearly impossible. This is why both the *Botham Jean Act* and the *George Floyd bill* need your support. Thanks to Rep. Sherman for his sponsoring of Bo's Law.

The language of colorblindness is now meant to mask the fact that people who look like me still have massive social advantages. If we are colorblind, we can pretend that there is a level playing field we all play on. Which is why white politicians work overtime to convince themselves and their constituents that all they are doing is keeping things fair.

By every meaningful measurement in our state, Blacks trail whites significantly. So, we have to ask why, of course. And the answer white people give begins with an imperceptible shrug that implies what in another era we would have said openly: There's something about the character and culture of Black people that inhibits their success on the level playing field we have created. But as the engineer and management consultant Edwards Deming said: *Every system is perfectly designed to get the result that it does*.

Which means we need to address the systems that exist, systems that continually favor white people over people of color. This is what must be fixed before individual hard work and collective hope can do their part.

The Need for Moral Imagination

We need instead a moral imagination that is rooted in a vision that the world can be better. Morality is centered on what is humane, not just what is legal. As Dr. King said in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail: *A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.*

We have a lot of law-and-order folk sponsoring bills right now that do not square with the moral law or the law of God. We have current systems that are designed to keep things the way they are for Black Texans, or even to make them worse, no matter what is said about how fair things look on paper. What's needed is the moral imagination that the world can be better than it is and that the world as is does not reflect the intentions of God.

That moral imagination has to come from people like you—people whose vision is rooted in faith that is embodied in the Black church. I am telling you that the faith that is rooted in the white church has defended an idea of freedom that looks like the Wild, Wild West. Lots of guns; individualism running rampant; survival of the richest; praises of the divine magic of free markets and competition, when that ends up producing precisely the outcomes we see today. Doubling down on that vision is harmful to all of us, whether we profit by it or not, because as Jesus said: *What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?*

The Black church has preserved the gospel while the white church has lost its way. I want to mention just two ways that is true: the meaning of freedom and the value of community.

Defining Freedom and Community

Kelly Brown Douglas talked about the hope of the Black faith. She noted the idea of an unfinished world that yearns for the day when there is a "new heaven and new earth" and "the wolf and the lamb will feed together." To get there, we have to understand two important facets of Black faith that are rooted in the Bible.

First, freedom. The Christian story doesn't appear out of nowhere. It begins with the story our Jewish siblings just celebrated. The Passover recalls God's liberation of the children of Israel from their slavery and oppression in Egypt. It began a story that continued with the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. God would no longer abide our notion that some people have a right to rule over others. Laws must apply equally to all.

The idea of divine right of kings was doomed from that moment forward, as was the sinful ideology of white supremacy. It has taken a long time to root these things out or to bring them into the light; but now we must see the truth. Political democracy is possible only with radical equality.

Freedom, therefore, does not mean a lack of government regulation. That only allows might or white to mean right. Freedom is liberation from such evil systems. But it's more than that; it's liberty and law. It is the creation of new and more just systems, systems that sync up closer to the biblical vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

The second thing is community. God did not only deliver individuals from Egyptian slavery; God delivered a people. Which is why is has always been easier for Black people than white people to see themselves in the story of the children of Israel. White people want to talk about individuals being free to succeed, shorn of the constraints of government. But government is the expression of our communal life. It's one way we work to build a more just, peaceful and prosperous society.

Freedom, therefore, does not mean a lack of government regulation. That only allows might or white to mean right. Freedom is liberation from such evil systems. But it's more than that; it's liberty and law. It is the creation of new and more just systems, systems that sync up closer to the biblical vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

The hope of Black faith in our politics must deliver us a greater sense of neighborliness. The Hebrew Bible and Jesus both said a lot about loving our neighbor as ourselves. Politics is one way we love our neighbor.

As Mika Edmondson has put it in a recent tweet: You cannot love your neighbor while supporting or accepting systems that crush, exploit, or dehumanize them. *You cannot love your neighbor while accepting less for them and their family than you do for you and your own*. And yet, that is the very definition of

what our politics have produced toward Black people in this country and in this state. The idea that the wolf and the lamb will feed together is precisely the kind of dream of democracy we must keep alive. This is true community. It's not a zero-sum game where the wolf devours the lamb. But that is the way we have structured our politics.

Bending the Arc

Things have to change. But they will not change by simply believing the oft-quoted line of Dr. King that Ms. Douglas cites—that the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice. That may be true, because God is resolute in God's commitment to justice for all. But God has chosen not to work alone in this world. God calls upon people—especially people of faith—to bend the arc.

In her poem for the presidential inaugural, "The Hill We Climb," the U.S. Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman, references the sign of the reluctant prophet Jonah:

We've braved the belly of the beast; we've learned that quiet isn't always peace. Like the prophets of old, she holds us accountable for our actions: *We know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation. ... Our blunders become their burdens*.

Then, like the prophet Micah, she reminds us of God's desire for mercy: But one thing is certain. If we merge mercy with might, and might with right, then love becomes our legacy, and change our children's birthright.

This is where you come in, of course. This is where hope lies. And this is why you have my prayers.■

This address was delivered on 5 April 2021 in Austin, Texas, and offered to *Christian Ethics Today* by its author. George Mason is pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, TX. He is a member of the board of directors of Christian Ethics Today Foundation and a leading pastor among progressive, inclusive Christians.

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A Critical Interpretation of Speaking Truth to Power: Re-Presenting the Theological Methodology of James H. Cone

By Darvin Adams

My PhD adviser and the president of Chicago Theological Seminary, Stephen G. Ray, Jr., reminds us that James Hal Cone was not only the Father of Black Liberation Theology, but he was also the Father of Liberation Theology proper. Cone was the first of all liberation theologians to construct a systematic theology for the human experience of systemic oppression. The preeminent voice of thinking theologically about the Black experience in the United States, Cone's constructive method can be described as a revolutionary theological anthropology. Cone's thought, in concert with Paul Tillich, stresses the idea that theology is not universal, but tied to specific historical contexts. Here, Cone intentionally critiques the Western tradition of abstract theologizing by examining the tenets of its social context. While Cone is heavily influenced by such thinkers as Karl Barth, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Karl Marx, at the heart of his methodology lies an inspirational ability to speak theological and cultural truths to empirical and colonial powers as the truth of God is revealed to him. Whether one considers Cone's methodology as the strength of his theology or vice-versa, Cone successfully references the structural sins of white theology and the white church as the major reason for the tragic history of human oppression amongst Black Americans. As part of his theological analysis, Cone argues for God's own identification with "blackness" whereby the Black experience of suffering and oppression is identified with the experience of God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit for the purposeful motif of human liberation.

The major themes of Cone's theological method are God, Jesus Christ, racism, suffering (survival) and liberation. Cone's view of God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are referenced in the Old Testament book of Exodus, the Prophets and various books in the New Testament. In view of the Bible as the Word of God, Cone believes that the gospel portrayal of Jesus Christ in solidarity with the poor is the gospel message. Hence, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the ultimate act of liberation. For Cone, Black theology and the Black Church are products of this biblical tradition. The Bible is important, but it is not the starting point for theological reflection. Both the Black experience and the Bible serve as major sources for Cone's revolutionary vision of Black Liberation Theology. Methodologically, Cone reads the Bible through the lens of the Black experience. For Cone, the Black experience narrates the history of Black struggle and cultural survival. By most accounts, Cone's theology is a survival theology of the Black human experience in that Black survival encompasses the everyday realities of life and death. As Cone sees it, the experience of

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crisis within one's human identity calls for a particular type of truth-telling; one that renders a prophetic, theological analysis of how Black people have been caught in the systemic web of white social, economic and political power (privilege).

Cone's theological method draws upon the various resources of African-American religion and Black culture for the purposes of speaking the truth and constructing a liberating theology for oppressed Black folk. Using oppression as both source and norm, Cone's unique ability to speak truth to power affirms the Black experience as a source of theological reflection. In this frame of theological thought, Cone contends that human beings cannot test the truth of the Black narrative by using intellectual categories that were not created from the Black experience itself. Cone contends that, "There is no truth for and about

Black people that does not emerge out of their experience." While Cone takes the time to reflect on his experience of the Black Church in Bearden, Arkansas, the Black Church experience is not Cone's only Black experience in Bearden. Cone came to realize that the human experiences of oppression, racism, poverty, murder, death, brokenness and isolation greatly impact one's theological worldview. Further, Cone believes that "one's experience adjoins one's theological perspective to the point of where theology becomes reasoning about God." Here, "theology is also human speech informed by historical and theological traditions, and written for particular times and places." In other words, "theology is contextual language that is defined by the human situation that gives birth to it." For Cone, theology is reasoning about God. Specifically, "Theology is ensconced in language about the liberating character of God's presence in Jesus Christ as he calls people into being for freedom in the world."

God of the Oppressed is a great example of Cone using contextual language as a form of theology. Here, Cone's theological goal is not to construct a new approach to the gospel, but rather Cone wants to relate the gospel message to the experience of the Black community. What this collaborative relating means for Cone is that "social and historical context are important in framing the questions Black people address to God, as well as the mode of answers provided." For Cone, the social context of Christian Theology is found in the way white people treat Black people in the United States of America. To this point, Cone affirms that the God of biblical faith and Black religion is partial to those who are powerless. Cone's theological method also reveals that biblical revelation and social existence go hand in hand. By way of affirming the Triune God as the God of the oppressed, Cone presents God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as liberators of those who are in bondage. Here divine liberation and Black suffering can be referenced in the Exodus story and in the suffering of Jesus Christ. Cone wants to identify liberation as the heart of the Christian gospel, and blackness as the primary mode of God's presence. On behalf of the voiceless Black masses who have been hurt by white preaching and white theology, Cone advocates that. "The God of Moses and of Jesus is in solidarity with the victim, empowering them to fight against injustice and participate in their own liberation. Referencing Luke 4:18-19, Cone writes that, "Jesus' work is essentially one of liberation. Becoming a slave himself, Jesus opens realities of human existence formerly closed to man. Through an encounter with Jesus, man knows the full meaning of God's action in history and man's place within it."

While his prized pupil, Dwight N. Hopkins, utilizes African American folktales to help define what it means to be human in the presence of a transcendent God, Cone utilizes historical and theological reasoning for the purpose of critiquing the religious culture of white people in the United States of America. With the understanding that white theology is the intellectual arm of the white church, Cone identifies the white church as an empirical denominational church whose primary purpose is to oppress Black people. Cone also critiques mainstream white theologians for their attempt to first deny and then justify racism. This particular critique shows Black power to be an angry rejection or passionate acceptance in conversation to Christianity and Contemporary American Theology. In this theological vein, Black power is Christ's central message to 20th century America. Cone writes that, "and unless the empirical denominational church makes a determined effort to recapture the man Jesus through a total identification with the suffering poor as expressed in Black Power, that church will become what Christ is not." Cone's message to the Black Church is just as passionate in that he believes that the Church must be prophetic. Not only is he angry about white people's treatment of Black people, but Cone is also concerned theologically with the lack of substantive criticism on behalf of the Black oppressed. As a Christian theologian, Cone is committed to holding America accountable for her maltreatment of African-American people. Further, Cone believes that for America to decide how her oppressed should decide or respond to being oppressed is another form of systemic oppression in and of itself.

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Cone's first systematic account, A Black Theology of Liberation, reveals his methodological commitment to affirming the theological significance of blackness while critiquing white theology in its unwillingness to confess their sins of racial discrimination and social negligence. For Cone, blackness symbolizes both oppression and liberation in any given society. Cone's notion of blackness and oppression aids him in further defining theology. Cone believes that theology is

contextual language that speaks to a particular way of life. As a theologian and an ordained preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church tradition, Cone demonstrates his commitment to the ongoing struggle for equality and justice. Cone also demonstrates his willingness to grapple with the historical notions of Christian theology and how the Gospel of Jesus is consistent with the fight for liberation. Here, Cone's theological method is inclusive to a passionate anger that speaks boldly against the racism that is found in the work of white Christian theologians. Again, Cone's methodological critique intentionally calls out many white theologians for denying the reality of racism and then attempting to justify it theologically in the misguided practice of God-talk. Cone addressed his racial critique primarily to white liberals in the Church and society because they were denouncing Black power and oppressing Black people in the same breath.

The black theologian must reject any conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples. Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God's experience, or God is a God of racism.... The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God's own condition. This is the essence of the Biblical revelation. By electing Israelite slaves as the people of God and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, the human race is made to understand that God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering...Liberation is not an afterthought, but the very essence of divine activity. Subsequently, Cone's theological method is only as strong as the sources he uses to theologize what it means to be Black, Christian and American. The theological sources which Cone draws from are the Black experience, Black history, Black culture, revelation, Scripture and tradition. The norm of Cone's Black Liberation Theology is the norm of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk is the manifestation of Jesus as the black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation. Cone's version of Black Liberation Theology represents a theological interpretation of slavery, racism, the Black Church, the white church, white theology and other sources of societal and institutional injustice. Two examples of Cone's using the Black experience, Black history and Black culture as primary sources in constructing theology are found in The Spirituals and the Blues and The Cross and the Lynching Tree.

In The Spirituals and the Blues, Cone claims that Black history is a spiritual, a song of testament sung between human hearts. Theologically speaking, Cone presents the spirituals and the blues as African-American cultural expressions as music that speaks to the rupture of Black lives or the people in the land of bondage. For Cone, the blues are secular spirituals in that they speak to the realities of poverty, love and sex as categories of Black life. Historically speaking, Cone affirms that the spirituals helped to sustain the slaves and the children during the times of social and racial trouble. Put another way, the evaluative expressions of the slave songs helped to define the social-historical experience of Black people in the late 18th and 19th centuries. In the same way, the blues helped to spiritually comfort those Blacks who were victims of racial prejudice and economic exploitation in the Jim Crow South. In the mind of Cone, Black music is unity music in that Black music has social, political and theological implications for Black people who exist in the racist United States of America. Here, Cone theologizes the blues as a late parallel development—a secular spiritual that allows Black people to feel the spirit in the midst of their human oppression. In the words of Cone, "I AM THE BLUES. MY LIFE IS A SPIRITUAL."

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In his award-winning text, The Cross and the Lynching Tree, Cone demonstrates the evolution of his theological thinking by way of focusing his theological reflections on the terrorism of lynching and the existential need for those who believe in Jesus to confront structural evil. Again, Cone uses the theological method of truth-telling to correlate the reality of Jesus' crucifixion on the cross and blacks being lynched on the trees of America's towns and cities. Referencing Acts 10:39, Cone juxtaposes the cross and the lynching tree in the Black experience as a way of constructing theology. Referencing such thinkers as Reinhold Niebuhr, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., Cone cre-

atively examines the legacies of the cross and the lynching tree with hopes of reconciling the gospel of liberation with the context of Black oppression. As in many of his published books, King and X are intellectual resources used to make sense of the Christian faith and white supremacy. For Cone, slavery and segregation are social evils as white supremacy poses a great contradiction to Christianity in America. The cross in the Bible represents the brutal legacy of the lynching tree and represents the tragic meaning of the cross. For Cone, the cross and the lynching tree describe the tragic plight of Black people on American soil.

Cone's theological method is also founded in his notion of the Black Christ. Cone affirmed that Christ was Black for the purpose of pointing to Christ's particular relationship with the oppressed. For Cone, Christ's particular relationship with the oppressed revealed Christ's blackness in that "blackness was not incidental to who Christ was, but was an essential aspect of Christ's nature." Kelly Brown Douglas' phenomenal text, The Black Christ, is helpful.

In developing his argument for Christ's Blackness, Cone borrows from Paul Tillich's definition of ontological symbols. Tillich recognized that humans, finite beings, could not adequately express or capture in words the divine, an infinite being. Ontological symbols, he said, were only means that humans had available to them for communicating about the divine. Here, Cone takes Tillich's theology seriously in that these ontological symbols can serve as interlocutors for divine reality and human reality. As an ontological symbol Black pointed to the essence of the Black experience in "twentieth-century America" and to the contemporary identity of Jesus as Christ.

In the face of racial oppression, Cone argued that, "the Christological importance of Jesus Christ must be found in his blackness." By way of stressing the way He identified with oppressed in his birth, ministry and death, Cone affirms that, "Christ's Blackness was informed by Jesus' historical identification with the oppressed, and the fact that in a white racist society, Black people were the oppressed ones. Cone explained: Christ is black, therefore, not because of some cultural or psychological need of Black people, but because and only because God really enters into the world where the poor, the despised and the oppressed are."

Within Cone's version of the Black Christ, Black is literal in relationship to human reality, but symbolic in relationship to the divine. Cone explained that, "Theological language must be paradoxical because of the necessity of affirming two dimensions of reality which appear to be contradictory….Through my particular experience of blackness, I encounter the symbolic significance of Black existence and how that existence is related to God's revelation in Jesus Christ." Here, Cone's theological prowess allows him to inextricably link "the literal aspect of Christ's blackness to the particularity of Black oppression." In asking the theological question of who is Jesus Christ for us today, Cone affirms that, "If Christ is not black, the gospel is not good news to the oppressed, and Marx's observation is right: "Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world… the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people."

Cone also examines the genesis of the spirituals in the Black experience and presents a theological extrapolation of their message about God, Christ, suffering and eschatology. By examining the various messages of the blues, Cone concludes that they are "secular spirituals." In his book, The Spirituals and the Blues, Cone does not use the words 'Holy Spirit'. Rather, he uses such phrases as the divine Spirit, the Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Black humanity in bondage, God's Spirit, the Spirit of Black emotion and the spirit. By doing so, Cone shows the spiritual connection between the songs of the Black slave experience (the spirituals) and the crusader message of the blues as they are both representative of the creative ways Black people express their humanity within the Black religious experience. In his text, A Black Theology of Liberation, Cone concludes:

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The blackness of God means that the essence of the nature of God is to be found in the concept of liberation. Taking seriously the Trinitarian view of the Godhead, black theology says that as Creator, God identified with oppressed Israel, participating in the bringing into being of this people; as Redeemer, God became the Oppressed One in order that all may

be free from oppression; as Holy Spirit, God continues the work of liberation. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Creator and the Redeemer at work in the forces of human liberation in our society today. In America, the Holy Spirit is black persons making decisions about their togetherness, which means making preparation for an encounter with whites.

For Cone, the work of the Holy Spirit in the context of Black oppression in America defines the spiritual essence and material substance of both God's revelation and human revolution. For liberating reasons, the Spirit of God works on behalf of oppressed Black people. But even in Cone's stressing the spiritual presence of Christ in the lives of slaves and modern day Black folk, Peter Hodgson affirms the presence of a pneumatological christology in Cone's writing. At the same time, Hodgson helps to transition the conversation from christology to pneumatology to the spirit world in African Christianity. African theologian Mercy Oduyoye argues that the spirit world is a reality in Africa, and that Christianity needs to "have room for the concept of many Christs, persons in whom the Spirit of God dwells in all its fullness." Emphasis will be placed on the role of combat, healing, sacrifice, and mediation of ancestors and companions. Hodgson affirms that, "In African Charismatic Christianity, the theology is christocentric but, with the emphasis being placed on the Holy Spirit, one reads a binitarian approach to the Godhead. In this theology, Christ and the Holy Spirit take the place of the spirit powers that are in the service of God in the traditional cosmology."

In Cone's provocative text, God of the Oppressed, he talks briefly about the presence of the Holy Spirit as a way of making clear his view of liberation in the face of Black oppression. In affirming that Jesus Christ is the ground of human liberation, Cone uses the words of Anthony Burns, an ex-slave, and David Walker to demonstrate that "freedom is not a gift from slave masters but a natural right of divine creation." Cone shares: "Should tyrants take into their heads to emancipate any of you, remember that your freedom is your natural right. You are men, as well as they and instead of returning thanks to them for your freedom, return it to the Holy Ghost, who is your rightful owner. If they do not want to part with your labors…and my word for it, that God Almighty, will break their strong band."

Going back to Cone's revolutionary text, Black Theology & Black Power, he affirms that the Holy Spirit is, in essence, Black power. Cone writes that, "Black Power, though not consciously seeking to be Christian, seems to be where men are in trouble. And to the extent that it genuinely concerned and seeks to meet the needs of the oppressed, it is the work of the God's Spirit." Cone uses the black context in America during the 1960s as a way of indicating that the real power of the Holy Spirit is found in the equality of the Triune God. Cone never uses the words 'God in three persons' nor does he refer to the Holy Spirit as a real person. However, in referencing God as Trinity, Cone believes that "God's manifestation as Spirit is indispensable for a total picture of the Christian God." Cone also agrees that in the "biblical tradition or contemporary theology, God as Spirit is precisely God as Father and God as Son. In essence, the Holy Spirit is nothing but the Spirit of God and Christ working out his will in the lives of men." For the purpose of God's unconditional love for humanity, "the Holy Spirit is the power of God at work in the world affecting in the life of God's people for God's intended purposes." Cone uses the word love in a trinitarian light to show what Augustine believed about the Holy Spirit. In affirming that God is love, Augustine believed that the "Father does not understand nor love for Himself, but that the Son understands for Him, and the Holy Spirit loves for Himself and for them." The same is true for both the Son and the Holy Spirit in that they can neither understand nor love for themselves without the other two members of the Godhead loving for themselves and for one another.

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For Cone, God's Spirit is not just a subjective feeling of piety or inspiration in the hearts of men but, rather an "active power, that is to say, it is the personal activity of God's will, achieving a moral and religious object." Even as the Spirit becomes the power of Christ himself at work in the life of the believer, Cone notes that, "The work of the Spirit is not always a conscious activity on the part of the persons through whom God works." Cone proclaims that,

The mistake of the modern church is to identify the work of God's Spirit in the believer either with private moments of ecstasy or with individual purifications from sin, particularly from a short list of ritual pollutants, such as alcohol and tobacco. This is a hopelessly impoverished view. The working of God's Spirit in the life of the believer means an involvement

in the world where men are suffering. When the Spirit of God gets hold of a man, he is made a new creature, a creature prepared to move head-on into the evils of this world, ready to die for God. This is why the Holy Spirit is the power of God, for it means a continuation of God's work for which Christ died.

Like many of the first-generation Black theologians, Cone believes that the Black Church must be an active partner in the liberating strategies whereas Black people and the communities in which they reside are concerned. For Cone, the work of the Holy Spirit is one of liberation and transformation. Here the Spirit of God implores His people and the Church of Jesus Christ to participate in their own liberation. Divine liberation as a divine act of God comes from God but can be engineered, translated and worked out in the actions of human beings. Both actions are the work of the Holy Spirit.

This particular essay is dedicated to the life, legacy and theological work of James H. Cone, the father of Liberation Theology. Even as I am a research scholar of J. Deotis Roberts, Sr., and the broader work of the first-generation Black theologians, I finish this particular essay in deep reflection, with a heavy heart and with thick tears in my eyes. I am now recalling the first time I met Dr. Cone in person. It was in 2010 at the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, Georgia.

We were both in the fellowship room reserved for those individuals that were associated with Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and Northwestern University. Of course, I was nervous. Who wouldn't be? I was a second-year PhD student studying Black Liberation Theology at the very institution at which Dr. Cone had completed his PhD. Sigh. But I was also spiritually reserved in the calming fact that God had blessed me to be in the presence of one of my theological heroes. In the darker shadows of the back portion of the room behind the catered food, Dr. Cone walked up to me and my colleague/cohort Dr. Mark Boswell and reached out his right hand to the both of us. With his high-tenored voice, Dr. Cone introduced himself to us and asked us "what exactly" we were studying within the broader stream of Black theology. It was almost as if he was assuming that we were brought to Garrett-Northwestern for the purpose of studying some form of Liberation Theology, Black, white and/or otherwise. We told him our research interests and that we were studying under the guiding hand of Dr. Stephen G. Ray. He said two things to us. He gave our adviser and director, Dr. Ray, the highest of compliments. And then he encouraged us to write out our theological interests on the creative tablets of our hearts. He blushed widely and then said, "I couldn't do it all. But I certainly tried to."

The most beautiful part about meeting Dr. Cone for the first time lay in the fact that he did not have to tell us in person how to use our academic work to speak truth to power. We all knew where Dr. Cone stood in terms of his courageous ability to speak Black theological truths to white racist power. It was eternally recorded in his published volumes in that James H. Cone was the father of Liberation Theology proper and Black Liberation Theology in the United States of America. His theological methodology set an important precedent and defined the contours of what it meant to speak Black theological (liberating) truths to white supremacist power. Even as Dr. Cone has officially transitioned into the Glory of God, he is to be placed upon the Mount Rushmore of Black Liberationist thought alongside W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Minister Malcolm X. It should be noted that academia was Cone's primary platform for speaking truth to power. Dr. Cone is the main reason why Black Liberation Theology has become an academic study of great rigor and not just a cultural and religious conversation among a few concerned Black ministers. Cone made Black theology a mainstream conversation for everybody. His theological method crossed disciplines and genres as it transcended all of our cultural contexts. Thank you, Dr. James Hal Cone, for being courageous and righteous by way of allowing your theological method to speak truth to power. ■

Note: All references may be found on our website: www.christianethicstoday.com

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Jim Crow in New Clothes

By Raphael Warnock

Mr. President, before I begin my formal remarks, I want to pause to condemn the hatred and violence that took eight precious lives last night in metropolitan Atlanta. I grieve with Georgians, with Americans, with people of love all across the world. This unspeakable violence, visited largely upon the Asian community, is one that causes all of us to recommit ourselves to the way of peace, an active peace that prevents these kinds of tragedies from happening in the first place. We pray for these families.

Mr. President, I rise here today as a proud American and as one of the newest members of the Senate, in awe of the journey that has brought me to these hallowed halls, and with an abiding sense of reverence and gratitude for the faith and sacrifices of ancestors who paved the way.

I am a proud son of the great state of Georgia, born and raised in Savannah, a coastal city known for its cobblestone streets and verdant town squares. Towering oak trees, centuries old and covered in gray Spanish moss, stretched from one side of the street to the other, bend and beckon the lover of history and horticulture to this city by the sea. I was educated at Morehouse College, and I still serve in the pulpit of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, both in Atlanta, the cradle of the civil rights movement. And so, like those oak trees in Savannah, my roots go down deep, and they stretch wide, in the soil of Waycross, Georgia, and Burke County and Screven County. In a word, I *am* Georgia, a living example and embodiment of its history and its hope, of its pain and promise, the brutality and possibility.

Mr. President, at the time of my birth, Georgia's two senators were Richard B. Russell and Herman E. Talmadge, both arch-segregationists and unabashed adversaries of the civil rights movement. After the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board* ruling outlawing school segregation, Talmadge warned that blood will run in the streets of Atlanta. Senator Talmadge's father, Eugene Talmadge, former governor of our state, had famously declared, "The South loves the Negro in his place, but his place is at the back door." When once asked how he and his supporters might keep Black people away from the polls, he picked up a scrap of paper and wrote a single word on it: "pistols."

Yet, there is something in the American covenant — in its charter documents and its Jeffersonian ideals — that bends toward freedom. And led by a preacher and a patriot named King, Americans of all races stood up. History vindicated the movement that sought to bring us closer to our ideals, to lengthen and strengthen the cords of our democracy. And I now hold the seat, the Senate seat, where Herman E. Talmadge sat.

And that's why I love America. I love America because we always have a path to make it better, to build a more perfect union. It is a place where a kid like me who grew up in public housing, the first college graduate in my family, can now stand as a United States senator. I had an older father. He was born in

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1917. Serving in the Army during World War II, he was once asked to give up his seat to a young teenager while wearing his soldier's uniform, they said, "making the world safe for democracy." But he was never bitter. And by the time I came along, he had already seen the arc of change in our country. And he maintained his faith in God and in his family and in the American promise, and he passed that faith on to his children.

My mother grew up in Waycross, Georgia. You know where that is? It's "way 'cross" Georgia. And like a lot of Black teenagers in the 1950s, she spent her summers picking somebody else's tobacco and somebody else's cotton. But because this is America, the 82-year-old hands that used to pick somebody else's cotton went to the polls in January and picked her youngest son to be a United States senator.

Ours is a land where possibility is born of democracy — a vote, a voice, a chance to help determine the

direction of the country and one's own destiny within it, possibility born of democracy. That's why this past November and January, my mom and other citizens of Georgia grabbed hold of that possibility and turned out in record numbers: 5 million in November, 4.4 million in January — far more than ever in our state's history. Turnout for a typical runoff doubled. And the people of Georgia sent their first African American senator and first Jewish senator, my brother Jon Ossoff, to these hallowed halls.

But then, what happened? Some politicians did not approve of the choice made by the majority of voters in a hard-fought election in which each side got the chance to make its case to the voters. And rather than adjusting their agenda, rather than changing their message, they are busy trying to change the rules. We are witnessing right now a massive and unabashed assault on voting rights unlike anything we've ever seen since the Jim Crow era. This is Jim Crow in new clothes.

Since the January election, some 250 voter suppression bills have been introduced by state legislatures all across the country, from Georgia to Arizona, from New Hampshire to Florida, using the big lie of voter fraud as a pretext for voter suppression, the same big lie that led to a violent insurrection on this very Capitol — the day after my election. Within 24 hours, we elected Georgia's first African American and Jewish senator and, hours later, the Capitol was assaulted. We see in just a few precious hours the tension very much alive in the soul of America. And the question before all of us at every moment is: What will we do to push us in the right direction?

And so, politicians, driven by that big lie, aimed to severely limit — and, in some cases, eliminate — automatic and same-day voter registration, mail-in and absentee voting, and early voting and weekend voting. They want to make it easier to purge voters from the voting roll altogether. And as a voting rights activist, I have seen up close just how draconian these measures can be. I hail from a state that purged 200,000 voters from the roll one Saturday night, in the middle of the night. We know what's happening here: Some people don't want some other people to vote.

I was honored on a few occasions to stand with our hero and my parishioner, John Lewis. I was his pastor, but I'm clear he was my mentor. On more than one occasion, we boarded buses together after Sunday church services as part of our Souls to the Polls program, encouraging the Ebenezer church family and communities of faith to participate in the democratic process. Now, just a few months after Congressman Lewis' death, there are those in the Georgia Legislature, some who even dare to praise his name, that are now trying to get rid of Sunday Souls to the Polls, making it a crime for people who pray together to get on a bus together in order to vote together. I think that's wrong. Matter of fact, I think that a vote is a kind of prayer for the kind of world we desire for ourselves and for our children. And our prayers are stronger when we pray together.

To be sure, we have seen these kinds of voter suppression tactics before. They are a part of a long and shameful history in Georgia and throughout our nation. But, refusing to be denied, Georgia citizens and citizens across our country braved the heat and the cold and the rain, some standing in line for five hours, six hours, 10 hours, just to exercise their constitutional right to vote — young people, old people, sick people, working people, already underpaid, forced to lose wages, to pay a kind of poll tax while standing in line to vote.

And how did some politicians respond? Well, they are trying to make it a crime to give people water and a snack as they wait in lines that are obviously being made longer by their draconian actions. Think about that. Think about that. They are the ones making the lines longer, through these draconian actions. And then they want to make it a crime to bring grandma some water while she's waiting in a line that they're making longer. Make no mistake: This is democracy in reverse. Rather than voters being able to pick the politicians, the politicians are trying to cherry-pick their voters. I say this cannot stand.

Matter of fact, I think that a vote is a kind of prayer for the kind of world we desire for ourselves and for our children. And our prayers are stronger when we pray together.

And so, I rise, Mr President, because that sacred and noble idea — one person, one vote — is being threatened right now. Politicians in my home state and all across America, in their craven lust for power, have launched a full-fledged assault on voting rights. They are focused on winning at any cost, even the cost of the democracy itself. And I submit that it is the job of each citizen to stand up for the voting rights of every citizen. And it is the job of this body to do all that it can to defend the viability of our democracy.

That's why I am a proud co-sponsor of the For the People Act, which we introduced today. The For the

People Act is a major step in the march toward our democratic ideals, making it easier, not harder, for eligible Americans to vote by instituting commonsense, pro-democracy reforms, like establishing national automatic voter registration for every eligible citizen and allowing all Americans to register to vote online and, on Election Day; requiring states to offer at least two weeks of early voting, including weekends, in federal elections, keeping Souls to the Polls programs alive; prohibiting states from restricting a person's ability to vote absentee or by mail; and preventing states from purging the voter rolls based solely on unreliable evidence, like someone's voting history — something we've seen in Georgia and other states in recent years. And it would end the dominance of big money in our politics and ensure our public servants are there serving the public.

Amidst these voter suppression laws and tactics, including partisan and racial gerrymandering, and in a system awash in dark money and the dominance of corporatist interests and politicians who do their bidding, the voices of the American people have been increasingly drowned out and crowded out and squeezed out of their own democracy. We must pass For the People so that people might have a voice. Your vote is your voice, and your voice is your human dignity.

But not only that, we must pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. You know, voting rights used to be a bipartisan issue. The last time the voting rights bill was reauthorized was 2006. George W. Bush was president, and it passed this chamber 98 to 0. But then, in 2013, the Supreme Court rejected the successful formula for supervision and preclearance contained in the 1965 Voting Rights Act. They asked Congress to fix it. That was nearly eight years ago, and the American people are still waiting. Stripped of protections, voters in states with a long history of voter discrimination and voters in many other states have been thrown to the winds.

We Americans have noisy and spirited debates about many things — and we should. That's what it means to live in a free country. But access to the ballot ought to be nonpartisan. I submit that there should be 100 votes in this chamber for policies that will make it easier for Americans to make their voices heard in our democracy. Surely, there ought to be at least 60 in this chamber who believe, as I do, that the four most powerful words uttered in a democracy are "the people have spoken," therefore we must ensure that all of the people can speak.

But if not, we must still pass voting rights. The right to vote is preservative of all other rights. It is not just another issue alongside other issues. It is foundational. It is the reason why any of us has the privilege of standing here in the first place. It is about the covenant we have with one another as an American people: *E pluribus unum*, "Out of many, one." It, above all else, must be protected.

And so, let's be clear. I'm not here today to spiral into the procedural argument regarding whether the filibuster, in general, has merits or has outlived its usefulness. I'm here to say that this issue is bigger than the filibuster. I stand before you saying that this issue — access to voting and preempting politicians' efforts to restrict voting — is so fundamental to our democracy that it is too important to be held hostage by a Senate rule, especially one historically used to restrict the expansion of voting rights. It is a contradiction to say we must protect minority rights in the Senate while refusing to protect minority rights in the society. Colleagues, no Senate rule should overrule the integrity of our democracy, and we must find a way to pass voting rights, whether we get rid of the filibuster or not.

The right to vote is preservative of all other rights. It is not just another issue alongside other issues. It is foundational. It is the reason why any of us has the privilege of standing here in the first place. It is about the covenant we have with one another as an American people: E pluribus unum, "Out of many, one." It, above all else, must be protected.

And so, as I close — and nobody believes a preacher when he says, "As I close" — let me say that I — as a man of faith, I believe that democracy is the political enactment of a spiritual idea: the sacred worth of all human beings, the notion that we all have within us a spark of the divine and a right to participate in the shaping of our destiny. Reinhold Niebuhr was right: "[Humanity's] capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but [humanity's] inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."

John Lewis understood that and was beaten on a bridge defending it. Amelia Boynton, like so many women not mentioned nearly enough, was gassed on

that same bridge. A white woman named Viola Liuzzo was killed. Medgar Evers was murdered in his own driveway. Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman, two Jews and an African American standing up for that sacred idea of democracy, also paid the ultimate price. And we, in this body, would be stopped and stymied by partisan politics, short-term political gain, Senate procedure?

I say let's get this done no matter what. I urge my colleagues to pass these two bills, strengthen and lengthen the cords of our democracy, secure our credibility as the premier voice for freedom-loving people and democratic movements all over the world, and win the future for all of our children. Mr. President, I yield the floor. ■

This address, Senator Raphael Warnock's first on the US Senate floor, was delivered on March 17, 2021. The speech can be seen in its entirety at: https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4952332/senator-raphael-warnock-maiden-floor-speech

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A Year after George Floyd's Death

The guilty verdicts against Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd have been hailed as good news. Those verdicts should not be used to deceive people about the following realities.

First, the criminal prosecutions against Chauvin and the other three former Minneapolis police officers involved in George Floyd's death occurred after Minneapolis and Minnesota law enforcement and political leaders questioned whether George Floyd's death involved any criminal conduct. The Minnesota National Guard was activated to suppress peaceful protestors who were outraged after the officers who killed Floyd were not arrested and charged. My May 31, 2020, blog post detailed what went wrong, why it was wrong, and what needed to be done to hold the culprits accountable and compensate the Floyd family and the Minneapolis community members who were harmed by the official response.

Second, the events preceding and after the Chauvin verdict show that systemic racism in policing is routinely causing deadly results. Witness the deaths of Adam Toledo, Duante Wright, Ma'Khia Bryant, Andrew Johnson, the maiming of Jacob Blake, and numerous other incidents.

*Finally, a just society allows Black and Brown people to live in peace without the threat of law enforcement terrorism and slayings. Guilty verdicts bring accountability when they happen. But guilty verdicts do not protect Black and Brown people from the racist policing shitstem.**

The following article was written immediately following the tragic events of May 25, 2020. Now, in the immediate aftermath of the trial and conviction of Derek Chauvin, almost a year later, consider again what I wrote then.

---Wendell Griffen

** Jamaican patwah*

What Is Wrong, What Went Wrong and How to Make it Right

By Wendell Griffen, 2020

On Monday, May 25, 2020, a black teenager used her smartphone to record the final minutes of George Floyd's life in the world at the hands of four Minneapolis police officers. She watched three of them stand, kneel, observe and support a fourth who held his knee on the neck of George Floyd for more than nine minutes while Floyd was forced to remain on his stomach with his hands cuffed behind his back. She watched George Floyd beg for help, complaining that he could not breathe, and then she saw him die.

Each officer heard Floyd's desperate cries to breathe. They heard Floyd scream for his mother. They heard onlookers call on them to pick Floyd up, roll him over, and seat him in a police cruiser. They heard onlookers proclaim that Floyd was not resisting arrest. The teenager captured the sights and sounds of racism, militarism and materialism that resulted in the death of George Floyd in plain sight and under the force and authority of four Minneapolis police officers.

When the footage of George Floyd's last desperate and dying minutes, filmed by the courageous teenage black girl, was shared with the public, the Minneapolis Police Department fired the four officers. But the MPD did not arrest them despite knowing what they did to George Floyd. None of the officers was arrested for assault or murder, criminal acts that were plainly visible from the publicized smartphone video and known by the leadership of the Minneapolis Police Department and the Hennepin County prosecuting attorney when the four officers were fired on May 27.

The U.S. attorney for the District of Minnesota and the Hennepin County prosecuting attorney held a joint press conference on Thursday afternoon, May 28. Strangely, the Hennepin County attorney said during the press conference that "there is other evidence that does not support that" a crime was committed in the death of George Floyd. Then the U.S. attorney and Hennepin County prosecutor called on the public for "patience" and urged people to "trust the process."

Instead, on May 28, the mayor of Minneapolis

asked the governor of Minnesota to dispatch the state militia – the national guard – to Minneapolis. After the May 28 joint media appearance by the U.S. attorney and Hennepin County prosecutor, local outrage about the refusal to arrest anyone concerning George Floyd's death intensified and hardened. Anger about long-recognized injustice and corruption surrounding abusive and homicidal law enforcement behavior in Minneapolis was not met by *any* substantive action protesters could "trust."

On Friday afternoon, May 29, the Hennepin County prosecuting attorney convened a press conference and announced that Derek Chauvin, only one of the four police officers involved in the death of George Floyd, had been taken into custody and charged with murder in the third degree (the lowest murder offense) and manslaughter (the second lowest homicide offense). Chauvin was the officer who pinned Floyd to the street surface face down and pressed his knee against Floyd's neck while Floyd pleaded for his life and eventually died. The prosecutor did not explain why the other three former officers were not arrested as accessories to the murder of George Floyd.

What Went Wrong:

Hiring, training and retaining culturally incompetent, abusive and homicidal actors to work as law enforcement was wrong.

Dispatching and deploying four armed police officers to respond to a suspected forgery involving an unarmed suspect over $20 was wrong.

Forcing George Floyd to the street on his stomach and holding him there after Floyd had been handcuffed behind his back and was not resisting arrest or hindering being placed into a vehicle for transport was wrong.

Pinning George Floyd to the street while Floyd was handcuffed behind his back and forced onto his stomach was wrong.

The conduct of the other three police officers who assisted Chauvin in pinning Floyd to the street on his stomach with his hands cuffed behind his back and who prevented onlookers from approaching to render first aid to Floyd was wrong.

Denying George Floyd first aid or relief from having his breathing threatened by Chauvin was wrong.

Disregarding the appeals by spectators to pick George Floyd up and pay attention to his complaints of being unable to breathe was wrong.

Withholding information about what happened was wrong. Refusing to arrest the four police officers immediately when they were fired was wrong.

Concealing the identities of the fired former officers and refusing to refer to them as criminal suspects in the death of George Floyd was wrong.

Calling on the family of George Floyd, the black community of Minneapolis and the wider community and nation to be "patient" and "trust the process" was wrong. The Minneapolis Police Department urged black and brown people to "trust" a "process" manipulated to protect abusive and homicidal law enforcement personnel from discipline, criminal prosecution and conviction and professional banishment.

Each officer heard Floyd's desperate cries to breathe. They heard Floyd scream for his mother. They heard onlookers call on them to pick Floyd up, roll him over, and seat him in a police cruiser. They heard onlookers proclaim that Floyd was not resisting arrest.

Militarized responses to non-violent protests were wrong. Deployment of police in riot gear on May 27, calling out the national guard on May 28, and firing rubber bullets, flash bang grenades, pepper bullets and deploying baton-wielding police officers was wrong. Sending assault rifle-toting national guard soldiers to confront angry and grief-stricken civilians was wrong.

Allowing investigation and prosecution decisions concerning the killing of George Floyd to be handled by the Hennepin County prosecuting attorney and the U.S. attorney for the District of Minnesota was wrong. Concerns about cronyism between the Hennepin County Prosecutor and the Minneapolis Police Department deepened after the Hennepin County prosecutor made his comments during the

May 28 media appearance with the U.S. attorney for the District of Minnesota. And the U.S. attorney surely must have known how little trust there is among people of color for Attorney General William Barr because of his decision to not file charges against Daniel Pantaleo (the NYPD officer whose choke hold led to the death of Eric Garner).

Failure/refusal to have Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison lead the investigation and prosecution of the four former police officers was wrong. Ellison (unlike the Minneapolis mayor, Minnesota, Hennepin County prosecutor, and U.S. attorney for Minnesota) has established himself as credible, courageous and trustworthy about confronting and correcting abusive and homicidal law enforcement behavior.

Failure to discern and admit cultural incompetence on the part of the Minneapolis and Minnesota political and law enforcement leadership was wrong. Cultural incompetence involves having the knowledge and skill to navigate cross cultural situations, dynamics,and realities in effective ways. The history of distrust and hostility within communities of color about the long record of abusive and homicidal law enforcement by the Minneapolis Police Department is overwhelming proof as to the cultural incompetence of elected officials and police agency leaders and rank-and-file personnel regarding use of force during interactions by law enforcement personnel with persons of color. A "law and order" mindset bottomed on militarized responses to public outrage about the abusive and homicidal behavior that killed George Floyd does not foster trust, patience and healing among communities of color, political leaders, law enforcement leaders and rank-and-file law enforcement personnel.

What Can Be Done to Make It Right:

Publicly Arrest the Three Other Former Officers Who Were Involved in the Death of George Floyd!

Had the four former officers been arrested immediately after they were fired May 27 on suspicion of causing the death of George Floyd, most – if not all – of the angry protests on May 27 and afterwards in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, would have been avoided. Protests and expressions of outrage will continue until every law enforcement agent who cooperated with, was complicit in, and otherwise supported events related to the detainment, arrest and death of George Floyd has been arrested.

II. ***Honor the Life and Memory of George Floyd***

The Floyd family and Black community should be consoled and supported. George Floyd's name and memory should be publicly honored, at the cost of the City of Minneapolis, in a manner approved by the Floyd family.

Transfer Further Investigation and Prosecution of all Criminal Charges Arising from the Death of George Floyd to Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison in order to dispel valid concerns about cronyism Between the Hennepin County Prosecutor's Office and the Minneapolis Police Department.

The charges filed against Derek Chauvin (third degree murder and manslaughter) are at the lower range for homicide offenses chargeable in Minnesota. However, Chauvin (aided by his three accomplices) assaulted George Floyd by holding his knee on Floyd's neck for nearly ten minutes until Floyd died, ignoring pleas from onlookers to stop. Chauvin and his accomplices heard onlookers shout that Chauvin's actions threatened Floyd's life. The conduct of the four men was clearly intentional, even if they did not intend Mr. Floyd's death. *The Hennepin County prosecutor could have charged Derek Chauvin with second degree unintentional murder, a crime punishable by imprisonment for up to forty (40) years. (*Minnesota statutes 609.19, subdivision 2.1). Also, the same statute states: *Whoever assaults another and inflicts great bodily harm may be convicted of assault in the first degree and sentenced to imprisonment for up to 20 years, payment of a fine of up to $30,000, or both* (609.221).

The Minneapolis Police Department apparently concluded that Chauvin's conduct was unjustifiable since they fired him. Thus, it is strange that Chauvin was not charged with second degree intentional murder, given the clear proof that he assaulted George Floyd and inflicted "great bodily harm" that caused Floyd's death.

*The Hennepin County prosecutor also could have charged the other officers who assisted Chauvin in murdering George Floyd with second degree unintentional murder…if the person intentionally aids…the other to commit a crime (*Minnesota statutes 609.05, subdivision 1).

Under this statute, prosecutors in Minnesota routinely use accomplice liability to charge persons who aid others to commit crimes, including murder. The decision to not file charges against Chauvin's three accomplices who aided him by preventing onlookers from

stopping Chauvin from continuing to hold George Floyd on the ground with his knee on Floyd's neck suggests that the Hennepin County prosecutor treated three former police officers differently – and far more leniently – from how other persons would be treated.

IV: Issue a Public Apology from the City of Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Police Department, and the State of Minnesota to the Family of George Floyd for His Wrongful Death and for the Pain and Suffering Experienced after It;
and Negotiate, Reach and Publicize a Fair and Substantial Monetary Settlement with the Family of George Floyd and Resulting Damages that Includes:

Admissions in the Death of George Floyd by the City and Police Department.
Conscious Pain and Suffering for George Floyd
Mental Anguish for George Floyd
Funeral Expenses for George Floyd
Lost Earnings of George Floyd
Damages to the Close Relatives of George Floyd for Mental Anguish

V: Engage in Mediation through the Minneapolis Council of Churches Involving Minneapolis Elected Officials, the Minneapolis Police Department, and Communities of Color.

Minneapolis civic and police leaders must be led by prophetic voices within communities of color. Communities of color have good reasons to view mediation efforts initiated by civic and police leaders as efforts to pacify their longstanding complaints about excessive force by police officers. For that reason, mediation should be provided by prophetic moral leaders affiliated with the Minneapolis Council of Churches.

VI. Retain Expert Consultation and Assistance in Cultural Competency and Inclusion for Minneapolis Civic, Law Enforcement and Community Leaders, with Special Emphasis on Cultural Competence in Law Enforcement and Use of Force Practices.

Plainly, Minneapolis Police Department leaders and rank-and-file personnel lack the knowledge and skill required to handle cross cultural situations, events and experiences in ways that are fair, decent and honorable. Leaders of the MPD and City of Minneapolis need ongoing assistance and advice in cultural competency and inclusion from independent consultants rather than by MPD personnel or other City of Minneapolis employees to assure that it will be provided in an objective way. The assistance and advice should be mandated for all MPD personnel for not less than 90 years.

VII. Enter into and Complete a 10-Year Agreement between the Minneapolis Police Department, City of Minneapolis, and the U.S. Department of Justice for a Pattern and Practice Investigation, and Monitoring of the Minneapolis Police Department by the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

VIII. Provide Lifetime Mental Health Counseling and/or Treatment Paid for by the City of Minneapolis for the Immediate Family of George Floyd, and for the Persons Who Were On-Site when He Was Killed on May 25, 2020.

George Floyd's relatives suffered an indescribably horrific tragedy when four members of the MPD murdered him. Their horror has been compounded by the culturally incompetent ways in which the MPD, City of Minneapolis, and State of Minnesota have responded to protests about Floyd's death.

The people who physically witnessed the murder of George Floyd, including the teenager who bravely filmed what happened to George Floyd, have memories that will haunt them the rest of their lives. Those memories take physical, emotional and moral tolls on people.

The people who physically witnessed the murder of George Floyd, including the teenager who bravely filmed what happened to George Floyd, have memories that will haunt them the rest of their lives. Those memories take physical, emotional and moral tolls on people. The City of Minneapolis and MPD should pay for the mental health counseling and treatment these people need.

X. Rebuild and Repair Buildings Destroyed and Repaired in Communities of Color during the Actions to Protest the Murder of George Floyd.

The protests in Minneapolis that led to damage and destruction of buildings in communities of color where businesses provided groceries, medication and medical

supplies, and other essential items and services could have been prevented had MPD leaders quickly arrested the four former police officers who killed George Floyd. A publicly funded restoration program for those business and property owners would demonstrate civic commitment to repentance and healing for generations of systemic discrimination, racism and tolerance for abusive and homicidal law enforcement behavior by the MPD.

XI. End the Militarized Occupation of Minneapolis.

Cultural incompetence permeates much of what the MPD, City of Minneapolis and State of Minnesota have done concerning the murder of George Floyd, beginning with the decision to dispatch four police officers to respond to a report about a suspected $20 forgery. The actions of the four officers that caused Floyd's death were culturally incompetent and professionally unjustifiable.

Non-violent peaceful protest about the murder of an unarmed and helpless black man by the police is not a crime in Minnesota. Protesters have the right to openly and fiercely condemn the murder of George Floyd by the MPD. They have the right to condemn the refusal of the MPD to arrest and prosecute Floyd's killers.

To their credit, protesters have refused to be bullied and bossed. From all indications, the protests will continue no matter how many soldiers and military weapons are deployed to stop it.

Deploying military force against peaceful grieving and oppressed people is tyranny. The militarization of Minneapolis should be ended immediately.

Pray for the family of George Floyd and the people who are protesting his murder by the MPD. Protest the refusal to arrest and aggressively prosecute the four former MPD officers who murdered George Floyd. And condemn and denounce attempts to bully and beat protesters into silence about the injustices surrounding the murder of George Floyd.

Wendell Griffen, pastor of New Millennium Church in Little Rock, Arkansas is a state court trial judge, owner of a consulting firm concerning cultural competency, equity, and inclusion, author of *The Fierce Urgency of Prophetic Hope* (Judson Press, 2017) and three internet blogs, contributes columns about social justice and public policy to *Christian Ethics Today*, Baptist News Global, Good Faith Media, and other outlets. He serves as a member of the board of Christian Ethics Today Foundation. ■

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Famine in The Bible is More Than a Curse: It is a Signal of Change and a Chance for a New Beginning

By Joel Baden

As the coronavirus spread rapidly around the world last year, the United Nations warned that the economic disruption of the pandemic could result in famines of "biblical proportions."

The choice of words conveys more than just scale. Biblical stories of devastating famines are familiar to many. As a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, I understand that famines in biblical times were interpreted as more than mere natural occurrences. The authors of the Hebrew Bible used famine as a mechanism of divine wrath and destruction – but also as a storytelling device, a way to move the narrative forward.

When the heavens don't open

Underlying the texts about famine in the Hebrew Bible was the constant threat and recurring reality of famine in ancient Israel.

Israel occupied the rocky highlands of Canaan – the area of present-day Jerusalem and the hills to the north of it – rather than fertile coastal plains. Even in the best of years, it took enormous effort to coax sufficient sustenance out of the ground. The rainy seasons were brief; any precipitation less than normal could be devastating.

Across the ancient Near East, drought and famine were feared. In the 13th century B.C., nearly all of the Eastern Mediterranean civilizations collapsed because of a prolonged drought.

For the biblical authors, rain was a blessing and drought a curse – quite literally. In the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Hebrew Bible, God proclaims that if Israel obeys the laws, "the Lord will open for you his bounteous store, the heavens, to provide rain for your land in season."

Disobedience, however, will have the opposite effect: "The skies above your head shall be copper and the earth under you iron. The Lord will make the rain of your land dust, and sand shall drop on you from the sky, until you are wiped out."

To ancient Israelites there was no such thing as nature as we understand it today and no such thing as chance. If things were good, it was because God was happy. If things were going badly, it was because the deity was angry. For a national catastrophe like famine, the sin had to lie either with the entire people, or with the monarchs who represented them. And it was the task of prophets and oracles to determine the cause of the divine wrath.

Divine anger…and punishment

Famine was seen as both punishment and opportunity. Suffering opened the door for repentance and change. For example, when the famously wise King Solomon inaugurates the temple in Jerusalem, he prays that God will be forgiving when, in the future, a famine-stricken Israel turns toward the newly built temple for mercy.

The Bible's association of famine and other natural disasters with divine anger and punishment paved the way for faith leaders throughout the ages to use their pulpits to cast blame on those they found morally wanting.

The Bible's association of famine and other natural disasters with divine anger and punishment paved the way for faith leaders throughout the ages to use their pulpits to cast blame on those they found morally wanting. Preachers during the Dust Bowl of 1920s and 1930s America held alcohol and immorality responsible for provoking God's anger. In 2005, televangelist Pat Robertson blamed abortion for Hurricane Katrina. Today some religious leaders have even assigned responsibility for the coronavirus pandemic to LGBTQ people.

In the book of Samuel, we read that Israel endured a three-year famine in the time of David, considered Israel's greatest king. When David inquires as to the cause of the famine, he is told that it is due to the sins of his predecessor and mortal enemy, Saul. The story illustrates how biblical authors, like modern moral

crusaders, used the opportunity of famine to demonize their opponents.

For the biblical writers interested in legislating and prophesying about Israel's behavior, famine was both an ending – the result of disobedience and sin – and also a beginning, a potential turning point toward a better, more faithful future.

Other biblical authors, however, focused less on how or why famines happened and more on the opportunities that famine provided for telling new stories.

Seeking refuge

Famine as a narrative device – rather than as a theological tool – is found regularly throughout the Bible. The writers of the Hebrew Bible used famine as the motivating factor for major changes in the lives of its characters – undoubtedly reflecting the reality of famine's impact in the ancient world.

We see this numerous times in the book of Genesis. For example, famine drives the biblical characters of Abraham to Egypt, Isaac to the land of the Philistines and Jacob and his entire family to Egypt.

Similarly, the book of Ruth opens with a famine that forces Naomi, the mother-in-law of Ruth, and her family to move first to, and then away from, Moab. The story of Ruth depends on the initial famine; it ends with Ruth being the ancestor of King David. Neither the Exodus nor King David – the central story and the main character of the Hebrew Bible – would exist without famine.

All of these stories share a common feature: famine as an impetus for the movement of people. And with that movement, in the ancient world as today, comes vulnerability. Residing in a foreign land meant abandoning social protections: land and kin, and perhaps even deity. One was at the mercy of the local populace.

This is why Israel, at least, had a wide range of laws intended to protect the stranger. It was understood that famine, or plague, or war, was common enough that anyone might be forced to leave their land to seek refuge in another. The principle of hospitality, still common in the region, ensured that the displaced would be protected.

Famine was a constant threat and a very real part of life for the ancient Israelite world that produced the Hebrew Bible. The ways that the Bible understood and addressed famine, in turn, have had a lasting impact down to the present. Most people today may not see famine as a manifestation of divine wrath. But they might recognize in famine the same opportunities to consider how we treat the displaced, and to imagine a better future. ■

Joel Baden Professor of Hebrew Bible, Yale Divinity School. *This essay was first published in The Conversation on April 21, 2021 and is reprinted with permission.*

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We hear the heresy against the teachings of Jesus.

Surviving an Execution in Medieval England and Modern Ohio: Miracle, or Incompetence?

By Sara M. Butler; 5 February 2021.

In Ohio, Governor DeWine's landmark 8 December 2020 press conference has left the future of felony execution in the state up in the air. The indefinite delay in capital punishment announced back in 2018 has turned into what DeWine is referring to as a "de facto moratorium," as he instructs lawmakers to find some method of execution other than lethal injection. Since 2015, Ohio, like 28 other American states where the death penalty remains on the books, has been struggling to find an American pharmaceutical company willing to supply sodium thiopental. A nation-wide shortage of the drug springs from the reluctance of drug companies to be openly associated with the death penalty. Past boycotts of their products across Europe have demonstrated that it is bad for business.

Those of us who are residents of Ohio and who are not supporters of the death penalty, are heaving a sigh of relief. Ohio, in particular, has a gruesome history of botched executions by lethal injection. Sentenced to death for the aggravated murder of his cellmate, Christopher Newman was set to be executed 24 May 2007. It took them so long to find a viable artery, that he was permitted a bathroom break. In all, it took 10 attempts and two hours to complete the mission.

Two years later, after 18 failed attempts to insert an IV into the veins of Romell Broom, he was granted a reprieve. While the pandemic forced a delay of his second scheduled execution to 2022, Broom passed away of natural causes 28 December 2020.

The most disturbing example of a botched execution took place in 2014. Dennis McGuire was subjected to a new combination of drugs, midazolam (a sedative) alongside the pain medication hydromorphone. Medical authorities warned the state that the combination might cause death by suffocation. Much to the sheer horror of those assembled at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility, during 10 to 13 of the 24 minutes it took him to die, he gasped for air. Columbus *Dispatch* reporter, Alan Johnson, stated: "He gasped deeply. It was kind of a rattling, guttural sound. There was kind of a snorting through his nose. A couple of times, he definitely appeared to be choking"[1].

Finally, on 15 November 2017, executioners gave up after spending an hour trying to find a viable vein for Alva Earl Campbell, Jr. The state rescheduled his execution for 15 June 2019, but he passed away from natural causes in March of 2018.

With such an appalling track record, it does indeed seem as if it is time to abandon lethal injection! What was once touted as a humane and painless procedure has proven to be neither in these instances. Of course, as a medievalist and living in a highly religious state, I keep wondering: Does no one see the hand of God in all of this?

If I learned anything from Robert Bartlett's *The Hanged Man: A Story of Miracle, Memory, and Colonialism in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 2004), it is that when a convicted felon survives execution, it is a miracle. *The Hanged Man* tells the story of William Cragh, a Welsh rebel, hanged outside Swansea in 1290. After his body was removed from the gallows and carted to the local church for burial, he began to show signs of life. Lady Mary de Briouze – wife of the very man who had sentenced Cragh to death – declared that divine intervention brought Cragh back to life, thanks in part to her heartfelt prayers for intercession to Thomas of Cantilupé, soon to be sainted, whose canonization trial provides the evidence for Bartlett's book.

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William Langland's *Piers Plowman* confirms that this interpretation of a failed execution was not simply an obscure Welsh custom. The author writes: "It is noghte used on erthe to hangen a feloun / Ofter than ones" (*It is not used on Earth to hang a felon more than once)*. Piers Plowman, B text, 18:380-81.

Equipped with this knowledge, I was astonished when I stumbled across the execution of Adam Trop, a felon hanged at Dublin in 1363, recorded in the patent rolls, whose botched execution was most definitely not interpreted as a miracle. On the assumption that he was dead, his body was thrown down from the gallows and carried to the church on a bier by a group of his friends and family. It was too dark to bury him at that point, so they left his body inside the church and planned to return the following morning to bury him in the churchyard. During the night, Adam revived.

While Adam may have considered his own recovery a miracle, he did not wait around to make sure the local authorities agreed. Instead, he escaped by breaking down the doors of the church and fleeing on foot. He made the right decision. The sheriff also saw nothing miraculous in an escaped felon. He tracked Adam down to county Kildare, dragged him back to the gallows in Dublin where he hanged him for a second time, this time successfully. Neither did the king see a miracle in this failed execution: He fined the citizens and burgesses of Dublin 100 shillings for the escape, although he was eventually convinced to pardon them the exorbitant fine [2].

Indeed, digging deeper into the calendars of patent and close rolls, I came across another 23 cases, dating to the years 1234-1381, of "hanged men" (and women) who rose from the dead, only six of them recognized as miracles [3]. More often than not, these botched executions were seen instead as we would see them today—an intolerable product of human error.

The crown's more usual approach was to punish those whose incompetence made the authorities look inadequate. For example, in 1280, when the knights of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem prepared to bury hanged man John of Ellingstring in the churchyard of St James, York, they discovered the corpse was still breathing. While the king saw fit to pardon the felon, he was not prepared to turn a blind eye to incompetence. He fined the townships of Ellington, Ellingstring, Fearby, and Witton 12 marks for John's escape [4].

Similarly, the failed execution of Walter Eghe in 1285 prompted the City of Norwich to stage an inquest to better understand where they had gone wrong. They pinned the blame on William, son of Thomas Stanhard, who took Walter down from the gallows (assumedly for having done so too soon); he was committed to jail. Walter was in the church of St George when he revived, where he immediately claimed sanctuary. He stayed there for 15 days, guarded by representatives from the four nearest parishes (St Peter of Hungate, St Mary the Less, St Simon and Jude, and St George). Then somehow, he escaped, making it as far as the church of the Holy Trinity, also in Norwich, where he again claimed sanctuary. At that point, the king decided to issue Walter a pardon, but not before the four parishes were fined for letting him slip by their watch unnoticed [5].

In July of the same year, the sheriff of Northampton imprisoned the 12 men assigned to supervise the execution of Henry Cule and his sister Agnes, both of whom "escaped alive by a fortunate chance" after "they had long been hanging." The king eventually showed compassion to them and ordered the sheriff to deliver them to bail [6].

Why did so many convicts survive their executions? Were the medieval English just hopeless when it came to hanging?

The method itself was problematic. Hanging in the Middle Ages was accomplished by slow strangulation – pulling the rope to raise up the accused – rather than the sudden drop intended to break the condemned's neck associated with the trapdoor that was an invention of the 18th century.

At times, the equipment itself was faulty. In three instances, the rope used to hang the condemned snapped [7]. Investigations after the fact were keen to prove that it had not been helped along by those who sympathized with the plight of the accused. In 1334, when Felicia de Whichull's rope split after she had been hanging "for a long time but was not yet dead," the sheriff of Stratford certified that it did so "without the help of man or fraud" [8]. They had good reason to be suspicious. Peter Kyngesgrene (1374) was cut down by certain ministers of the friary of St John when he was only half-dead. They took him to the precinct of the church of St Sepulchre to prevent crown officials from getting their hands on him [9].

The method itself was problematic. Hanging in the Middle Ages was accomplished by slow strangulation – pulling the rope to raise up the accused – rather than the sudden drop intended to break the condemned's neck associated with the trapdoor that was an invention of the 18th century. Exactly how long it takes for life to seep from the body was the question asked in each and every investigation. For Henry and his sister Agnes, the record notes that they were left hanging "a long time"; John de la Lynde of Hereford (1332) was hanging "for the great part of a day"; Ivetta of Balsham (1264) was hanging "from the ninth hour of Monday until sunrise of the Tuesday following"; John le Ropere of Warwick (1381) was hanging "for a longer time than another felon under the same judgment" whose hanging was successful; and yet each one of them lived to tell the tale [10].

And what a tale that must have been. William de Briouze's description of William Cragh after he had been removed from the gallows gives us a glimpse of the harrowing experience:

His whole face was black and in parts bloody or stained with blood. His eyes had come out of their sockets and hung outside the eyelids and the sockets were filled with blood. His mouth, neck, and throat and the parts around them, and also his nostrils, were filled with blood, so that it was impossible in the natural course of things for him to breathe air through his nostrils or through his mouth or through his throat … his tongue hung out of his mouth, the length of a man's finger, and it was completely black and swollen and as thick with the blood sticking to it that it seemed the size of a man's two fists together.

Bartlett, *The Hanged Man*, 6.

Regardless of what went wrong, or whether the condemned's clinging to life was regarded as a miracle, the one factor that unites most of these cases is the outcome: All but one (poor Adam Trop!) of these individuals were permitted to go free. Some were pardoned outright; others were required to seek sureties for good behavior. One woman was so moved by the experience that she lived out the rest of her life in the leper hospital where she regained consciousness as they were about to bury her [11]. Even when the crown was frustrated with the glaring ineptitude of those who failed in their duty to ensure that justice was upheld, the king still saw fit to let the condemned walk free.

Presumably, the only thing worse than being executed is surviving a botched execution and knowing that you might have go through the whole thing all over again. The physical trauma experienced by these medieval men and women was certainly more horrific than that experienced by those who survive a failed execution in modern-day Ohio. (But please note that Broom even had shunts inserted into his legs in an effort to deliver the drug). One suspects the degree of psychological trauma, though, is equivalent. The medieval inclination was towards mercy, recognizing that these individuals had suffered enough already. While it is rare to find an instance in which the medieval period was more merciful than the one in which we live, that would certainly seem to have been the case when it comes to botched executions. ■

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[1] Dana Ford and Ashley Fantz, "Controversial Execution in Ohio uses New Drug Combination," CNN (17 Jan. 2014), https://www.cnn.com/2014/01/16/justice/ohio-dennis-mcguire-execution/index.html.

[2] CPR, Edward III, vol. 12, 430.

[3] Walter de Pyonne (1234), CCR, Henry III, vol. 3, 6; Margaret widow of Alan Everard of Burgh by Waynflete (1284), CPR, Edward I, vol. 2, 113; William Prest of Somercotes (1348), CPR, Edward III, vol. 8, 96; Geoffrey Cokerel, approver (1349), CPR, Edward III, vol. 8, 270-71; Walter Poynant of Hameldon (1365), CPR, Edward III, vol. 13, 60-61; Margery le Chaumberlein of Hope Woolworth (1372), CPR, Edward III, vol. 15, 214.

[4] CPR, Edward I, vol. 1, p. 396. Two years later, the king pardoned the townships the 12 marks. CCR, Edward I, vol. 3, 278.

[5] William Hudson, ed., *The Records of the City of Norwich,* 2 vols (Norwich: Jarrold & Sons, 1906-10), vol. 1, 221-22.

[6] CCR, Edward I, vol. 2, 330.

[7] William le Neweman of Steventon (1261), CCR, Henry III, vol. 11, 425; Philip son of Adam le Lechur of Botteworth (1279), CPR, Edward I, vol. 1, p. 327.

[8] CPR, Edward III, vol. 3, 5.

[9] CPR, Edward III, vol. 16, 51.

[10] CPR, Edward III, vol. 2, 308; CPR, Henry III, vol. 5, p. 342; CPR, Richard II, vol. 1, 623.

[11] CPR, Edward I, vol. 2, p. 113.

Reading and Using Books

Jemar Tisby, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice.*

Zondervan Reflective, 2021.

Reviewed by Ray Higgins

The Quaker author, Parker Palmer, wrote a little book over 20 years ago titled, *Let Your Life Speak*. Jemar Tisby's life speaks through his latest book, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice*. Tisby's life speaks as powerfully in this book as it does in his first book, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*, which is a *New York Times* best-seller.

Jemar Tisby is an impressive man. In addition to being a NYT best-selling author, he is an historian, national speaker, educator, minister and social justice entrepreneur.

For over a decade, he has been writing and speaking about racial justice, religion, politics and culture. He is the president of *The Witness: A Black Christian Collective*. He is also cohost of the *Pass the Mic* podcast. He grew up just north of Chicago, earning an undergraduate degree from Notre Dame and the Master of Divinity degree from the Reformed Theological Seminary.

Tisby was recently named to his new position as assistant director of *Narrative and Advocacy* at the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University, where Ibram X. Kendi is the director and founder.

At the beginning of Tisby's career, he worked for *Teach for America* as a teacher and principal in a public charter school in an Arkansas Delta county seat town. He is currently working on a Ph.D. in history at the University of Mississippi, where he is in the dissertation stage. (He is the only person this writer knows who has written and published two books while writing his dissertation.)

Tisby has been interviewed by the *Washington Post, Vox, CNN*, and the *Atlantic.* He speaks in a variety of forums, including churches. During the fall of 2019, he made several presentations at the *Race in the Rock Series* that was created by Dr. Preston Clegg and Second Baptist Church, in downtown Little Rock, Arkansas, in partnership with Arkansas Baptist College, an historic Black college (HBCU). His presentations were based on his first book. In January 2021, the book launch for Tisby's second book, *How to Fight Racism*, was live-streamed on Facebook from the worship center of Second Baptist Church.

During the summer of 2020, Rev. Matt Dodrill, the new senior pastor of Pulaski Heights Baptist Church in Little Rock, led the church through a summer study of race relations and racial justice, beginning that study with Tisby's first book.

It is important to understand how interrelated these two books are, and how well the first book, an explanation of American history, prepares the reader for the second book, a primer on being a racial justice person.

Tisby's writing style and content are as engaging as hearing him speak on his podcasts and in lectures. His stories, examples and analyses help readers understand racism and discover how they can embody the character and lifestyle of a racial justice person.

It is important to understand how interrelated these two books are, and how well the first book, an explanation of American history, prepares the reader for the second book, a primer on being a racial justice person.

My goal, in this review, is to encourage individuals and churches to use these two books to learn about race relations, racism and racial justice so that they can embody these truths and values and join the journey.

HOW TO FIGHT RACISM

The opening chapter carries the title of the book. The rest of the book is divided into three sections: awareness, relationships and commitment. Each section has three chapters. Each chapter begins with the word "how." The author's intent is to inform, inspire and equip readers with the knowledge, skills and capacity to fight racism, be courageous Christians, and join the journey toward racial justice.

Chapter one introduces the topic of how to fight racism. It begins with the story of the death of George Floyd by the knee of a police officer and includes a

helpful explanation of the meaning of words such as Black, equity and equality. The author presents his practical strategy for fighting racism, which he calls "the ARC of Racial Justice." ARC stands for awareness, relationships and commitment, which are the three sections of the book.

In this first chapter, the author gives a brief and inspiring description of the life of Fannie Lou Hamer, who lived in Ruleville, Mississippi. It includes her calling to be a voting rights activist, and the hardships and injustices that she suffered at the hands of white supremacists. Many of the stories Tisby tells in his books, such as this description of Hamer and her life, would make instructive and memorable sermon and teaching illustrations.

Part one of the book, entitled *Awareness*, introduces the first idea in "the ARC of Racial Justice." The chapters in this section include: "How to Explain Race and the Image of God"; "How to Explore Your Racial Identity;" and "How to Study the History of Race."

Like other influential theologians, Tisby grounds his work in a fundamental and powerful theological concept. For him, it's the theology of the image of God. "Christianity teaches that all people are created in the very image of God. We are God's crowning creation, and each person is precious simply because they are human. Their physical appearance—including skin color—are part of bearing God's image and should be respected as such" (p. 9). This leads the author to describe the Christian picture of eternity as "a multihued, multilingual, multinational, multiethnic fellowship with others in a never-ending worship of the triune God" (p. 26).

In Chapter three, the author guides the reader to explore one's racial identity through the presentation of a "Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model" and the "Stages of Racial Identity Development: White Identity." He provides a helpful outline for writing one's racial autobiography, which would be a worthy exercise for individual and groups to do and share.

Chapter four provides instruction about studying the history of race. The topics presented in this chapter are good weapons against the arsenal of conspiracy theories and attempts to rewrite history that too many Christians, in particular, find persuasive.

Part two focuses on relationships. The chapters include: "How to Do Reconciliation Right;" "How to Make Friends;" and "How to Build Diverse Coalitions."

Tisby begins chapter five on reconciliation, describing "the talk" that Black parents have with their children, while many white parents are oblivious to this freedom-preserving, life-preserving talk. He describes "racial justice practices" for churches to engage with their membership: incorporate lamentation in worship, corporate confession of the sin of racism, acknowledging the church's racial history, churches reconciling with people it has harmed through racism, and preaching on racial reconciliation.

Chapter six introduces the importance of making friends. This includes guidance for meeting people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and talking with racial justice resisters.

Chapter seven addresses how we can build diverse communities. Topics include building diversity into your church/organization, adopting a statement on racial justice, pursuing diversity when your organization remains homogenous, and when to leave an organization because of its racism. When reading this chapter, I thought of how revealing and powerful the "photo ops" are of the previous president's cabinet, staff, and gatherings and the current president's cabinet, staff and gatherings.

Part three focuses on commitment. The chapters include: "How to Work for Racial Justice;" "How to Fight Systemic Racism;" and "How to Orient Your Life to Racial Justice."

Tisby writes:"The journey for racial justice continues, but the music we hear along the way is not a funeral dirge; it is festival music leading us to a banquet of blessings and a harvest of righteousness"(p. 206).

Chapter eight explores how to work for racial justice. It begins with a number: Three hundred eighty-one. That is the number of days the Montgomery bus boycott lasted. This boycott succeeded through real commitment. That commitment was informed by the themes of loving God, loving neighbor and bearing witness to Christ. Racial justice practices include: stewarding one's budget for justice, holding candidate forums, hosting voter registration drives and freedom schools, starting a community development corporation, and sponsoring a public school.

Chapter nine explains systemic racism, a reality that many non-minority persons have trouble believing exists. Systemic racism deniers limit their thinking to individual behavior and individual solutions. They are blind to the social and systemic expressions of

racism and racial injustice. In this chapter, the author explores voting rights, immigration reform, reparations, criminal justice reform, and equitable funding of public schools.

The final chapter focuses on how to orient one's life to racial justice. How do we live in a way that our entire lives are a witness for racial justice? Tisby offers 10 racial justice practices.

In the conclusion, Tisby writes: "The journey for racial justice continues, but the music we hear along the way is not a funeral dirge; it is festival music leading us to a banquet of blessings and a harvest of righteousness" (p. 206). ■

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Although one can start by reading either book, the first book does provide a foundation for understanding racism in the United States, especially in the history of denominations and churches. This historical study does create awareness and understanding, which leads to the second book which addresses the readers' questions about how to understand racism and become involved in the work of racial justice.

Individuals can read and learn from both books. Yet they are designed to be read and discussed in community, in small groups, and as a church. Studying both books will take Christians and churches on the journey to cleanse our lives and churches of the sin of racism. And, that should lead individuals and churches into doing the good and Christ-like work of justice for all.

By Ray Higgins, Executive Coordinator, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas, Little Rock, AR.

***Lent of Liberation: Confronting the Legacy of American Slavery*,**

by Cheri L. Mills,

Westminster John Knox Press, 2021

Reviewed by Deck Guess

If you see the season of Lent as a time for soul-searching, Cheri Mills's *Lent of Liberation: Confronting the Legacy of American Slavery* functions as a pocket-sized spiritual Hadron Collider for those, particularly of the dominant culture, willing to look at things they had never seen—or never seen clearly. Each daily reading includes an excerpt from the experience of escaped slaves preserved in *The Underground Railroad: A Record*, by William Still, who escaped slavery as a child and devoted his life to helping others reach freedom. Alongside each personal vignette is a passage of scripture, either reflecting a similar reality, or challenging it, or both.

In a scant 120 pages, including notes, Mills addresses the role of religion in the lives of both oppressor and oppressed, the long-term debilitating effects that failed Reconstruction had and continues to have on the Black family, the assumption of White innocence and Black guilt at all levels of the justice system and society in general, the plight of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) compared with Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), comparisons of racist, non-racist, and anti-racist, the concept of reparations for descendants of slaves, among other things. She also offers helpful insight on how non-Blacks can enter "Black space." The introduction and appendix both include facts and statistics of which most Americans are ignorant (since Black History Month so often plows the same well-worn furrows).

Mills pulls no punches. She admits that many of the questions at the end of each devotion appear to be aimed at Whites. (e. g. - *Based on the history of this nation and its treatment of enslaved, Jim-Crowed people, does America know God?* Or, *based on the message of this story [Lazarus and Dives], is the White church in America going to hell?*) But she explains that she sees White supremacy as an ideology in which our whole society is steeped. Consequently, many ethnic groups, perhaps unconsciously, absorb that worldview to assimilate into the dominant culture. (I was shocked to realize that the leader of the Boogaloo Boys arrested for destroying a *Black Lives Matter* banner on a church just before the insurrection in Washington, DC, is himself a person of color.)

It is "too simplistic a definition," she says, to limit understanding White supremacy as *violence* (emphasis added) toward Blacks. It may be painfully obvious in the history of slavery, which, Bryan Stevenson observes, "didn't end in 1865; it just evolved (quoted on page 1)." The sad evolution of today's White supremacy through Black codes, aborted Reconstruction, sharecropping, Jim Crow, public lynching, redlining and racial restrictive covenants in the real estate industry, reverse-redlining and subprime mortgage practices in the banking industry, and almost *carte blanche* tolerance by the justice system of mistreatment of minorities by law enforcement, culminating in mass incarceration, is a profoundly guilt-inducing prayer of confession. Quoting Yvette Carnell of #ADOS (American Descendants of Slavery), Mills insists, "There can be no peace without justice, but there can be no justice without truth" (p. 3). And the

truth goes marching on through the whole book.

More subtle and sophisticated than in days past, White supremacy operates in corporate boardrooms through laws enacted by governing bodies from town councils to congress, through administrative structures of public schools, colleges and universities, among others. Sometimes it has been calculated; sometimes stumbled into by people whose vision is clouded by never having experienced prejudice, therefore, being blind to their naïve practice of it. Nevertheless, the result has meant relentless damage to the Black population, compounded over decades and centuries. The study is a direct attack on "the mythology that everything great…in America was created by Whites, and if this greatness…is going to be sustained, Whites must continue to be in control" (Dr. Kevin W. Cosby, quoted on p. 4).

Many vignettes observe the hypocrisy of slaveholding Christians, faithful in their daily prayers and worship on Sunday, who have no hesitancy or pang of conscience in berating, belittling or beating their "property." Mills insists that two completely different approaches to scripture are required to describe the parallel realities of believing oppressed and believing oppressor. The "hermeneutic of the oppressor" is to spiritualize disparities between the biblical directives and accepted practice to excuse blatant departures from the expressed will of God. The "hermeneutic of the oppressed" requires listening with different ears. One example would be prayer. The prayer for deliverance from slavery would be seen as "unanswered"—even unanswerable—by the oppressed. The oppressor, however, would say that the slave is "spiritually free" in Christ, even though captive in body. Mills concludes that such "transactional prayers" are unbiblical. When she points out the myriad ways the White churches ignore clear biblical demands for justice, she is right to wonder whether they can claim the name Christian. Some postulate, says Mills, that White Christianity is responsible for much Black atheism.

Even when the possibility of real "Reconstruction" still existed, in 1865-66 White-controlled governments passed Black codes that declared unemployed Blacks with no permanent address to be vagrants. Owning nothing, with few resources, vast numbers of freed slaves, through no fault of their own, fell into that category. They were subject to arrest. If unable to pay the fine, as would be true of many unemployed, they could be jailed and exploited as a source of free labor. It was another form of legalized slavery, and the trajectory was set for the creative forms of exploitation yet to be devised.

It is heartbreaking to read of the many who fled bondage, leaving spouses and/or children to their plight. It is easy to consider them callous, but the fact is that Massa could sell any of them down the river on a whim at any moment. Often one slave was "married" (subject to involuntary dissolution) to another on a different plantation. Either master could decide to sell, compounding the complicated calculus of staying or making a break for freedom. It was a surprise to learn that a master's decision to break up a family often was mentioned as the catalyst for escape. It seems that if some slaves could just be assured of staying with their loved ones, they would willingly, if reluctantly, put up with the wicked system. Today, many in the dominant culture criticize what they might describe as the "instability" of the family constellation of many Black families, which they observe is often headed by a mother (frequently single), with an absent father. It is not difficult to draw a straight line from Black codes to the employment of desperation that was sharecropping, to the legalized discrimination of Jim Crow, to continued bias against employment of qualified Blacks, to

When she points out the myriad ways the White churches ignore clear biblical demands for justice, she is right to wonder whether they can claim the name Christian.

employment of last resort in the illegal drug and sex industries, to mass incarceration to understand the predicament of many Black families today. Many "absent fathers" are in prison. Many in the dominant culture smugly declare Black families to have inferior moral character while ignoring the culturally conceived and condoned conditions that created and continue many of the circumstances that Blacks also deplore.

The introduction and appendix, each, alone would have been worthy of study. The introduction, probably a late addition capitalizing on the raised consciousness of the events surrounding George Floyd's murder and its aftermath (the page numbers given in the study guide are off by the exact number of pages in the intro), is a powerful, up-to-the minute rehearsal of obstacles faced by Black people in America, particularly Descendants of American Slaves. It is a direct challenge to White Christians to take a hard look at where we are, how we got here, and what it will take to bring about justice. The appendix includes charts and statistics that document the disparity between

the resources and influence of White and Black Americans. Of particular relevance are the charts revealing the White Monopoly of Power (p. 100) and the rampant wealth inequality between the two races (p. 112). It also includes the Black Agenda of ADOS making the case for reparations specifically for Americans descended from former slaves. The Black Agenda is helpful in presenting the case for reparations and including options like educational opportunities and tax credits that do not necessarily involve a transfer of money. Other suggestions include payouts, but some seem vague.

Mills is adept at stoking outrage in the reader (along with a healthy dose of shame). Among facts particularly disturbing to me were:

- A New Orleans doctor published an article in which he proposed that enslavement was a natural state for Blacks; therefore, any Black who wanted to be free was mentally ill.
- Some *antebellum* currency of Southern states had likenesses of slaves on them because they were the basis of the economy.
- Slavery spawned modern credit markets which allowed slaves to be mortgaged and used as leverage to buy more slaves. Such securities traded on European markets. It is the same system used today in the home mortgage industry.
- The 3.2 million slaves held in the American South were valued at $1.3 billion, almost equal to the entire Gross National Product.
- Lynching was treated as a form of entertainment. Some were advertised, including the availability of a special train to take spectators, including women and children, to the spectacle.

But Mills rightly refuses to let the reader think outrage is nearly enough and refuses to let us settle for easy lip service. Many of the provocative questions each day include a call to action such as, *Besides praying about Black oppression, what tangible things can you do to be an answer to your own prayers? <u>When will you begin?</u>* (emphasis added*). Or, in remembering the popular slogan, White silence = White consent, are you willing to risk ridicule and scorn for speaking up and standing alongside African Americans? <u>What would make this sacrifice too high a price for you to pay?</u>* (emphasis added*).*

As an appropriately chastised White Christian who has not been nearly anti-racist enough over my lifetime, I hesitate to offer any critique. Mills holds the unassailable high ground of the righteously indignant Old Testament prophet crying for justice; so, I enter "Black space" with trepidation and what I hope is recognizable as the humility Mills encourages. There is a bit of overstatement and hyperbole in the book that I do not find helpful. Did the enslaved contribute much to the building of this country? Absolutely. Was it *all* built on their backs? Hmm. There is usually a legitimate argument against it to be made when someone speaks in absolutes, even if implied. It can empower detractors and give pause to people of goodwill who otherwise could agree enthusiastically. I had a similar concern with the slogan *Black Lives Matter*, which I wholeheartedly support. All the detractors had to say was, "*All* Lives Matter" to undercut the force of the movement. This suggestion may be offensive to those who inhabit Black space in every moment; but to this visitor to Black space, *Black Lives Matter <u>Too</u>* would have needed no explanation or qualification and left no question as to the racism of those who could not affirm it. The statement is also made in the book that "Blacks in America, by definition, cannot be racist. Racism is prejudice plus power." A recent article in the *Atlantic* addresses how slippery the definition of *racist* or *racism* has become; but to say "by definition" raises the immediate question of by whose definition? The suffix *-ism* is generally applied to a set of beliefs, in this case beliefs about members of a race different from one's own. Within the last two or three years, an article in the *Christian Century* quoted an African American woman who said (and I paraphrase from memory), that everyone is racist to some degree. The difference, she said, is that Black people do not have the power to impose their racism upon others as the predominantly White culture does. That power is a key factor in how racism affects society is undeniable; that not having power absolves a person or group from being racist is arguable. To make such sweeping statements can unnecessarily hinder people of good will from making common cause and make it easier for opponents to gain a toehold.

Reading *Lent of Liberation* was an experience I needed and recommend to everyone. I believe that reading it as a member of a group study took it to a level that an individual reading would not have. Our group of lily-white, mostly Southern, "people of a certain age" benefited from the participation of an African American friend, who, with great tact, kept us honest and helped us notice things people from the majority culture tend not to see. She, like Mills, challenged us to dig deeper and move beyond mere awareness to action. We all are better for the experience. ■

Deck Guess, a minister of the PCUSA, is Transitional Pastor of Banner Elk Presbyterian Church in Banner Elk, NC.

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