

Fire in the Whole

*Embracing Our Righteous Anger
with White Christianity
and Reclaiming Our Wholeness*

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To assist with personal reflection and group discussion, a Spotify playlist curated by the author and downloadable versions of the guides at the end of the book are available at **www.wjkbooks.com/FireintheWhole**.

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Chapter 1

Lift Every Voice and Sing

*W*hat if I told you that your anger is holy? The question may feel more poignant if you imagine, as I do, that it comes from a leather-clad Lawrence Fishburne, poised in a red leather chair, wearing a killer pair of reflective sunglasses like in *The Matrix*. Growing up in church, I was *never* taught that anger was something that could be appropriate, right, and healthy. Anger, I learned, could only evince a lack of self-control, immaturity, and unhealth. Now, as an adult, in practicing law I have the opportunity to evaluate justice on a literal daily basis. My work, my faith, and my identity as an African American all lead to the inexorable conclusion that when God's heart burns with anger at injustice, ours should too. God created us with this emotion for a purpose.

Here's another epiphany: the apathy with which the church seems to just casually accept racism in its ranks is a manifestation of spiritual abuse. Twenty—or even ten—years ago, we could never imagine the rhetoric and vitriol that have become a hallmark of evangelicalism. But today, reliable statistics demonstrate that white evangelical voters were the decisive factor in President Trump's 2016 election. According to polling data compiled by Pew Research, 81 percent of people who identify as white, born-again or evangelical Christians voted for Trump in the 2016 election.¹ While those numbers dipped slightly in the 2020 election, polling also suggests that approximately seven in ten white Americans who attended religious services at least monthly supported Trump's

second run.² According to a national poll published by Monmouth University in 2022, 61 percent of Republicans believe that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from Trump.³ The same poll reveals that only 63 percent of Americans as a whole believe that Biden won the election without the influence of fraud.

But we hardly need those statistics, do we? We saw who the loudest and most aggressive supporters of Donald Trump were. We worshiped next to them on Sundays, endured their hysteria on social media, worked with them during the week, conversed with them at our children's soccer fields, grimaced while listening to them rant over Thanksgiving dinner, and watched them cheer as their heroes set their feet up on Nancy Pelosi's desk in the offices of the US Capitol. All observable data shows that the divisions in the body of Christ, and by extension our nation, fall squarely along racial lines. Worse, we know that these lines aren't just demarcations on issues of race. Misogyny and bigotry against LGBTQIA+ people follow closely behind; white supremacy and patriarchy walk hand in hand. We have much to lament.

Those of us most affected by these issues see their effect on the church clearly. And more often than not, we've been ridiculed, had our faith questioned, lost community, been alienated from family, been maligned by church leaders, been cast out from our congregations, and been forced to consider whether Christianity, as a whole, is a sham. But what about believers who claim not to see the problem? Truly, can anyone be so naive? The cognitive dissonance is bewildering:

- They support a completely depraved charlatan for highest political office because "God can use anyone," but they object to women in ministry?
- They say, "We're not electing a pastor," but they invite him to speak from the pulpit on a Sunday morning?⁴
- They want African angels doing miracles, but they don't want African Americans taking a knee?⁵
- They disagree with homosexuality "because it's sinful," but

they ignore the disturbing frequency of conservative Christian leaders exposed for sexual immorality?

- They'll pray and fast forty days for a spiritual breakthrough, but they can't wear a mask for forty minutes to prevent a breakthrough infection?

These glaring hypocrisies have done us great harm, but even more hurtful is the church's unwillingness to take responsibility for the damage it's done. To use the words of rapper J. Crum, "How you speak in tongues but can't apologize?"⁶ After all we have witnessed and endured these last several years, we have every right to be livid. Radicalism's stranglehold on white Christianity has given us much to be angry about.

What Is White Christianity?

Before we go any further, we need to define terms. Generally speaking, when we're discussing issues of race or theology, the more specific we can be, the better. Yet it's difficult to name the species that created this rift in the church with taxonomic precision due to the interplay of politics, racism, misogyny, bigotry, and theology in American Christianity.

One of my biggest pet peeves is how white Christian nationalists and MAGA Republicans (e.g., Richard Spencer, Stephen Wolfe, and Charlie Kirk, among others) seem uniquely capable of defining groups of human beings and cultural ideologies with overly broad, sweeping terminology. While it's clearly manipulative, those who utilize the tactic do so masterfully. For example, the term "woke" used to be exclusively utilized within the Black community in reference to those who are particularly insightful regarding social issues. The term gained popularity in mainstream Christianity shortly after the 2018 release of Eric Mason's book *Woke Church: An Urgent Call for Christians in America to Confront Racism and Injustice*. As believers of all races sought insight into the racial turmoil that

settled upon the United States shortly after its release, books like *Woke Church* flew off the shelves. But physics teaches us that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Lest they lose their voting bloc, Republicans and conservative Christians quickly began to spin “wokeness” as a threat to democracy. In short order, the term “woke” was appropriated as a derisive pejorative by white conservatives to drive a wedge between conservative Christians and the liberal minorities they were beginning to empathize with. Soon “woke” was contemptuously utilized as a euphemism for anything related to Black culture that white America deemed threatening—regardless of whether it was related to faith. Today, the term has been deployed so broadly that it encompasses anything that the political right can label as part of the “liberal agenda,” despite their continued inability to define the term. As an illustration, conservative author Bethany Mandel went viral when she was at a loss to define “woke” during an interview promoting her book, despite having weaponized the word several times during her interview and having devoted a chapter of her book to it.⁷

By contrast, those of us who strive for intellectual honesty are not allowed to paint with such a broad brush. In fact, as Christians in social and political discourse, we are burdened with a level of precision that doesn’t inhibit those with political agendas. Namely, we have the obligation of aggressively critiquing what those who are corrupting our faith tradition are doing while simultaneously acknowledging that they are also created in the *imago Dei* (the image of God). Our convictions require that we fight fair, while theirs do not.

Therefore, while most Americans (particularly in the southern Bible Belt) would probably understand who we’re talking about if we were to label the troublemakers exclusively as “evangelicals,” the fact remains that we should acknowledge that term could be a political or theological designation. Meanwhile, outside of America, being labeled as an evangelical connotes little, if anything, more than the convictions of those ascribing to certain religious, doctrinal beliefs. There’s no political baggage associated with the designation.

It's not my intent to cast too wide a net. "White evangelicals" might be a sufficiently specific description. However, I do not want to be so limiting in my definition that I let those who contribute to the problem while not embracing an evangelical theological identity off the hook. There are many white Christians in Catholic or "mainline" Protestant denominations who may not identify *religiously* as evangelicals, but nonetheless embrace the toxic blend of religious and political conservatism I am describing here. Yet, paradoxically, some of those may still identify themselves as evangelicals in exit polls. How do we precisely describe such a nebulous group? The fact of the matter is that "toxic white American capitalistic patriarchal heteronormative Christian nationalism" just *does not* roll off the tongue. Nor would it serve us well to utilize an overly broad, derogatory term simply for the purpose of creating a label, as some conservatives have done with the term "woke." So, for now, the phrase "white Christianity" must serve as shorthand to describe *those whose orthodoxy and orthopraxy are dictated by an unshakable, yet misguided, tangle of faith and right-bridled political and social conviction that are antithetical to everything Christ represents.*

Lest we define "white Christianity" too narrowly, it is crucial to understand that white Christianity is also not about Christians who are white. Rather, it is a worldview that encourages cultural homogeneity through assimilation, or even promotion of nationalism, while giving equal emphasis to a unified stance *against* cultural phenomena (such as "wokeness") that it views as threatening to that homogeneity. In this way, it is completely possible for ethnically diverse congregations (even those led by African American pastors) to perpetrate the ills of white evangelicalism as they encourage minority conformity with majority culture. There's a difference between a *multiethnic* church, which has a visually diverse collection of races and ethnicities present in the congregation but lacks diversity in theological or political thought, and a *multicultural* church where the variety of cultures present all contribute to a diverse approach to reading and interpreting Scripture through various cultural lenses. In multiethnic assemblies a premium may

be placed on storefront diversity—utilizing people of color in promotional materials, websites, and front-facing positions—to attract other minorities and create a mirage of inclusivity. But it lacks true diversity of social, political, and theological views. Allowing ourselves to be used as tokens in such manner comes at great emotional and spiritual cost. Tokens get spent.

This power dynamic necessarily causes conflict when minorities point out ways in which the gospel conflicts with our modern, consumerist, American cultural iteration of Christianity. Examined in this context, *white Christianity is also that subset of Christianity that intentionally ignores, or does not consciously consider, the effects of racism or prejudice—in either the church or society—on the marginalized, nor cares to, having been given the resources and information to do so.*

White Christianity is also that subset of Christianity that intentionally ignores, or does not consciously consider, the effects of racism or prejudice on the marginalized.

As specific as I've attempted to be, I confess I still struggle with the phrase "white Christianity." For one, as a Black person, it feels to me as though any reference to "whiteness" has more weight leaving my lips than it does when Caucasians utilize it. I envy white authors who are permitted to address the impact that white supremacy and its twin brother, patri-

archy, have on our relationships and theology without receiving the same level of protest that minorities receive for saying the same things. Indeed, it feels as though our white allies are allowed to discuss whiteness clinically, as a state of mind—an assumption of normalcy in every facet of life that threatens historic, academic, and religious honesty, and that, once identified, may be recognized as problematic—whereas whiteness is understood as nothing more than a skin color dividing cultures when minorities attempt to have these conversations.

Moreover the burden of proof for white allies seeking to prove that whiteness is detrimental to the body of Christ seems much lower than for African Americans attempting to do the same. Where

a preponderance of the evidence seems sufficient for white people to prove their case, minorities making the same point must convince the same jury beyond a reasonable doubt.* Perhaps these are unavoidable biases brought by all who engage in challenging cultural conversations. Still, it's important to name these double standards in order to reduce their influence on our work.

So, now that we know how to identify those who caused us this pain, how do we identify ourselves, we who have suffered such terrible blows from religion wielded like a blunt instrument? My hope is that over the course of this book, we begin to identify ourselves as survivors rather than as victims. The distinction is in our progress toward healing. There is a difference between speaking from a place of scars and speaking from a place of wounds. Wounds are traumas that have not fully healed. On the other hand, scars reveal places where we were once wounded but healing has taken place. The healing may not be complete or even adequate. But it is no longer an active injury that impacts us in the same way.

Many things about my journey from white evangelicalism still hurt. Some traumas I will continue to work through for the rest of my life. Regarding some facets of spiritual abuse, I understand that I will be in lifelong recovery in the same way that those who go through formal efforts at recovering from addiction are taught to recognize that recovery is a lifelong process. But, for the most part, I can call myself a survivor of racialized spiritual abuse. As such I can speak about most of these issues from a place of scars. Either way, it is important that we see ourselves as survivors, even if it still hurts.

You can identify yourself as a survivor of white evangelicalism if you've left a church community feeling as though you were not free to be entirely who you are due to their complicity with racism. You

*In law, winning different kinds of cases requires different levels of proof. In a civil case, where the parties are typically fighting over money (because of a business dispute or a car accident, for example), one must prove one's case by a preponderance of the evidence to prevail. This simply means convincing the jury that the evidence tips the scales in favor of one side by an amount of 51 percent or greater. However, in a criminal case, the government must prove that the accused committed the crime beyond a reasonable doubt, the highest standard of proof that exists in law.

left; you're a survivor. If you felt as though a perspective of Scripture emphasizing liberation and social equity was tolerated, but not promoted, in the church you departed from, count yourself among our number. If your church leaders taught the Bible through a politicized lens that elevated nationalistic sentiment, quickly endorsed so-called conservative political candidates but overlooked their gross character flaws in favor of the church gaining political "influence" (read: power), you are a survivor. If, in your faith community, "unity" was more important than accountability, we can lament together. If you have been written off as "divisive" or "liberal" for reminding believers what the Bible teaches us about justice or love of our minority neighbors, look no further; you have found your people. If you feel abandoned by the very people who taught you the principles that buoy your faith, and feel you are screaming into the wind that the idea of refusing to discuss racism in the church is unfathomable, you are a survivor. These examples are endemic to the racialized psychological warfare practiced by white Christianity. Said another way, these are examples of spiritual abuse.

The Fire We Gather Around

It's only because I've dealt with the intense heat of anger that the duplicity of white Christianity generates in me that I am beginning to feel that I can walk in wholeness now. This is what I want for you. This is the work ahead of us: embracing that righteous sense of anger that burns within toward white evangelicalism, placing it in its proper context, fostering our departure, and illuminating our path to healing. And in a lot of ways the point is the journey. Perhaps the real antiracism work was the friends we lost along the way.

In the book of Revelation, we are encouraged that the faithful will persevere through the blood of the Lamb and the power of their testimony (Rev. 12:11). As we work together through this pain, we have in common that our present grief is part of the testimony we look forward to. Perhaps you recall Paul's encouragement to the Romans that our trials produce character. The translations we

typically read sound like a morbid pep rally, something akin to “suffering is great! It leads to perseverance, which builds character!” The somber insights of the *First Nations Version* feel much closer to what I imagine the apostle intended for his original audience:

But we must also find joy in our sufferings on his behalf. For we know that when the trail gets rough, we must walk with firm steps to reach the end. As we walk firmly in his footprints, we gain the strength of spirit that we need to stay true to the path. This gives us the hope we need to reach the end of the trail with honor. All of this is because of Creator’s great love that has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who is his gift to us from above. (Rom. 5:3–5)

We will overcome, but for now, it is enough to mourn, taking our lives one step—one day—at a time. Your frustrations are valid. The tension you feel in your body is real. Your depression is justified. Our anger is righteous.

As I process my grief with other people, one of the questions that just won’t go away is “Where did everything go wrong?” What were the first indications that something was awry? Unfortunately, evangelicalism has given us lots of options to choose from: the disillusionment of missionaries who have given up everything to do overseas ministry work when they realize that white evangelicalism could never have adequately prepared them; culture shock after returning from abroad; exposure to diversity of thought from Christians of other cultures; a pastor’s hard right turn into politics; the stigmatization of divorce and bias against single mothers; erasure of women; misogynistic demands for “biblical submission”; differing standards for men and women; pastors having affairs; unhealthy parenting practices; homophobia; political support of former president Trump; failure to respond appropriately to the COVID-19 pandemic; promotion of conspiracy theories; politicized responses to immigration; failure to respond to the poor; indifference toward mass shootings; the hypocrisy and fall of well-known Christian public figures or institutions; tolerance of psychophysical, emotional, and sexual abuse; syncretism of capitalism and

evangelicalism; culture war fatigue; hysteria over critical race theory (CRT) or diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); accusations of Marxism; failure to acknowledge the impact of world events on minorities in the congregation; complicity with racism; adoption of culturally offensive rhetoric; promotion of white supremacist ideology cloaked in the authority of biblical teaching; refusal to correct course; inability to apologize. . . . Truly, there is much for the white evangelical church to atone for.

And atone it must. It will be up to us to hold the church accountable. As a Black man married to a white woman and raising interracial children, my need for the church to speak appropriately into societal matters like police brutality, racism, and xenophobia isn't theoretical. The hypocrisies that the church tolerates, the sheep are raised to view as normal. For example, when white public figures are caught using slurs candidly on a hot mic, or white police officers are tried for murdering minorities, one of the first defenses proffered in their favor is how well they are regarded as good Christian people. Yet their supposed faith in Christ apparently provides them no insight into how Christ calls us to love our neighbors. The faith defense is a commonly utilized ploy because it works.

How does this happen? Historians can give us specific insights into the church's evolving complicity. But every historical mile marker we point to is really just an indicator that evangelicalism has failed to teach love of neighbor as a governing dynamic of the gospel. We already know what went wrong. It is past time to shift our energies from "How did we get here?" and instead focus on a different question.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Jesus taught that the command to love our neighbors is akin to the first and greatest command of loving God (Matt. 22:34–40). It's kind of what God is all about. These are essential tenets of our faith. While we know that it is not our duty to pronounce eternal

judgment on the souls of humankind, if those claiming Christ miss this, I think it's fair to question whether they are actually even Christians. If they're not following Jesus, by definition, they are not Christians.*

It is the shepherd's duty to lead the flock appropriately. If the church isn't teaching God's people how to read Scripture with an ethic of justice and live holistic Christian lives, then it's no wonder we see this cognitive dissonance. For this reason, Paul admonishes, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Rom. 10:14). If a pastor persistently challenges their church to see minorities as neighbors and image-bearers, the white police officer who sits in that pew on Sunday and pulls over a person of color on Monday would, hopefully, feel less inclined to shoot first and ask questions later. The church's failure to show up for the marginalized and give full-throated guidance on God's view here is wildly practical—a matter of life and death.

So why is it so difficult to convince so many Christian leaders to publicly denounce racism in politics and in the church? In short, because they don't want to. This will be discussed in greater detail in the chapters that follow. But suffice it to say, we would be wise to stop giving the benefit of ignorance to those at issue by appreciating how much information has to be disregarded for the church to be complicit in racism. We will never see eye to eye with folks committed to looking down their noses at us. There is freedom to be found in accepting that we are not here by accident. It's not that they don't understand. The offenders have *chosen* to champion *superficial* notions of unity. They have chosen to participate in tokenism. They have chosen to silence the voices of minorities by labeling them as being out of harmony with their

*The word *Christian* literally means "little Christ"—that is to say, a reflection of Jesus himself.

mission. It is even more egregious when the pastors who condescend to minorities, dismissing their views of Scripture as “woke” or a “social gospel,” are no more theologically educated than those they deride.

It is healthy and right to name the ways that the church has acted, or failed to act, that contribute to our social, spiritual, and emotional demise. Mourning together is an inevitable and necessary part of deconstruction, and deconstruction is a prerequisite to reconstruction. There are no shortcuts. Our collective lament is the spark that ignites this fire we gather around. Our beacon. As the light increases, revealing our faces, we understand that we are not alone. We are, each of us, seen and known. There is beauty in the sorrow.

Gathering together provides not only strength in numbers but an acknowledgment that we collectively held a vision of Christianity that has been upended. Yet if we all once held that vision—if we see that the church has deviated from what it should be—it suggests that there is, among us, a picture of the church that may yet still be achieved, one quite different from the version of Christianity we were handed and are deconstructing. We carry within us an enduring hope of all that the body of Christ may yet become, despite its perversion. In this regard, our recognition of the counterfeit provides evidence that there is, somewhere, a genuine article. Even if we have never fully laid eyes on it. Thus we gather. We lament in one voice. And soon we will add fuel to the fire to produce even greater light—to expose what is amiss for the sake of seeing it made right.

As former Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis once opined, “Publicity is justly commended as a remedy for social and industrial diseases. Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman.”⁸ Similarly, “Selfishness, injustice, cruelty, tricks, and jobs of all sorts shun the light; to expose them is to defeat them,” wrote James Bryce. “No serious evils, no rankling sore in the body politic, can remain long concealed, and when disclosed, it is half destroyed.”⁹

If you share these sentiments, there is a community here to support you. Come, gather around this fire.

The Song We Sing

There is something wrong when church, the place we go for shelter and nurturing, becomes the place we feel least safe. This paradox has understandably forced many minorities to question whether the faith we hold is an accurate reflection of the God we worship or whether we've just projected our own desires for a benevolent God who sees the lowly and brokenhearted onto an invisible deity. For people of color, the fact that our brothers and sisters in Christ can't see, or refuse to acknowledge, that the church has become a forward operating base in a culture war that denies our dignity calls the credibility of all Christian witness into question. The added weight of seemingly irreconcilable theological quandaries to such a burden is enough to break the confidence of our faith. We have to ask, Is God real, and is God really who we thought?

As we reassess everything we have learned in our faith, as well as those we learned it from, those of us standing on shaky ground realize there are only two possibilities: either the Bible has misrepresented who Jesus is or white Christianity has misrepresented the Bible. If it's the latter, what do we do with the reverence and long-standing trust we developed for those we adored who claimed to speak on God's behalf? Just like that, welcome to deconstruction.

"Deconstruction" has become utilized almost as a pejorative, on one hand, or so muted in definition as to become unhelpful, on the other. On one end of the spectrum is a knee-jerk overreaction to the notion of believers questioning anything they've been taught. Here, it seems that most of what has conservative Christianity screaming that the sky is falling is actually nothing more than pensive reflection on faith claims that had previously gone unchallenged. Yet even this austere version of deconstruction seems threatening to those who have never questioned any aspects of their faith. On the other hand, some of the Christian influencers who have the biggest platforms to discuss deconstruction understate its significance by describing it in terms that feel cold and clinical, such as "reconsidering," "unbundling," or "re-examining inherited beliefs." These hardly acknowledge deconstruction for the

foundation-rattling experience that it can be. Matt Chandler, pastor at the Village Church in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex, has come under fire for a number of (justifiable) reasons. One of the most memorable, in my opinion, was his assertion that “deconstruction has become some sort of sexy thing to do.” This perspective has become too popular in evangelicalism—as though survivors of abuse choose to be ostracized from loved ones and question all that we’ve ever known.¹⁰

While I don’t want to belittle anyone’s faith journey, I can’t take either the alarmist or understated view of deconstruction seriously. My experience of deconstructing didn’t lead me to the left or right side of the spectrum. It took me *down*. For myself and those I’ve discussed deconstruction with, the process wasn’t faith-*shaking*; it was faith-*demolishing*. I’m talking about psychic warfare, capture, torture, and internment. My process of deconstruction, first and foremost, was not something that I wanted to admit I was even going through.

Here’s a helpful analogy. I started playing piano at an early age. My lessons began before I could read. Therefore, I wasn’t able to be taught most of music theory. Things like chords, cadence, scales, intervals—the elements that are essential to improvisation—would have to wait. Nevertheless, I became very talented at reading notes and playing what was handed to me from hours of practice and rote memory. I had an extensive repertoire to play from memory, anything from Scott Joplin’s “The Entertainer” to Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata.” I received many awards for my achievements in competitions. I got so good that I considered becoming a professional pianist one day. When I was sixteen, I began lessons with a different teacher, who attempted to teach me theory. By that point, however, I had more than a decade of experience learning to play with an incomplete understanding of how music worked, and I’d become adept at compensating to hide it. Having to admit what I didn’t know was embarrassing. It was as though I had never known music at all. Eventually, the frustration defeated me, and I stopped playing completely. Deconstruction felt very similar to me.

As someone raised in the church, baptized at an early age, I was terrified of admitting that I harbored—was even capable of harboring—areas of doubt or unbelief in my faith. Doubt was a shameful prospect for me because as far back as I can remember, my entire life has been in, and in service to, the church. I knew the Bible inside out, but now there were things that I couldn't account for. And without understanding the theory underlying the stories and letters that I'd learned from rote memory, I was unable to improvise when the contradictions challenged me. Far from the fun, sexy, flirtatious rebellion that deconstruction is often portrayed as, there were whole weeks where I was immobilized by the impact of feeling every phase of grief simultaneously. At other times, my lament was disorienting and violent—the feeling of perpetually crashing through each of the stages of grief like floors of a building. Think of the scene in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* when Tony dons the massive Hulk-buster armor and drives the Hulk through every level of an African skyscraper, nearly leveling a city block in the process. My deconstruction process was nuclear fission, an atom-smashing undoing of that which meant the most to me. It was an unraveling of my sanity.

I began at the top of a slippery slope (despite a sincere, lifelong communion with Christ) and finished dangling from the last inch of that slope by one frostbitten finger. I am not exaggerating to say that there was a point where I questioned the historical existence of every biblical figure prior to King David and even began looking at Jesus side-eyed. I was fortunate to have pastors to go to with my questions who helped pull me back onto the ledge. Even still, I will never be the same.

What about those who don't have a safe place to work out their faith? This is the space that I want to create here.

If I can accomplish one thing throughout the course of this book, I hope to help people understand that the discriminatory spiritual abuse that the church has put them through is unacceptable. Everything that white Christianity stands for is worth being angry about. And exposing the ways the church continues to harm survivors is

God's work. The process may expose us to criticisms, such as those from Matt Chandler. But it will also liberate us from the isolated, quiet litigation of our dignity on which our sanity teeters. And we can do it *together*. Truth be told, what other option do we have? We who share this passion for Christ but utter disdain for how he is maligned by Christianity suffer the same malady as Jeremiah: too weary from opposition to our witness to carry on, but unable to stop for the fire that burns within (Jer. 20:9). Indeed, "truth telling will cost you," says Dr. Thema Bryant. "Tell it anyway. Your silence costs you more."¹¹ If these words resonate with you, if you've discovered vocabulary for things that once felt impossible to explain to others, you are a survivor. We all are. And you're not alone.

Those of us gathered around this campfire represent a new community beginning to understand that our lived experiences are legitimate barometers of unhealth in the church. And our lived experiences are no longer subject to intellectual debate from the culprits of spiritual abuse—racialized spiritual abuse in particular. Though we mourn, we also choose to value our peace of mind and dignity as people created in the *imago Dei*. We simultaneously rue and embrace our creation of healthy boundaries for those committed to failing to understand us—even those closest to us. We resolve that we will no longer offer justifications for those who wounded us. We will speak loudly together. We will lend our voices to the chorus of the spiritually homeless.

As we gather around this fire, let us lift every voice and sing:

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us.
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
Let us march on till victory is won.¹²

A New Lens for a Color-Blind Church

If we glean anything from the development of the law throughout the civil rights movement, it should be how difficult the pioneers of that movement had it. Yet I envy the clarity of the work set before them. There were clearly defined obstacles in front of them that made their message coherent and their objectives clear. They fought for things such as equal pay, the right to vote, the right to sit in the same places as white people, the right to go to integrated schools, and the ability to have interracial relationships. No matter your opinions on race, the evening news made the disparity clear as minorities were blasted with fire hoses or attacked by canines for sitting outside businesses they wanted to patronize. Clear injustice. Because the obstacles were clearly observable, progress could be measured by observable transformations in society. In our era, discrimination is more subtle. Racism has found other rocks to hide behind. Often this is by design.

Prior to the civil rights movement, discrimination was like a cluster of balls on a pool table racked in triangle formation. Each ball represented an individualized system of injustice but, united in that grouping, they created a phalanx of discrimination. The impact of the civil rights movement broke that unified structure apart like a cue ball. Bam! Some balls fell in the pockets, never to return. The right to vote, for example, was a permanent victory,

though with an asterisk.* There remain a number of balls loosely scattered across the table; each represents an independent system in desperate need of reform, and each requires its own plan of attack. Though the cohesion of the separate spheres of injustice was broken, many remain on the table. Some are difficult to hit because they're lodged against the wall. You get the picture. The issues are still out there to be addressed, but they're no longer visibly clumped together in strength.

Plenty of people are doing great work in these spheres. I'm more interested in the table itself. Our current cultural climate. The atmosphere we breathe. Ways white Christianity accommodates those spheres and communicates that no legitimate reading of the Bible warrants teaching a responsibility to attack them. The campaign to demonize a theology of liberation is so effective that our greatest efforts are taken not in debating *how* we achieve the goal but whether we should pursue it at all. Because the methods of oppression utilized today are subtle, even invisible, minorities who address specific issues head-on are perceived as overreacting, reduced to "angry Black folks" who cannot just get along with people. In ways subtle and not so subtle, minorities are accustomed to being told to stop talking, even in the church.

"Give the pastor grace for that culturally inappropriate comment."

"Everyone's so sensitive that we (white men) can't joke about race anymore."

"What you thought was racism really wasn't racism."

"You're taking it wrong."

"Racism really doesn't exist now."

"Christians don't see color."

"White privilege doesn't exist."

"I put myself through college (with mom and dad's money);

*There is another discussion to be had about how the right to vote is whittled away through gerrymandering, school-to-prison pipelines, targeted policing, abuse of prosecutorial discretion, wrongful felony convictions, and laws prohibiting felons from voting. Save that for another day.

I didn't get a scholarship to be here. (Like you must have. Surely that's the only way you got here.)"

"All lives matter."

It seems that white Christianity expects us to be seen and not heard. Point of clarification: In this context, "seen" means becoming a harmonious but inactive part of the background. Like trees in the landscape, but not active participants in important conversations. Unless it's February, in which case we're tolerated but not listened to. In short, we feel overlooked. This is why proclaiming "I don't see color" is unhelpful. It sounds a lot like "Everything's voice is the same. Because I'm not really interested in the complexity and uniqueness of what you're going through, you should just conform. Your voice should sound like mine anyway. Minority perspectives are not unique, after all. Therefore, minorities have representation in this discourse—through the more intelligent, refined perspective of people who think like me. Your particular voice doesn't need to be heard." The adage "I don't see color" is shorthand for "If I assume we're the same, I can skip over you."

Neither these efforts to blanch minority empowerment nor the arguments opposing such efforts are new. In 1967, Dick Cavett invited former Yale professor Paul Weiss on his talk show to confront James Baldwin on his views on race in America.¹ Weiss emphasized his commonality with Baldwin as a scholar, and asked, "Why must you always concentrate on color, or religion, or this? There are other ways of connecting men. . . ." Weiss' interrogation was meant to make Baldwin concede that by discussing race, Black people were doing a disservice to societal progress by emphasizing our differences. In today's vernacular, Weiss essentially asked Baldwin, "Why must you say, 'Black lives matter'? Isn't it sufficient to say, 'All lives matter'?" Baldwin's response chided Weiss spectacularly.

I don't know what most white people in this country feel.
But I can only conclude what they feel from the state of their

institutions. I don't know if white Christians hate Negroes or not, but I know we have a Christian church which is white and a Christian church which is black. I know, as Malcolm X once put it, the most segregated hour in American life is high noon on Sunday. That says a great deal for me about a Christian nation. It means I can't afford to trust most white Christians and I certainly cannot trust the Christian church. I don't know whether the labor unions and their bosses really hate me. That doesn't matter, but I know I'm not in their unions. I don't know if the real estate lobby has anything against black people, but I know the real estate lobby is keeping me in the ghetto. I don't know if the board of education hates black people, but I know the textbooks they give my children to read and the schools that we have to go to. Now, this is the evidence. You want me to make an act of faith, risking myself, my wife, my woman, my sister, my children, on some idealism which you assure me exists in America which I have never seen.

Lord, hear our cry. Why should it be necessary to make a fuss over distinctions of race in our discussions of human flourishing? In short, because neither the social aspirations boldly proclaimed by America, nor the biblical ideals espoused by white Christianity, has gotten the job done. Therefore, my purpose in taking such pains in chapter 4 to emphasize the shortcomings of American law and white Christianity in dignifying the humanity of Black people is to ensure that our white siblings of faith never forget that we have grossly deviated from those expectations enshrined in our Bibles as well as our nation's founding documents. It is to remind us that this work is godly and simple to do. But the church is ill equipped to embark on the journey of fixing the problem if we're not even willing to acknowledge how far we have to go. There should never have been a debate, in America or within Christianity, about whose lives matter more. Yet debate we do.

We can never fully embody our identities as followers of Christ if our conversations are centered around *whether* justice is due rather than what quantum of justice is necessary to make the marginalized

whole. Neither a myopic nor hyperopic view will help us regain our conscience, our moral compass, or our identity as a nation. All that is really required of us is willingness to love our neighbors with the same sanctity as we love our own lives. The church's reluctance to do so is evinced by objections to protests to police violence, refusal to acknowledge systemic racism, outrage toward Colin Kaepernick, resistance to criminal justice reform, demonization of immigrants, rejection of LGBTQIA+ inclusivity within social justice movements, and insistence that minorities within white Christianity are better seen and not heard.

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Blind Spots and Prophetic Vision

What white Christianity fails to see in all of this is the unique opportunity, and responsibility, that it has in sustaining the work of the civil rights movement. To clarify King's thesis, the moral arc of the universe does not bend toward justice by happenstance; it is our obligation to ensure it curves. I fear greatly that King's work has been all but completely whitewashed in the minds of American believers. Lest we forget, King was not just a grand orator, a motivational speaker peddling a generic message of unity. He shared his prophetic vision within the context of addressing our country's demonstrable shortcomings despite pledging ourselves as one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. King and those who worshiped, marched, and protested with him approached each endeavor knowing there was a near certainty of violence being visited upon them by citizens, the police, or the lynching tree.

As articulate as he was, King was not prone to mince words. Before declaring his dream, King first admonished that he had come to Washington, DC, to cash a check: “America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds. But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt.”² We have elected to disregard how unpopular MLK’s aggressive stance toward injustice made him during his time and how unpopular such work remains today. Though the most glaring examples of oppression may have been dispersed about the table, there’s much more work to be done within our hearts and minds.

As we carry on King’s legacy by calling for accountability in our institutions and greater empathy from the church, we would do well to remember that the pursuit of justice has never been quiet work. As comments from the likes of Ted Cruz demonstrate,³ there is agonizing irony in the fact that King remains an archetype of race relations in white Christianity, yet only in the most whitewashed, sanitized fashion. I’m afraid that King’s adherence to nonviolent, passive resistance as a strategy to win the hearts and minds of civilized people would hardly succeed with majority culture in the modern era. White America no longer sees anything admirable, or noteworthy, in docile forms of protest. In fact, we saw as much when some of the peaceful protests carried out in 2020 were intentionally mischaracterized as riots.

We have become such connoisseurs of documented brutality against Black bodies, and the failure of the legal system to adequately address these brutalities, that no less could be expected. We have become blood sommeliers, demanding a certain clarity from cases of Black brutality held up to light for inspection, relentlessly inspecting the typicity and packaging of the victim to determine their worth, and judging whether recognition of the event pairs well with our overarching political agendas in order to evaluate whether calling for justice in this particular instance leaves the right taste in our mouths.

King’s blistering words for opponents of his movement have been forgotten. Rather, when critics of social justice hold up MLK as an example of what protests against injustice should

look like, it could very well be what they really want from Black people is to see them suffering via the same passive, nonviolent response to violence we saw in King's era. Some may call videos of limp Black bodies, mercilessly beaten and dragged into squad cars, a better, more palatable, example of protest than Black athletes kneeling during the national anthem. We also call this victimization.

One of the most freeing things that I've learned in recent years is that our lived experience is not a debate.⁴ I owe much to authors, podcasters, and theologians who have helped guide me to sanity throughout the course of this season. Jemar Tisby, Tyler Burns, Beth Moore, Esau McCaulley, Malcolm Foley, Ryan Holmes, Ashley Irons, Elijah Misigaro—these people (and many others) have been a life preserver for me in turbulent waters. There is no explanation or disclaimer owed to those who are looking for clarification that people who take the Bible seriously are not Marxists. No one really fears that we are communists; they fear that we are threats. Such weak criticisms are attempts to *other* minorities and shame our allies into a corner by calling them unpatriotic. It is a racially tinged McCarthyism.

Such characterizations are distractions designed to force debate about *how* we're expressing ourselves rather than confront the substance of *what* we're saying or *why* we're saying it. Our intent was never to debate the ideology of the Black Lives Matter movement; we want to talk about what happened to Breonna Taylor. We don't want to talk about critical race theory; we want to talk about what made a police officer, who knew he was being filmed, think it was all right to kneel on George Floyd's neck for almost ten minutes while the suspect begged for air, onlookers pleaded for him to stop, and cameras were rolling. And why did three of his fellow officers think it was proper to aid in such a murder? Why is it so difficult for churchgoers of a certain complexion to see and face these issues head-on? For so many minorities, we just can't help but feel the sense that our cries have not been heard within white Christianity. We're given little more to hold onto than the hymns that taught us an unending, yet seemingly unobtainable, hope.

More often than not, my white acquaintances who want to debate about the existence of racism, or the efficacy of a particular method of fighting racism, are doing so from an uninformed perspective. Well-intentioned as they may be, their challenges to how I speak about racism are rooted in (1) an assumption of disbelief based on years of indoctrination within a homogeneous background, and (2) a sterile, suppositional notion of racism as an academic exercise. In other words, they have no skin in the game. Thus they view the problem, if it exists, in theoretical terms, as a think tank might. Therefore abstract ideas such as “If we stop talking about it, it will go away” seem tenable. Of course, these notions fail in a practical application. Meanwhile, racism is a lived reality for people of color. We have observed it and are impacted by it. Where we are eyewitnesses, our detractors are merely philosophizing.* When the argument is done, they’ll pack up all the sharp intellectual tools used to reopen and probe our emotional wounds, go home, and turn on an episode of *Friends*. Meanwhile we’re left discarded on the table, exhausted and bleeding out.

When we ask our fellow Americans and Christians to agree that Black lives matter, we’re not asking for their allegiance to a political ideology or organization. We’re asking them to verify that we have the same basic human dignity as others. We’re asking them to dispel our belief that they don’t care whether we live or die. In fact, we’re asking them to admit that we’re not crazy for *assuming* white people don’t care whether we live or die in light of all we’ve borne witness to. We’re asking them to repent for standing by silently while others clearly communicate that they *don’t* care whether we live or die—thereby allowing us to form the mistaken (?) impression that they agree. We’re asking them to affirmatively dispel the notion that they agree with racism—because the climate we’re in makes that unclear.

*There’s a parallel to be drawn here, as “eyewitness” is a term of art. As previously explained, the testimony of a witness is direct evidence if the witness is determined to be credible. Therefore the testimony of minorities as to their experience with racism has the potential to be powerful evidence—the only issue is whether it is accepted by society. Said bluntly, society challenges our credibility.

Most importantly, we're asking them to get off their ass and do something about the fact that society doesn't seem to care whether we live or die. We're asking them to denounce those who explicitly *say* that they don't care whether we live or die—not just the ones who say it blatantly but the ones who do it with nuance as well, through microaggressions and dog whistles. And, yes, we're asking them to divorce themselves from the people in their ecosystems (church, family, and political parties) who don't care whether we live or die—choosing us over them. Because we had to do the same. We're asking them to understand that we're not debating political issues. We're not talking about legal precedents tied to the right to life and the role of government in the affairs of the private citizens. We're debating about whether they care about whether we live or die. We're asking Christians to act like Christ.