WESLEY, WHITEFIELD, AND WHITE EVANGELICALISM: ENGAGING RACIAL ISSUES IN PASTORAL MINISTRY & CHRISTIAN FORMATION

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We often don't like to discuss racial issues in our circles. It's often uncomfortable, challenging, and risks offending some. But as pastor-theologians charged with overseeing "local productions" of the gospel,[2] we cannot ignore the racism present in our communities and in our society. Racism goes against the grain of the gospel by advocating for a superior class of people based on skin color or cultural differences, and for the structures and systems of societies to benefit the superior group. In contrast, the gospel claims that "all people are equally guilty before a holy God but who can be recipients of grace if they trust in Christ."[3] The very thrust of the gospel maintains that there is no distinction between races, which are socially constructed categories.[4] What is needed, then, is a fresh Christian vision to counteract our susceptibility to conform to the pattern of the world in the area of racism.

Rather than offer a dense treatise on tackling the issue of racism in evangelicalism, I would like to narrow my focus to look at a few key thinkers, ponder how they contribute to this conversation regarding race and White evangelicalism, and how pastor-theologians can help their people untangle racism from Christian formation. I will first briefly touch on how the gospel and racial conciliation go hand in hand before turning to the work of J. Kameron Carter and Willie James Jennings in discussing how theology and racism are more closely aligned than we may think. The work of Carter and Jennings sets up the core of my paper—a case study examining how John Wesley and George Whitefield disagreed on something other than

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[2] Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 448.

[3] Timothy Isaiah Cho, "Is Racism a Social Issue or a Gospel Issue?" Retrieved from https://cccdiscover.com/is-racism-a-social-issue-or-a-gospel-issue/?utm_ content=bufferd4411&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer

[4] A helpful volume for thinking about the socially constructed nature of race is Tracy Ore's *The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*, 7th Edition (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

predestination: slavery. From there, I ponder how White evangelicalism specifically has been held captive by American individualism, and how such intellectual and spiritual captivity has manifested itself in the dismissal of important racial issues. I close by offering some thoughts on how pastor-theologians serve as agents of racial conciliation in both their ecclesial and academic circles. Ultimately, I argue that the church is often habituated and shaped more by the liturgies of society rather than by the gospel in the area of racism, and that racism is a matter of communal Christian formation rather than simply a problem "of the heart."[5]

THE GOSPEL AND RACE

We must begin by understanding that the gospel and racial concilia-tion are inherently connected. Gombis makes this connection quite well. He suggests that Jesus "came proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God—the arrival of that new reality in which the brokenness of creation is being restored," a byproduct of which is the conciliation of people.[6] The creation and fall narratives in the book of Genesis suggest that prior to the fall, creation was wholly integrated with God, living in perfect harmony together. However, the rebellion of Adam and Eve introduced sin into the world, thereby bringing a schism between God and humankind. This relational divide between God and humankind extended to the relation-ships of humans.

Gombis suggests that whereas pre-fall relationships were characterized by transparency and intimacy, "things are now utterly broken, and sin is carried out within broken relationships...So even before we're out of Genesis, we have murder, incest, rape, racial strife, the enslavement of nations, and on and on."[7] The conciliation that occurs between God and humans and inter-human relationships extends to relationships between individuals and peoples from across a spectrum of racial, ethnic, and national identities. King asserted that "Racism is a philosophy based on a contempt for life," an assertion that "one race is the center of value and object of devotion, before which other races must kneel in submission...Racism is total estrangement. It separates not only bodies, but minds and spirits. Inevitably it descends to inflicting spiritual or physical homicide upon the out-group."[8] We see this play out throughout the Old Testament, as Israel, God's chosen people, thought themselves superior to other nations whom God was attempting to reconcile to himself. For instance, Jonah's contempt for the Ninevites,

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[5] See George Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006). Yancey suggests that racism can be understood individually and systemi-cally. His thinking aligns with the work of Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). White evangelicals tend to think of racism as a problem of the heart rather than a systemic issue.

[6] Timothy Gombis, "Racial Reconciliation and the Gospel," ACT Review (2006), 117–128.

[7] Gobmis, "Racial Reconciliation and the Gospel," 119.

[8] Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here*, (kindle ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1967), loc. 1141.

according to Piper, was because of his racism and "hyper-nationalism."[9] Racism thus runs counter to St. Paul's assertion that all are equal before God (Gal. 3:28).

The life and ministry of Jesus exemplifies how the gospel and racial conciliation are bound up with each other. While much of our literature asserts that Jesus reached out to those "on the margins," Jesus was, in fact, a part of the margins of society. While we often highlight in our churches that Jesus entered the world during the *Pax Romana*, this era was not "peaceful" for Jews, women, or slaves. Jesus Himself was a racial, ethnic, and religious minority living under Roman occupation. Moss even suggests that Jesus was the victim of racial profiling, state-sponsored oppression, and ultimately, state-sponsored execution.[10] As Moss notes, "Jesus lived a life as a colonized person and as a minority in a community that was under siege by an occupying army," and was acquainted with "poverty created by an empire," and with patriarchy, "since not a single brother would listen to any of the sisters when they announced, 'Guess what y'all, the tomb is empty!'"[11] Moreover, it is fascinating to note that much of Christ's activity did not take place in the context of the temple or synagogues; his interactions with people occurred in the countryside, on mountains, on seas, and in peoples' homes.

The ministry of Paul is another example of racial conciliation. Paul's epistolary corpus sought to bring together the Jews and Gentiles under the banner of Christ, as both had separate histories, theologies, and values that shaped their thinking on Christian faith. Paul was aware of the struggles that occupied these people groups, such as the matter of consuming meat that had been sacrificed to idols (Rom. 14), and sought to accommodate each group while emphasizing their unique oneness. Paul never sought to privilege one group or the other. Rather, he sought to create an equitable community for both Jews and Gentiles to worship and live together. As the body of Christ, our union with one another must reflect this cross-racial and ethnic unity, as we seek to "work for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity, and especially for those in the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10, CEB). Thus, in our unity as the people of God, we are required to seek the good of one another; this necessarily extends to seeking justice for those marginalized in the church and in broader society.

Before turning attention to Wesley and Whitefield, I turn to the more recent proposal of J. Kameron Carter in understanding race as a theological problem. Carter argues in his masterful work, *Race: A Theological Account,* that the modern construction of "race" is primarily theological, and, thus,

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[9] John Piper, "The Education of a Prophet: Jonah," retrieved from https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-education-of-a-prophet-jonah. I would contend that Jonah's distaste for the Ninevites was based on more ethnic, cultural, and religious considerations, but his sense of superiority parallels contemporary racist thoughts and actions.

[10] Otis Moss, Otis Moss III, *Blue-Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

[11] Ibid., p. 19.

the solution to racism is theological as well.[12] Carter reasons that a number of early Christian writers, such as Irenaeus and Gregory of Nyssa were concerned that Christological heresies sought to dehistoricize Jesus, severing Him from His Jewish identity. Carter writes that Irenaeus of Lyons "reclaims Christ's humanity as made concrete in his Jewish flesh as a central feature of both Christian identity and the theological imagination."[13]

Fast forward to the time of Immanuel Kant. Carter suggests that in arguing for the supremacy of reason, Kant constructed a racial order upon the world. If reason is the epitome of thought and existence, and White European men are those who can lay claim to the tradition of reason, then White European males are the superior class. Bound up in reason came the superiority of *Whiteness* as a theological and racial category. This sense of superiority led to the idealization of Whiteness to the detriment of the *other*. Jennings defines Whiteness as "a social and theological way of imagining, an imaginary that evolved into a method of understanding the world" that privileges Whites.[14] Key to Carter's careful argumentation is the notion that Christian theology began embracing a theology of supersessionism, that is, the replacement of the Jews as the people of God by the church. The church in the modern era created a binary between the Jews (seen as the inferior race) and Gentiles (pictured as White Europeans). The Europeans, in Kantian thought, are destined to become the holders of "the supreme rational religion," over against the Jews and other non-Whites.[15] Carter, picking up on the concerns of Irenaeus, writes:

> Christology, that area within the theological curriculum that investigates the person and work of Jesus Christ, was problematically deployed to found the modern racial imagination. For at the genealogical taproot of modern racial reasoning is the process by which Christ was abstracted from Jesus, and thus from his Jewish body, thereby severing Christianity from its Jewish roots…In making Christ non-Jewish in this moment, he was made a figure of the Occident. He became white, even if Jesus as a historical figure remained Jewish or racially a figure of the Orient.[16]

The biologization of race and ethnicity and the *dehistoricization* of Jesus from his Jewish identity thus came to serve as a theological means of legitimizing the colonization of indigenous peoples in the Americas and the use of enslaved African labor in order to construct a new society—the United States.

Jennings provides a crucial anecdote that demonstrates the pervasiveness of the racist logic that preceded the modern era. In the Fifteenth-century,

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[12] J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008).

[13] Carter, Race: *A Theological Account*, 7.

[14] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010): 58.

[15] Carter, Race: *A Theological Account*, 82.

[16] Carter, Race: *A Theological Account*, 7.

Prince Henry offered a "tithe" of thanksgiving to be given to God for his remarkable blessing on his expedition.

> This ritual was deeply Christian, Christian in ways that were obvious to those who looked on that day and in ways that are probably even more obvious to people today. Once the slaves arrived in the field, Prince Henry, following his deepest Christian instincts, ordered a tithe be given to God through the church. Two black boys were given, one to the principal church in Lagos and another to the Franciscan convent on Cape Saint Vincent. This act of praise and thanksgiving to God for allowing Portugal's successful entrance into maritime power also served to justify the royal rhetoric by which Prince Henry claimed his motivation was the salvation of the heathen.[17]

The "slaves as tithe" motif served a broader purpose by proposing a new grand story of salvation. "African captivity leads to African salvation, and to black bodies that show the disciplining power of faith."[18] The theological construction of Whiteness combined with this parody of the *ordo salutis* created powerful logic that formed and shaped racial attitudes for centuries to come.[19] Those who could not demonstrate an ability to "reason" were inferior, leading to a host of violent actions, such as mass slaughter of indigenous people and the enslavement of Africans.

If we believe that theology pervades our lives and being, and holds the key to understanding and interpreting the known world, it makes sense that the concepts of race and racism would have theological grounding. Racism is a deviation from the gospel, the product of a flawed theology whose telos is shaped by the gospel. However, as we will see, even the brightest theologians and preachers can embrace a problematic and troubling understanding of race and racism rooted in priorities other than the gospel.

WESLEY, WHITEFIELD, AND SLAVERY: A CASE STUDY

One of the most historic relationships in Christian theological history is that of John Wesley and George Whitefield. The two had met at Oxford University, where they founded the so-called "Holy Club." The Holy Club would later give birth to Methodism and its distinctive theology and practice. While Wesley and Whitefield are generally remembered for their conflict over the nature of predestination, election, and free will—a strong point of contention between the two was the institution of slavery. Wesley was adamant in his abhorrence of slavery, while Whitefield eventually took part in the practice. The following section details a small case study in how the logic of racism often forms believers in ways contrary to the gospel.

John Wesley was an ardent opponent of slavery. His abhorrence of slavery intensified in the later years of his life, as he worked tirelessly to

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[17] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, loc. 289-308.

[18] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, loc. 385.

[19] James K.A. Smith picks up on this language in *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

end the practice. Wesley's argument against slavery and racism had three elements: theological, ethical, and anthropological. His anthropological argument against slavery rested on an appeal to the equality that all humans possess before God. "Plainly, the Scriptures had concluded them all under sin—high and low, rich and poor, one with another."[20] In Wesley's theology, since all humans are born in sin and must respond to the call of salvation, there exists no difference between those Europeans and Africans. Madron suggests that for Wesley, "no valid distinctions [were] to be made between the races, insofar as human value or basic human nature was concerned."[21] Moreover, Wesley saw in many African societies the values of justice and mercy embodied in ways that the European societies did not. They were fair and just in all of their dealings, "unless white men have taught them otherwise."[22]

Wesley especially took issue with the practices of slave traders, whom he referred to as "men-butchers," directly questioning their humanity and compassion.[23] The practice of contriving wars and drunkenness among Africans was especially abhorrent to Wesley. The whole process of the slave trade was dehumanizing, particularly the voyage to the United States, which culminated in the enslaved Africans "again [being] exposed naked to the eyes of all that flock together, and the examination of their purchasers."[24]

Slave owners were just as immoral, as they were the "spring that puts all the rest in motion."[25] For Wesley, the very institution of slavery was a contradicted the traditions of liberty and freedom upon which rested Western society. "Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air: and no human law can deprive him of that right."[26] Therefore, it was within Wesley's heart to "strike at the root of this complicated villany," and "absolutely deny all slave-holding to be consistent with any degree of natural justice"[27] Wesley grounded this aspect of his argument in an appeal to natural law and an understanding of good human relations.

While Wesley was against slavery in all circumstances, some of his contemporaries were more accepting of the practice, accommodating the predominant views of the day. Whitefield was initially a critic of slavery. Anthony Benezet, a Quaker, wrote in a letter that Whitefield "at first clearly saw the iniquity of this horrible abuse of the human race, as manifestly appears from [a] letter he published on that subject."[28] However, after

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[20] Wesley, *Journal, Works*, Volume. I, 198 (June, 1739).

[21] Madron, Thomas, "John Wesley on Race: A Christian View of Equality," Methodist History, 2.4 (July 1964), 24-34.

[22] Wesley, *Works*, Volume XI, "Thoughts Upon Slavery," 64-65.

[23] Wesley, *Works* (Jackson edition), Volume IV (Journal), 95-6 (April 14, 1777).

[24] Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Slavery," 67-68.

[25] Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Slavery," 78.

[26] Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Slavery," 79.

[27] Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Slavery," 70.

[28] Quoted in Benezet's letter to Lady Huntingdon. Whitefield's complete letter is David D. Thompson, *John Wesley as a Social Reformer*, 43-45.

prolonged exposure to slavery, Whitefield's views began to shift. Whitefield, writing to Wesley, pondered whether or not those born as slaves have any concept of freedom, and thus, would be content to remain in a state of bondage.

> I also cannot help thinking that some of those servants mentioned by the apostles in their epistles were, or had been, slaves. It is plain that the Gibeonites were doomed to perpetual slavery; and, though liberty is a sweet thing to such as are born free, yet to those who never knew the sweets of it slavery, perhaps, may not be so irksome.[29]

Whitefield also believed that slavery was necessary in order to cultivate "hot countries."[30] "What a flourishing country might Georgia have been had the use of [enslaved Africans] been permitted years ago!"[31] While Whitefield did not believe the acquisition of enslaved Africans was fair or just, he did believe that God had somehow ordained the slave trade. He thought it good that he would purchase a number of enslaved Africans in order to "make their lives comfortable" and "lay a foundation" for them to come to know Christ. Ultimately, Whitefield saw the institution of slavery as a means to evangelize and disciple enslaved Africans. He also dismissed all other concerns as being subservient to the ultimate goal of evangelization. To conclude his letter to Wesley, he writes, "I trust many of [the enslaved Africans] will be brought to Jesus, and this consideration, as to us, swallows up all temporal inconveniences whatsoever."[32]

Brendlinger suggests that Whitefield's change of heart was primarily due to economic reasons. Whitefield had purchased the Orphan House of Georgia, and believed that funding could come from the cultivation of 640 acres of land he had inherited. As Whitefield mentioned in the aforementioned letter, he argued that enslaved Africans were necessary for the cultivation of land in hotter climates. "His commitment to the orphanage coupled with the prevailing view of the landowners of the south convinced him that black laborers, because of their previous African climate, were well suited to such labor."[33] Brendlinger also suggests that Whitefield's advocacy of slavery was also informed by sustained exposure to the practices of southern land owners. Benezet, the Quaker who had frequent correspondence with Whitefield, believed that Whitefield had grown to accept the prevailing sentiment of the day—that slavery, though an evil, could serve economic purposes while facilitating the conversion of a people group. In a letter written after Whitefield's death, Benezet observed about Whitefield that "for tho' the spiritual advantage of the Slaves is pleaded…it plainly appears that the temporal advantage, resulting from

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[29] David D. Thompson, *John Wesley as a Social Reformer*, 43-45.

[30] David D. Thompson, *John Wesley as a Social Reformer*, 43-45.

[31] David D. Thompson, *John Wesley as a Social Reformer*, 43-45.

[32] David D. Thompson, *John Wesley as a Social Reformer*, 43-45.

[33] Irv Brendlinger, "Wesley, Whitefield, a Philadelphia Quaker, and Slavery," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 169.

their labour, is the principal motive for undertaking to defend the practice."[34] Thus, Benezet asserted that Whitefield's advocacy for slavery was based on economic reasons rather than spiritual or theological. His exposure to the predominant thought and practice of his day eventually convinced Whitefield in his heart that slavery *might* be a positive contribution to society, as some enslaved Africans *might* come to know Jesus through the witness of benevolent masters.

Some interesting observations can be made about Wesley and Whitefield's interaction regarding the institution of slavery. While Wesley was stalwart in his universal and transtemporal condemnation of slavery, Whitefield slowly succumbed to adopting the predominant ideologies of British colonial society at the time. His eventual adoption of slavery as a preferable, even Christian, practice was the result of continued exposure. In other words, the liturgy of support for slavery was ultimately what formed Whitefield's thought on slavery, leading him to cite biblical references to support his position while ignoring the broader thrust of the gospel message.[35]

The point here is to demonstrate that even in the midst of the logic and ideology that condoned and championed slavery, someone like Wesley was able to maintain a position that advocated for abolition, while his counterpart allowed himself to be formed more by the liturgies of the world rather than by the gospel. Reflecting on Whitefield's legacy, Kidd writes,

> I do admire Whitefield because of his passionate commitment to the gospel, but his relationship to slavery represents the greatest ethical problem in his career. It represents an enduring story of many Christians' devotion to God but frequent inability (or unwillingness) to perceive and act against social injustice…Even the most sincere Christians risk being shaped more by fallen society than by the gospel.[36]

Carter's accounts of race as a theological construct is evident in the interaction between Wesley and Whitefield. Whitefield had perceived that enslaved Africans, by virtue of living in hotter climates, were better-equipped to perform manual labor, rather than Whites. For Wesley, this appeared to be an aberration of the truth, for he himself was able to perform strenuous manual labor during his time in Georgia. Whitefield's thinking here demonstrates that he believed that the enslaved Africans were somehow inferior to Whites, for their purpose was to ultimately serve their White masters. This small case study demonstrates that even the most devout of Christians can find themselves on the wrong side of righteousness due to their inability to see injustice before their very eyes.

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[34] Brendlinger, "Wesley, Whitefield, a Philadelphia Quaker, and Slavery," 171.

[35] Brendlinger, "Wesley, Whitefield, a Philadelphia Quaker, and Slavery," 173.

[36] Thomas Kidd, "George Whitefield's Troubled Relationship to Race and Slavery," *The Christian Century,* accessed from https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2015-01/george-whitefield-s-troubled-relationship-race-and-slavery.

WHITE EVANGELICALISM AND RACISM

While Wesley and Whitefield lived and worked in a society that actively promoted slavery, we live in a different time. Slavery has been abolished, Jim Crow laws have been struck down, segregation is a thing of the past, and our nation's history of racism and violence is universally condemned by Christians. However, systemic racism, that is, racism that is infused into the structures of society, still exists. Before I move forward, I want to share several statistics that highlight the nature of systemic racism:

- Black people are 12 times more likely to be wrongfully convicted of drug-related crimes than Whites.[37]

- Schools are more segregated now than the 50's or 60's; over 75% of Black and Latinx students attend schools that are majority-minority.[38]

- A Black man is 3 times more likely to be searched at a traffic stop than a White man.[39]

- The average wealth of White families is $95,261, while the average wealth of a Black family is $11,030.[40]

These statistics are but a small sliver of the systemic racism present in the world today. One could interpret these statistics two different ways: that systemic racism is real and violent, inflicting perpetual pain on racially and ethnically minoritized groups, or, that racism is simply individualistic, and that these statistics demonstrate that White people work harder, have a stronger sense of morality, and have cultivated a developed sense of discipline and responsibility.

The latter (the individualistic belief) is the predominant viewpoint of White evangelicals. In their landmark study, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith interviewed over 2,000 White evangelicals on how they understand racial issues in the United States.[41] Their study suggested that White evangelicals often do not acknowledge systemic racism or interrogate their own White privilege. "Most white evangelicals, directed by their cultural tools, fail to recognize the institutionalization of racism—in economic, political, educational, social, and religious systems. They therefore

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[37] National Registry of Exonerations.

[38] S.F. Reardon, J.P. Robinson, and E. S. Weathers, "Patterns and Trends in Racial/Ethnic and Socioeconomic Academic Achievement Gaps" in H. A. Ladd and E. B. Fiske, editors, *Handbook of Research in Education Finance and Policy, Second edition* (Lawrence Erlbaum), forthcoming.

[39] U. S. Department of Education. (March 21, 2014). Expansion survey of America's public schools reveals troubling racial disparities: Lack of access to pre-school, greater suspensions cited. Office for civil rights. Retrieved from https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/expansive-survey-americas-public-schools-reveals-troubling-racial-disparities

[40] Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Traffic Stops," retrieved from https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?tid=702&ty=tp

[41] Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press).

often think and act as if these problems do not exist."[42] White evangelicals tend to assume that ethnic communities fail to succeed in life due to some deficiency in their motivation or within their culture. In other words, White evangelicals rather would have society color-blind and focused on individual responsibility and achievement. As Emerson and Smith note, "From the isolated, individualistic perspective of most white evangelicals and many other Americans, there really is no race problem other than bad interpersonal relationships."[43]

Why do White evangelicals adopt such a negative reaction to the problem of systemic racism? Emerson and Smith suggest the following:

> On careful reflection, we can see that it is a necessity for evangelicals to interpret the problem at an individual level. To do so otherwise would challenge the very basis of their world, both their faith and the American way of life. They accept and support individualism, relationalism, and antistructuralism. Suggesting social causes of the race problem challenges the cultural elements with which they construct their lives. This is the radical limitation of the white evangelical toolkit. *This is why anyone, any group, or any program that challenges their accountable freewill individualist perspective comes itself to be seen as a cause of the race problem.*[44]

D. A. Carson asserts a similar sentiment by suggesting that while Christians of color would contend that racial conciliation is a gospel issue, White Christians are "more likely to imagine that racial issues have so largely been resolved that it is a distraction to keep bringing them up."[45]

An example of the "freewill individualist" perspective in very recent history is in the case of the evangelical response to the police shootings in Ferguson, Missouri. A White police officer named Darren Wilson shot and killed a Black youth named Michael Brown. As a result, protests broke out, and in the midst, two police officers were shot and killed. In response, Franklin Graham tweeted out the following:

> Listen up—Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and everybody else. Most police shootings can be avoided. It comes down to respect for authority and obedience. If a police officer tells you to stop, you stop. If a police officer tells you to put your hands in the air, you put your hands in the air. If a police officer tells you to lay down face first with your hands behind your back, you lay down face first with your hands behind your back. It's as simple as that. Even if you think the police officer is wrong—YOU OBEY.

Graham's tweet generated the ire of a group of Black, Latinx, and Asian American religious leaders, who penned their own response to Graham.

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[42] Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 170.
[43] Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 89.
[44] Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 89.
[45] D.A. Carson, "What are Gospel Issues?" *Themelios 39* (2)(2014): 218.

> Frankly, Rev. Graham, your insistence that "Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and everybody else" "Listen up" was crude, insensitive, and paternalistic…The fact that you identify a widely acknowledged social injustice as "simple" reveals your lack of empathy and understanding of the depth of sin that some in the body have suffered under the weight of our broken justice system. It also reveals a cavalier disregard for the enduring impacts and outcomes of the legal regimes that enslaved and oppressed people of color, made in the image of God—from Native American genocide and containment, to colonial and antebellum slavery, through Jim Crow and peonage, to our current system of mass incarceration and criminalization.[46]

For Graham, the problem of police violence is simple: do what you're told to and you'll be fine. However, this naive response places the blame on the victim, and assumes that the system (signified by the police) is fine. Moreover, subtly embedded in this response is individualism; racially and ethnically minoritized people who are shot by police shoulder some of the blame for their own suffering and death. However, the systemic position would argue that police violence is the result of centuries of oppression, and that individual instances of police violence are the result of a system stacked against racially and ethnically minoritized groups. According to Emerson and Smith's research, most White evangelicals tend toward the former perspective, not necessarily out of malicious intent, but more out of the way they have been socialized.

The conflation of evangelicalism and Americanism that Emerson and Smith observe here serves as an especially concerning marriage. In a recent survey, the majority (53%) of White evangelicals suggested that immigrants were more likely to "threaten American values" compared to 32% of Black evangelicals, and 26% of Latinx evangelicals.[47] In contrast, 59% of Latinx evangelicals and 53% of Black evangelicals believe that immigrants "strengthen American values," compared to 32% of White evangelicals. These statistics demonstrate that some White evangelicals conflate Christian values with so called "American" values. Thus, those who are "outside" the mold of White, American evangelicalism are considered "other." Here we see the perpetuation of a theological understanding of race that privileges the White population (and its corollary beliefs, assumptions, values, and practices) over other racial and ethnic groups.

Wilder writes that the earliest institutions in the United States "were instruments of Christian expressionism, weapons for the conquest of indigenous peoples, and major beneficiaries of the African slave trade and

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46 Lisa Sharon Harper, "An Open Letter to Franklin Graham," March 19, 2015, http://sojo.net/blogs/2015/03/19/open-letter-franklin-graham.

47 Public Religion Research Institute, "How American View Immigrants, and What They Want from Immigration Reform," Retrived from https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/PRRI-AVA-2015-Immigration-Report-1.pdf

slavery."[48] In reacting to the marriage of White Christians, racism, and so-called "American values," Peter Leithart writes that

> Evangelicals fail to address racial issues in so far as they conform to American presumptions. A long-standing division in the church and society…becomes intractable because of evangelical inherence to the individualistic assumptions of the American way…To address the racial divisions in the churches more effectively, evangelicals have to repent, not (or not only) of our racism, but of our Americanism.[49]

The marriage between evangelicalism and Americanism has produced a body of Christians whose ideas regarding race and racism are informed more by cultural forces rather than the gospel. In some senses, the command to "work for the good of all" (Gal. 6:10) became more of an individualist charge than a command for a community. Thus, the church needs to push against the tendency toward individualism in the area of race, and consider how systemic racism continues to pervade our society, our churches, and our homes.

ENGAGING RACIAL ISSUES AS PASTOR-THEOLOGIANS: SOME THOUGHTS ON A MATTER OF CHRISTIAN FORMATION

Thus far, I have argued that while the gospel speaks into the need of racial conciliation and justice, Christians have often adopted attitudes more in line with societal tendencies and practices. This is evident not only in Wesley's interaction with Whitefield in the area of slavery, but also in how many of us respond to race-based violence and related incidents. Christian formation, thus, has not been effective in producing believers who stand with the poor, oppressed, and marginalized in society. Even James K.A. Smith in engaging with the work of Jennings suggests that the "virtue project," which assumes that Christian tradition is a cure for a myriad of ecclesial problems "conveniently ignores the church's capitulation to the horrors of modernity."[50] Thus, the art and science of spiritual formation needs to be understood within the context of greater societal forces that impact the church community and Christian individuals. As pastor-theologians, those charged with not only the theological nourishment of our churches, but also the broader landscape of Christendom, how can we effectively serve as agents of Christian formation in the areas of race and racism?

Perhaps a place to begin is in examining the kinds of texts and ideas with which we surround ourselves. By this I mean that we have a tendency to read and engage with the work of those with whom we agree. But I challenge my fellow pastor-theologians to examine the makeup of their bookshelves and see how many books by racially or ethnically minoritized

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[48] Craig Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy,* 17.

[49] Peter Leithart, *The End of Protestantism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 93.

[50] James K.A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017): 173.

scholars they have in their possession. Black, Latinx, Asian, and feminist theologies are forged in the fires of oppression, while evangelical theologies (thought extraordinarily valuable and useful) do not share the same kinds of histories. These histories inevitably shape our theologizing. For instance, James Cone remarks in his epic work, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* that "White theologians in the past century have written thousands of books about Jesus' cross without remarking on the analogy between the crucifixion of Jesus and the lynching of black people."[51] For Cone, there was no theological reflection of our nation's wicked history of slavery and lynching, as the White church "needed theologians to interpret the gospel in a way that would not require them to acknowledge white supremacy as America's great sin."[52] Evangelical theological reflection on the crucifixion usually takes the path of exploring various "theories" of the cross while ignoring the obvious parallels between the cross and race-based violence. Another example is how Martell-Otero suggests that it is a "disincarnate Christianity," one that emphasizes abstract belief and individual salvation, "that allows its adherents to exploit the poor, ignore the suffering, and smugly await a heavenly reward at no cost to them."[53] Filling our theological diets with the works of racially minoritized pastors and theologians can assist us in garnering a broader sense of how the gospel impacts different types of communities, and raises our awareness of how people different than us theologize their experiences. Our theologizing is strengthened, our ability to speak into various contexts grows, and we include the perspectives of those marginalized. To radically reshape the racial attitudes of our people, our diets must include perspectives that don't necessarily reflect our own experiences.

While engaging the works of racially minoritized theologians is beneficial for us, we cannot succumb to the temptation to claim that we are experts. As pastor-theologians, our business is words; we preach with them; we teach with them; we disciple with them; and we write with them. But perhaps before we speak into issues of racial injustice, we need to listen carefully to those who are in pain. I asked a friend of mine, a Black woman, what pastors should do to better engage issues of race. Her response was "Listen. Just listen. Shut up. Listen." When we fail to listen well, we run the risk of saying things birthed out of our inexperience and ignorance that end up hurting others and damaging our witness. Listening well is especially important when we seek to help people ponder the reality of racism in the United States today.

As mentioned previously, White evangelicals tend to emphasize the individual sin of racial prejudice over the wider problem of systemic racism. Those who suggest that racism is something other than an individual sin

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[51] James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012)*: 159.*

[52] James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching*, 160.

[53] Loida Martell-Otero, "From Satas to Santas: Sobrajas No More," in *Latina Evangelicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013): 49.

are often seen as the cause of racism.[54] A better theology of systemic sin could possibly alleviate the concerns that White evangelicals tend to have about the notion of systemic racism. John Piper's article, "Structural Racism: The Child of Structural Pride" is especially instructive in developing a theology of systemic sin. Piper addresses the "instinctive, white, evangelical reaction against the idea of *structural racism* or *systemic racism,*" knowing this is the typical response among White evangelicals.[55] At the core of Piper's argument is that since humans have created systems, and humans are inherently prideful, then systems are full of pride. Piper writes "No sin is more systemic and structural than pride. It is woven into every human institution. Selfish ambition, vain-glory, looking out for our own interests first, valuing the world over God."[56] Pride manifests itself in greed, lust, and fear, and these sins are cooked into human systems. With sinful systems that institutionalize sin in all its forms, "it would be inconceivable and utterly astonishing if there were no such thing as *structural racism.* In this world of sin and Satan and a decadent world system, it is incomprehensible that one sin would be privileged to escape systemic expression."[57] According to Piper, racism is the child of pride, and thus should be a given when discussing individual and corporate sins. An account such as Piper's may help Christians see that sins can be institutionalized, especially the sin of racism. Pointing to historical examples of slavery, Jim Crow laws, segregation, and anti-immigrant rhetoric may also help, but so will naming other examples of corporate sin, such as political corruption, guilty criminals avoiding jail time, and allowing the legality of abortion and prostitution in some areas. To boil it down, if we are all sinners, then the systems we create are sinful and perpetuate sins against others—like racism.

CONCLUSION

As we strive toward oneness in Christ, we cannot forget about the histories and perspectives of those coming from the margins. It is often too easy to say that we want to emphasize our unity (or our "unity through diversity") while ignoring the racial issues that plague our communities. As pastor-theologians, we must remain steadfast in promoting a vision for Christian formation that requires us to empathize with our racially and ethnically minoritized brothers and sisters and seek the good of all. In other words, we must recover a vision for the gospel's communal and systemic dimension. While this work is difficult, uncomfortable, and can often be seen as "divisive," we must remain steadfast in seeking to untangle racism

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[54] Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 89.

[55] John Piper, "Structural Racism: The Child of Structural Pride," *Desiring God,* accessed from https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/structural-racism

[56] John Piper, "Structural Racism: The Child of Structural Pride."

[57] John Piper, "Structural Racism: The Child of Structural Pride."

from the process of Christian formation. In words traditionally attributed to John Wesley:

> Do all the good you can,
> By all the means you can,
> In all the ways you can,
> In all the places you can,
> At all the times you can,
> To all the people you can,
> As long as ever you can.

This includes challenging ourselves, our congregants, and those for whom we produce theological work in undoing any assumptions about race or racism that deviate from the inclusive and universal dimensions of the gospel.