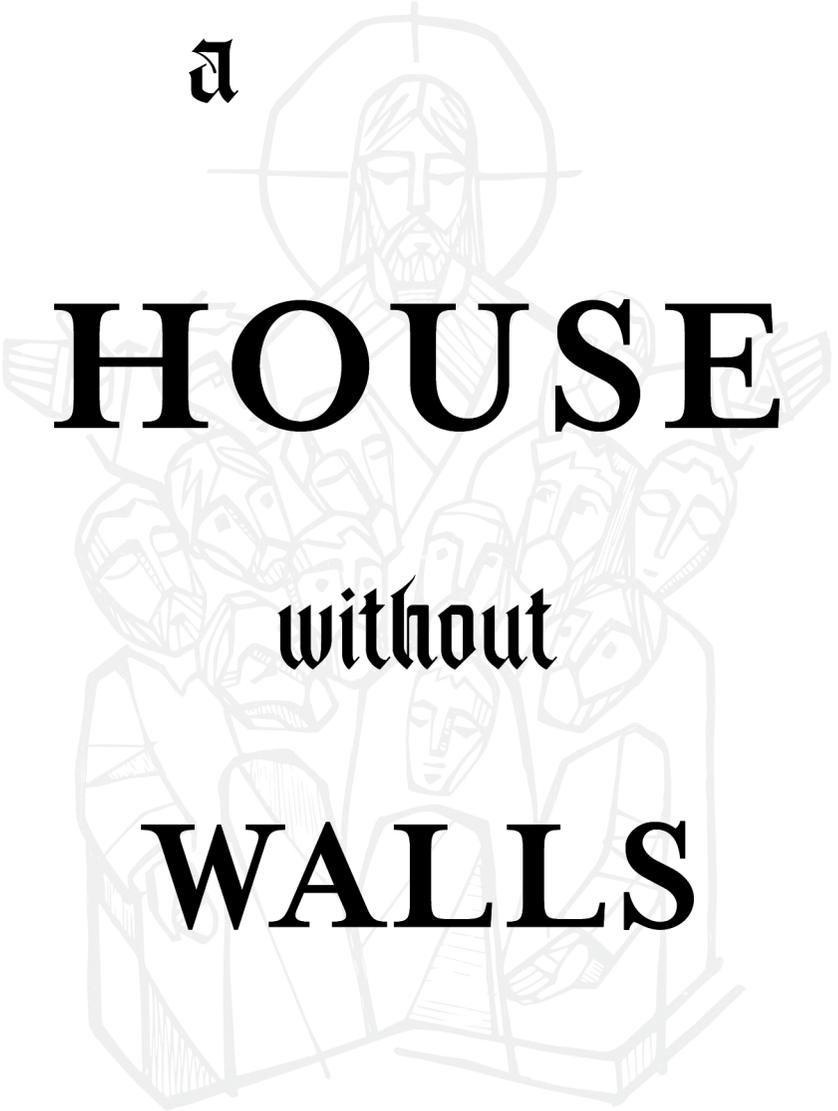


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DAN CRABTREE

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HOW CHRIST UNITES HIS
ETHNICALLY DIVIDED CHURCH



AMBASSADOR INTERNATIONAL
GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA & BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND

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A House Without Walls

How Christ Unites His Ethnically Divided Church

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Para mi Amor, quien me ha mostrado un amor sin paredes.

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PREFACE

“AM I ENCOURAGING DISUNITY AND/OR segregation? I don’t know yet.”

A Christian writer asks this question in his article titled “Why Black Christians Should Leave White Evangelicalism.”¹ His growing frustration with mostly pale-skinned congregations had reached the limit, so he suggests that Christians racially part ways. According to this author, “White Christian America” and the “Black identity” are simply irreconcilable. And so, he says, the time has come to divide.

He’s not alone in his call for division. Another Christian author and historian likewise told CNN regarding African American Christians in mostly European American churches, “We are telling them to get out.”² And many have. A handful of pastors led their churches in the last few years to leave the Southern Baptist Convention over issues of race, racism, and critical race theory.³ *The New York Times* noted that in 2018 a “quiet exodus” of African American worshippers from European American congregations was already underway. A researcher and spiritual leader in the multiethnic church movement recently lamented, “It’s about to completely break apart.”⁴

So, that’s it then? The Church just needs to divide? Is racial division too big for Christ to solve? Or is His finished work on the cross sufficient even for a time like this?

As I write, ethnic division not only marks Christianity but also dominates the headlines. In May 2020, the death of George Floyd, an African American man, under the knee of Derek Chauvin, a European American cop, lit the

powder keg of mounting racial pain and exploded into nationwide protests, riots, and desperate cries for justice. The country groans; the streets erupt; and many in the church call for change.

As a shepherd in a local church, my heart is heavy for my brothers and sisters in Christ who suffer from racism and her sour fruits. Especially in a cultural moment like this, many in the Church tremble with fear and seethe with anger when faced with gut-wrenching questions. “Will I keep getting pulled over by the cops because I’m not white?” “Does my skin color not just *inform* but *define* how others see me?” “Will my black, teenage son make it home tonight?” Regardless of politics, these questions are real, and pastors feel the heavy hearts of their people.

What also makes me sad as a pastor is to see *conversations* about race dividing the Church. For some, the mere mention of racism sparks assumptions of Cultural Marxism, critical race theory, and woke theology. For others, any sign of hesitance to radically reorient the Christian life around racial reconciliation, corporate repentance, and financial reparations is the reincarnation of Jim Crow ethics. Others are unfamiliar with the terminology and feel paralyzed to speak up at all. The fallout of this kind of grenade-lobbing Christianity is a spiritual wasteland of division, hurt feelings, fear of engagement, and, ultimately, dishonor to Christ. The Church is dividing because of race.

Surely, there must be a better way to talk about race in the Church! Shouldn’t we be able to find a path forward that doesn’t lead to fracturing parties and mass migrations from the Bride of Christ? Recent, divisive conversations about race have revealed a deep ideological fault line underneath the Evangelical surface. Where did that chasm come from, and how can it be bridged? Shouldn’t the one household of faith, the pillar and buttress of the truth, the Church of the Living God, be able to maintain some semblance of unity even in a dark and divisive world? How might God bring His diverse people together as one?

The Bible's answer to ethnic division in the Church is surprisingly simple and not at all what the world would tell us. Here it is: *The church is united by Jesus.*

I assure you, "simple" in this case does not mean "simplistic." The outflow of Jesus' Lordship in His Church means thoughtful discernment and diligent study for His people. Jesus mediates His authority to His Church through His Word, so ethnic harmony in the Church will take some serious Bible study. But that's what the church has always done; it's what we still do; and it's what will bring us together when absolutely nothing else can.

To be clear, what I'm proposing in this book is *nothing but* the work of Jesus. I'm not advocating for a new methodology, ideology, or theology. If Church history has taught us anything, it's that we should be leery of new ideas. No, what I propose as the salve to heal the wounds of the Church is a remedy older than the Church itself. I contend that unity in the Church will always depend, fully and finally, on the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word. As we agree with Christ in His Word, we will have unity. As we contradict Christ and His Word, we will have division. We must come together by coming under the Lordship of Jesus Christ through His Word.

So, the way I intend to approach united submission to Jesus through this book is to study the Bible. We need to see how Jesus defines the Gospel that creates, animates, and sustains His Church so that we won't fall victim to false fixes. We need to know the authority of Scripture to use it rightly as our guide in navigating conversations about race and ethnicity. We need to know what the Bible says about the origins of ethnicity so that we understand God's purposes in our differences. We need to esteem our Lord and His Word if we would find ethnic unity in the Church, and that's what I hope to do with you in these pages.

Let me be clear, however, about what this book won't do. This book won't retread the now well-worn ground of the various arguments about race from a sociological or political perspective. Others have already done that far better than I could. This book is squarely focused on the Church, on people who

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care about what the Bible says, and so appeals to Scriptural arguments rather than census data or historical anecdotes as the final authority.

The goal in this material is not a Tweetable slam dunk on critical race theory but the lived-out unity of the Church. If you're hoping to find more ammo here for your online squabble, you'll be disappointed. The truth has two-edges—both razor-sharp. Expect the Bible to challenge your political commitments, not as a “third way” but as *the* way. That's where this book is headed, anyway.

More than anything, I want Jesus to be worshipped. Don't you? There just isn't anything more important in all of creation than Jesus' glory. “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” (Rom. 11:36).

Though we will get into the weeds in this conversation, dealing with all kinds of particular points of doctrine and historical details, don't ever take your eyes off of Jesus. He is the One Who can unite His Church; He is the reason for the Church; and He is the great joy of the Church. Without Him, every letter you read is utter vanity. So, if you do nothing else as a result of reading this book, please worship Jesus. Let's exalt Jesus in our hearts through this study and watch the walls of ethnic division in the Church crumble as we lift up one voice to the glory of our great God and Savior.

INTRODUCTION

AN OLD CHURCH, AN OLDER PROBLEM, AND THE OLDEST ANSWER

A BLACK AND WHITE BANNER on the weather-beaten red brick walls of Bruton Parish Church read, “Black lives matter.” The Episcopal congregation had gathered outside on June 19, 2020, masks covering their mostly white faces, to celebrate Juneteenth, a holiday commemorating the delayed emancipation of African American slaves 155 years prior. Plywood covered the large, portal windows surrounding the historic church building, while a virus spread through the town of Williamsburg, Virginia, and across the globe, prohibiting the congregation from its weekly gatherings.

Small groupings of churchgoers stood distanced from each other, scattered across Duke of Gloucester Street in front of the old church building. They listened while a priest voiced her lament over America’s long history of oppression and racism.

Inside the empty, cruciform church building, white-painted wood walls separated the boxed pews, where famous Americans once sat. George Washington had his own assigned pew toward the center of the cross. So did Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, George Mason, and other founding fathers. On any given Sunday during the era of the American Revolution, the Bruton Parish rector would ascend the high-walled, elevated pulpit to lead psalm-singing and to preach from the Bible.

The doctrines of liberty and justice (for all) would echo through Bruton Parish, past the politicians to the back wall and up into the balcony. A few mismatched chairs held a congregation of its own on the separate landing. The balcony was reserved for slaves.

Ethnic prejudice, partiality, and hatred have indelibly marked America's story, and the professing church has not been exempt. Many Protestant churches in American history reinforced the racism that they should have condemned. The evil motives behind American chattel slavery, Jim Crow laws, and "separate but equal" have poisoned our country's churches from their earliest days. Today, the rise of divisive ideologies combined with our haunting, painful past have produced streets and hearts filled with violence and suspicion. It seems like our country is being torn apart at its ethnic seams—and many churches right along with it.

That service outside of the worn walls of Bruton Parish Church captures in an image the central reason why ethnic division has prevailed so long in American churches: the Church has often settled for merely secular solutions. As long as our answer to ethnic division *in* the Church comes from *outside* the Church, dependent on extra-biblical powers, man-made coalitions, and earthly sources of influence, we'll remain distant and divided by walls we've erected and can't destroy. To our shame, we're good at building walls, but not at taking them down. Our hands and hearts are too futile and too frail.

Of course, that's not to say that social and political efforts to combat racism can't help. Where unjust laws exist, they call for just law-making. But if we aim for *just* law-making, our remedy is incomplete. The cut may be sealed up, but it's still infected. The suffering of our fellow image-bearers under the burdens of discrimination and false ideological frameworks can and should be stemmed, silenced, and stopped by many and various means. Protests, petitions, and policies may be sorely needed, but they can't heal the hurting heart. Left to our own devices, we can't bring lasting unity to an ethnically splintered Church.

There is simply no force on earth that can dismantle the ethnic dividing walls we've constructed. Our barriers stand immovable—racist indifference, corrupted justice, sociological blame-shifting, counterfeit authorities, bankrupt worldviews, superficial salvation, and political posturing. Our human tools can fix symptoms but not hearts. Outside of the Church, there is no hope for ethnic unity, and we shouldn't hope to find it there.

Brothers and Sisters, what we want to discover together in God's Word is that in His Church, Jesus Christ has the unparalleled power to tear down every last brick in our ethnic dividing walls and build from the rubble a new, diverse, and united people from every tribe and tongue and nation for His eternal worship.

His death, resurrection, and reign construct a multiethnic canopy for all colors, shapes, and sizes of sinners. Here in the Church, Christians with every kind of skin tone and with all manner of sinful baggage find a welcoming family under the shelter of the cross. Here, the halls echo with the harmonies of redeemed sinners as we join our broken voices to declare together, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!" Here, Christ assembles a spiritual temple out of former slaves and out of former slave-owners.

The world can't understand this kind of blueprint. Only Christ can reconcile all things on earth and in heaven. Only Jesus can bring unity to an ethnically divided Church. Only the Carpenter from Nazareth can build a house without walls because only He uses nails.

WE NEED TO TALK

Even to broach the subject of ethnic division in the Church may seem problematic to some. The pushback I've heard has sounded like this:

- "Isn't it too negative to harp on our divisions?"
- "Aren't we trying to deal with far bigger structural issues right now?"

- “Why are we talking about quarrels between Christians when we should be talking about mass incarceration, police brutality, and economic disparity plaguing the black community?”
- “Doesn’t talking about race just lead to more anger and division?”
- “Why can’t we just focus on the Gospel and not worry so much about the amount of melanin in our skin?”
- “Aren’t you white, Dan? Shouldn’t we be hearing from a person of color about race?”

These are all understandable questions, and I hope to answer them, but you’ll have to stick with me. For now, let me offer three brief answers from God’s Word to address why we absolutely do need to talk about ethnic dividing walls in the Church.

First, our love for our fellow believers compels this conversation. Paul writes to the Corinthian church that “if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor. 12:26). African American, Latin American, Asian American, and Native American believers have suffered unjustly, but they must not suffer alone. European American Christians reel from feelings of guilt, uncertainty, and fear. If we love God and neighbor, then the author of Hebrews would exhort us to “remember . . . those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (Heb. 13:3). We can’t ignore the pain in our own body, so we need to talk.

Second, it’s the example we’re given in Scripture. You may search in vain for an explicit biblical command to engage in cross-cultural conversations about race in the body of Christ, but the apostle Paul consistently models for us the importance of addressing this topic. He taught the Galatians the theology behind diverse Christian unity when he wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). He confronted the apostle Peter’s ethnically-charged fears when they threatened to divide the Church (Gal. 2:11-14). To the fractured factions of the Corinthian church, Paul wrote,

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). Paul’s faithful legacy charts an unmistakable course into the waters of ethnic conflict in the Church, and we’re commanded to follow him there (1 Cor. 11:1).

Third, Jesus is committed to the unity of the Church. It is no overstatement to say that the reason Jesus came to earth was to unite the Church to Himself. That was his prayer to the Father the night before His death: “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one” (John 17:22). He came to give His glory through the Gospel to unite the Church. But Jesus goes even further than *praying* for the Church’s unity. He *dies* for the Church’s unity. Paul writes:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us [Jews and Gentiles] both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” (Eph. 2:14-16).

Jesus’ aim in the cross is reconciliation between God and man and between ethnically divided man. This is but one of the multifaceted goals in the Gospel, and it’s absolutely critical to how we live as a Church. Jesus hung on the tree to turn racists into peacemakers, to transform prejudice into empathy, and to build a house of worship not separated by balconies, buildings, or walls but united in the bonds of love. If He would suffer the wrath of the Father for our unity, then surely that unity is worth protecting, and we can’t protect what we won’t frankly address.

So, we need to talk. These will be hard conversations, no doubt, and we won’t say everything we should the way we should. I know I won’t. But I ask for your grace as I try to start the conversation, in weakness and in

trembling. If we can't stumble through uncomfortable conversations about race and division toward greater harmony and love for Jesus, then the world will assume we're just as hopelessly divided as they are. May it never be.

UNITY IS GLORIOUS

Some might ask, though, what's so great about multi-ethnic unity in a church, anyway? What's all the fuss about? The answer is God's glory.

The Bible tells us why God ultimately wants to make one family out of many ethnicities; it's for "the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph. 1:6). There is no higher motive than the glory of God. It's what motivates God Himself to save people from different ethnic backgrounds and unite them in the Church. Through ethnically diverse, harmonious worship, God demonstrates that the cross of Jesus overcomes the strong forces of ethnic hatred, partiality, and pride to make one beautiful, new people in His image. He makes much of His power and His Son by tearing down the dividing walls and bringing the nations together in univocal, multilingual worship. Psalm 67:1-3 establishes this glorious truth: "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, *Selah* that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!"

God glorifies Himself by superseding human dividing lines and creating a united body out of diverse peoples to worship Him. Why does ethnic unity in the Church matter so much? Because the glory of God is at stake.

ROADS DIVERGED

If the unity of an ethnically diverse body of believers has such massive, eternal importance, then naturally, the question is, "How does Christ empower us to live out this glorious reality in the Church?" Answering that question from the Bible is the burden of this book.

In our day, there's been no shortage of proposed strategies to accomplish ethnic harmony. Outside of the Church, people of all ethnicities have been

summoned to participate in nationwide protests against the police; to show solidarity with minority advocacy groups like Black Lives Matter; and to demonstrate ongoing allyship by renouncing all affiliations with people, organizations, and products that have been touched by racism.

My goal right now is not to biblically critique all of these proposals, only to acknowledge the dominant methods that are being proposed today. Many of these proposals are unbiblical. Some harm more than they hurt. None of them can do what Christ alone can do. That being said, ethnic division in the Church is a complex issue. Simplistic, broad-brush responses in any direction will only reveal that we lack the love necessary to work hard at empathizing, understanding, and searching God's Word for light to illumine the path ahead.

At least one thing is clear: unity does not grow through more division. In the turbulent waters of conversations about ethnicity, we can be tempted to look for simplistic responses that lump our fellow believers into camps rather than treating them as individual image-bearers. We may alienate those who should be closest to us because they disagree in part, and that only further fractures the body of Christ. So, if you find yourself already responding by trying to neatly fit your brothers and sisters into "sides" (the ones you agree with and the ones who are wrong), look to the humility of Christ. Does your attitude reflect the gracious, lowly heart of your Savior? In Christ, truth and unity go hand in hand, and so do believers who disagree.

Tribalism opposes the unity of the Gospel, so we should be opposed to tribalism. We dare not approach the stubborn walls of ethnic division in the Church *primarily* as Republicans or Democrats; as social justice advocates or discernment guardians; as black, white, brown, or anything else that is secondary to our identity. The Church must approach ethnic discord with one all-consuming identity in mind: we are a family of blood-bought believers in the Lord Jesus Christ under the authority of His Word for the sake of His glory.

We are Christians before we are anything else. Our Gospel-grounded self-recognition needs to come first in absolutely everything we think and do

on the hard road toward ethnic harmony in the Church. The cross of Christ is not just a rhetorical flourish in the conversation about ethnic division; it is the only hope. That doesn't mean we ignore political engagement or difficult conversations. But if we are to work for true ethnic unity in the Church, all of our efforts must start and end with Jesus. And Paul helps us understand why.

WHEN THE WALL CAME DOWN

The apostle Paul shows us how ethnic dividing walls are destroyed in the body of Christ. The pattern he describes has universal application and will be our pattern going forward. To see Paul's plan for a unified Church, we need to return to a passage we already mentioned and see it in context. In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul writes:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole

structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

If we would have eyes to see and ears to hear it, this passage could become a sledgehammer to break through the walls of our ethnic divisions. In writing to the Ephesians, Paul sketches for us the work of Christ to make one out of two, to bring the far near, to unite the divided and bring peace out of hostility. In fact, he lays out the logic that becomes the basis for how we approach all division in the Church, ethnic or otherwise.

Paul brackets this Gospel reminder with two radically different situations. He begins with the alienation and separation of the Gentiles (to include the Ephesians) from the Jews and from God (v. 11-12). Then he concludes with one holy temple made up of united Jews and Gentiles (v. 19-22). Ethnic division to ethnic unity in eleven verses.

So, what happened in those eleven verses to bring this unity out of division? How did these distinct ethnic groups, separated by religion, culture, politics, and just about every imaginable social dimension, become “fellow citizens” and “members of the household of God?” To put it in our setting, how could the Church in the suburbs have one mind, one spirit, and one purpose with the Church in the inner city? How can African Americans and European Americans call each other “brother” and “sister” today when some of their grandparents killed and were killed by each other because of their ethnicity? What bond could possibly hold together those who are still so distanced by race, injustice, and centuries of festering hostility?

If we’re going to see ethnic division erased in the Church, we would be wise to hear how it happened in Ephesus. It takes something stronger than resolve, more all-encompassing than an apology, and deeper than social reform. It takes the blood of Jesus Christ. As Paul says, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near *by the blood of Christ*” (v. 13).

A MOUNTAIN BETWEEN

Some have argued that the division Paul speaks about in Ephesians 2 is almost entirely unrelated to the kinds of division we see in the Church today. Others have written off this passage as irrelevant to the current conversation about ethnic strife in our country and in our churches. But a closer look at the context reveals that the truth Paul sets before us is an ancient mirror of the struggle we're engaged in right now.

Paul begins by reminding the mostly-Gentile, Ephesian believers that they used to be *persona non grata* in the Jewish world. They were called “the uncircumcision,” which was a derogatory slur used by the Jews to emphasize the unholy otherness of their Gentile neighbors. Those Persians and Greeks and Bythinians didn't have the sign of the covenant like the Jews, whom Paul calls “the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands” (v. 11). Paul not-so-subtly points out that this mark of ethnic superiority that the Jews so valued was, in fact, something *they did to themselves*. It was fleshly, external, and man-made. And in their pride, it had become yet another reason to distance themselves from the dirty, unclean, unworthy Gentile rabble.

But the division between Jew and Gentile went even deeper than circumcision. Paul reminds the Gentile believers in Ephesus that at one time, they were also cut off from the Messiah—“separated from Christ” (v. 12). They had a completely different religion with different gods and different styles of worship and different festivals and even different languages. It was similar to the distinction that comes through “Christianese” words and phrases that we use today: “I'm so blessed.” “We had a great time of fellowship.” “Man, I feel like I was so fed today.” The Jews had their own kind of religious insider talk. The Ephesians were “strangers” from all of that, including the promises of salvation to Abraham's descendants. They were, as Paul puts it, “without God in the world” (v. 12).

Paul doesn't stop there but continues to heap up existing divisions between Jew and Gentile. They were “far off,” meaning they were so

spiritually estranged from God and His people that it was like being in a totally different zip code, across the ocean, in the opposite hemisphere. The Jews were intentionally separate from the Gentiles by the establishment of “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” (v. 15), that is, the Mosaic Law which had as its primary aim the holiness, the set-apartness, of the people of God. In the minds of the Jewish people, they were the clean-cut church folks; and the Gentiles were the debauched, riotous worldlings. They could never cohabit a hall of worship; they were too different.

Paul also pictures the entrenched barriers between Jew and Gentile as “the dividing wall of hostility” (v. 14). This is the metaphor I’m picking up on to describe ethnic division, in part because the picture Paul uses is so palpable. But what did Paul mean by it?

In first-century Jerusalem, Herod’s temple was the largest religious structure of its day. The massive complex had several entrances, gates, chambers, and courtyards, including a space specifically set apart for women and an inner sanctum for the priests.⁵ One of the largest dividers on the dusty temple grounds was a thick, foreboding wall separating the Court of Israel from the infamous “Court of the Gentiles.”⁶ The Court of the Gentiles housed Solomon’s Portico and hosted the temple’s moneylenders and sheep-sellers. Non-Jewish sojourners were allowed, by Jewish law, to come into the Court of the Gentiles but no further. No Old Testament command required this ethnic separation at the temple; the Jews invented this barrier. The next court in the temple, fourteen steps up and surrounded by a stone wall, was only accessible to those with top secret clearance—namely, being born to Jewish parents. The Gentile converts, on the other side of the wall, would have to worship from afar.⁷

Can you picture it? One place of worship for one ethnicity, and another for a different ethnicity. No mixing, no mingling. Stark divisions, marked by an imposing, unambiguous, towering wall of separation. And for any Gentiles who didn’t immediately get the picture, the ancient historian Josephus

tells us that there was a placard on this dividing wall⁸ with the following inscription: “No alien may enter within the balustrade around the sanctuary and the enclosure. Whoever is caught, on himself shall he put blame for the death which will ensue.”⁹

This ethnic division ran so deep in Judaism that the death penalty was enforced to maintain it. Jew and Gentile remained separate, physically divided by an unassailable stone wall. But that wall only reinforced the spiritual, cultural, and relational division that constructed it. Jewish and Gentile lives were defined by walls.

Think back to the Civil Rights era. Separate drinking fountains. Divided schools. Segregated churches. African American men and women killed for trying to cross ethnic lines. These barriers may have been physical in some sense; but the spiritual, cultural, and relational divisions represented by those walls defined the American experience in far more powerful, painful ways. And in our country, some of those walls never really came down. They just got a fresh coat of paint.

The Ephesians also faced a world profoundly divided by race. How could a foreign people group so far, so unwelcome, so different in so many ways become even closer than biological brothers? I mean, even if you removed the wall separating the temple courts, the long-held bitterness and racial pride that built the wall would still remain. In the minds of the Jewish people, Mount Sinai itself stood between them and the unwashed Gentile masses below.

And you can't just move a mountain.

HOW CHRIST WORKS

Well, we can't, but *God can*. And in the death of Christ, God moved more than mountains. He brought together Jew and Gentile at last. Paul says the “far-off have been brought near” (v. 13); the hostile now are at peace, and the two are now “one new man” (v. 15). All have been “reconcile[d] . . . to God”

(v. 16), accomplished “by the blood of Christ” (v. 13) “in his flesh” (v. 14) and “through the cross” (v. 16).

Jesus moved Mount Sinai with His bare, bloody hands. When Jesus, the sinless Son of God died in the place of sinners on Golgotha, He bore on His shoulders for three interminable hours the eternal Hell that His people deserved. God poured out His wrath on His Son in order to give his multi-ethnic Bride the clothing of Christ’s righteousness. And in Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, He crushed the head of Satan, removed the sting of death, and gave the gift of his Spirit to make one spiritual family out of individual people from every different ethnicity. In the Gospel, Jesus tore down the wall of sin that separated God and man, and He “abolished the law of commandments” (v. 15) that separated Jew and Gentile. The stone wall with its death threats and racist motives crumbled at the cry, “It is finished” (John 19:30).

I want you to see, though, that Jesus didn’t stop at removing the obstacles to fellowship between believers from different ethnic groups. In fact, removing the dividing wall was a means to an end. Paul says in verses fourteen and fifteen that Jesus “has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility [that’s obstacle removal] by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances [that’s how he removed the obstacle], that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace” [that’s the purpose]. The word “that” in Paul’s sentence indicates a goal, a desired end state. God had an intent in the cross beyond demolition. As the miner removes dirt for the purpose of unearthing a diamond, so Jesus destroys the dividing wall of hostility for the purpose of creating something far more precious: the multi-ethnic unity of His reconciled people.

Notice also the sphere of reconciliation—He creates one new man “in himself.” The kind of unity the Church receives in Christ is different from the superficial exhibitions of the world. What Christ accomplishes in His death and resurrection far surpasses the semblance of ethnic civility that man can muster. He takes people with all their differences and distinctions,

spiritually unites them to each other in Himself, and thereby makes them into one new entity that does not divide itself from its members. Paul says, “he himself is our peace” (v. 14). Think of this unity like a wagon wheel with Jesus as the spoke at the center and all His people of Jewish, Gentile, African, European, Latino, Chinese, Pacific Islander, Dutch, Iranian, and Russian descents connected to each other through that spoke. They maintain their ethnic distinctiveness, their cultures, and their different physical appearances; but they are spiritually one in Christ. That spiritual union changes everything.

Jesus takes people broken, cursed, and fractured by sin and division, draws them to Himself, and makes beauty out of the rubble. Paul tells us that having crafted one new man out of ethnically diverse believers, Jesus sets about the work of growing those redeemed sinners “into a holy temple in the Lord” (v. 21). We are “joined together” like bricks in a building. The bricks in the wall that used to divide are now the bricks in the Church that worships as one. Our solid basis for unity comes through “the foundation of the apostles and the prophets” (v. 20); that is, for us today, the Old and New Testaments. And the pivotal connecting point for every brick in the building is “Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (v. 20). He tears down the wall to unite disparate people in Himself to be like a stained-glass window of multi-hued worship, reflecting the light of the Son to all who see the Church.

This is how Jesus always works. Our ethnic dividing walls may not stem from a misappropriation of Mosaic cleanliness laws, but they can create a separation just as bitter and far-reaching. African Americans can feel miles apart from their European American next-door neighbors while seated in the same pew and vice versa. But the cross of Christ breaks down exactly those kinds of ethnic walls and unites those who, in their racism and indifference, were once far-off. And in that act of union, Jesus builds for Himself a Church where Christians of every skin tone and culture gratefully receive and gladly share His cross-ethnic love. The kaleidoscopic worship of Christ in His

multiethnic Church helps us to see that what was once a reason to divide has now become a cause for celebration. Oh, may we look at the multi-ethnic Church that Christ has built and glory in His unmatched power to unite the hopelessly divided!

That's how Jesus will continue to work in His Church today. This work of Jesus to unite divided ethnicities in His Church is the focus of our study. We won't settle for imposters who would try to hot-glue us together around causes and ideologies. Too much is at stake to settle for superficial solutions and an impermanent union. We want Jesus to bring us together as one forever.

DEFINITIONS MATTER

Now, there's one more topic we need to address before we can get to the meat of the matter. We need to understand what we mean by the words we use if we're going to work out ethnic unity.

Today, so much of the confusion in conversations about ethnic division in the Church arises from divergent definitions. For example, "reconciliation" for one person means finding peace between two hostile parties. For another, reconciliation means dealing with the sins of people of the same race from the past. In this understanding of reconciliation, the historical, white enslavement of kidnapped Africans must be removed as a barrier between white and black people in the Church in order for reconciliation to occur. For others still, reconciliation focuses more on social programs and political discourse. Others would emphasize the personal, spiritual aspect of reconciliation. And that's just one word!

So, let's take a moment to define our terms to make sure we're using biblical definitions and biblical logic when it comes to ethnic division and unity. Note that I'll explain each of these critical words in greater detail later, but it may be helpful to know at the outset what I mean when I'm using these words so we can get the conversation going. These brief definitions will also serve as an outline for where we're headed.

- **Ethnicity:** Ethnicity, coming from the Greek word *ethnos*, differs from race in that it describes from what people group a person actually comes. The word for “ethnicity” appears in the Bible and describes a person’s cultural, geographic, social, familial, and linguistic heritage.¹⁰ It’s inherently fluid and, to some degree, subjective, though tied to real differences between people groups. While ethnicity highlights a person’s familial and cultural background, race has historically and incorrectly been tied to biological differences between people groups. That’s why throughout our study, I will more frequently use terms like European American than I will the term “white” and African American instead of the term “black.” No single group term can precisely account for all the nuances of each individual person’s background, but ethnic terminology seems to be the most appropriate way to talk about groups of people with a similar cultural heritage. From that standpoint, I’ll note several ways in which ethnic differences have been construed as racial differences and used to justify oppression in a brief historical prelude.
- **Gospel:** The Gospel is the Good News that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has died to save sinners from the wrath of God for himself. While that may seem like an uncontroversial statement to most believers, the word “gospel” has taken on a number of connotations in conversations about ethnicity. I’ll assert that the Gospel is Good News to people from every tribe and tongue because it is a free offer to all people of escape from God’s just judgment and reconciliation to God in Christ. The implications of the Gospel in the lives of Christians are many and yet not infinite. I’ll talk more about the walls being called “gospel” and the true Gospel that tears them down in chapter one.

- **Truth:** Of all people, Christians should be able to agree on the meaning of truth. But in the world of ethnic division, truth becomes as malleable as the purposes of the author, even inside the Church. Philosophically, truth is whatever corresponds with reality. But the Bible often uses the word “truth” to refer to the facts of the Gospel or even the whole of biblical revelation. If we conflate biblical truth with personal experience, we build more walls than we remove. Unity can only happen in the Church under the banner of biblical truth, though not ignorant of the Christian’s experience. I’ll cover this topic more in chapter two.
- **Race:** Race is a social construct that had been used almost exclusively in the history of the world for the purpose of oppression and division. Race has no grounding in biological fact (despite a long history of efforts to prove as much) but is merely a conceit that has been developed and morphed over time to suit different agendas and purposes. That being said, though race is not real biologically, it is real sociologically (that is, in people’s minds), so we shouldn’t ignore the language or implications of race in our day. I’ll explore this topic more in chapter three.
- **Racism:** Two definitions for racism are common today—one personal, one structural. While I broken-heartedly agree that individual people with racist thoughts and desires build societal systems that propagate their racist motives (see: Jim Crow laws, segregated schools, societies promoting racial superiority), a structural definition of racism tends to conflate the problem of unjust policies with sinful motives. In other words, racism ends up meaning two things rather than one. For the sake of clarity, I will only use the term “racism” in

its personal sense to refer to what the Bible calls “partiality” on the basis of ethnicity. That’s not to deny the existence of structural racism, only to be clear in my terminology. Personal racism sees one race as more or less valuable or preferable than another.¹¹ It is a sin and condemned by God and His Word, so we must condemn it as such. I’ll deal with the topic of racism in more detail in chapter four.

- **Reconciliation:** As we’ll discuss in an upcoming chapter, reconciliation (biblically defined) deals with the peace and restoration accomplished in an interpersonal relationship, either between estranged people or between people and God. Though I understand that there are ways in which groups of people can individually reconcile with each other en-masse in such a way that it takes on a corporate dimension, I will stick to talking about reconciliation individually rather than, for instance, calling on white people as a group to reconcile with black people as a group. I’ll talk about guilt, repentance, and reconciliation more fully in chapter five.
- **Justice:** Justice is fundamentally an attribute of God. Our own sense of justice is derived from God’s justice. Justice is God being, knowing, and maintaining what’s intrinsically right, giving what is due. God is not just or righteous because He conforms to a standard outside of Himself, but because He upholds His own inherent character of righteousness—that’s what I mean by “intrinsically right.” Therefore, our definition of justice has to flow from the intrinsic justice of God, which we see in starkest relief on the cross of Christ. Calls for justice in our world must be made in light of God’s justice in the Gospel, which I’ll deal with more in chapter six.

- Unity:** Multiethnic unity can be talked about in two ways. There is a positional unity that the Church receives from Christ that we do not ourselves accomplish because it refers to the spiritual union that we have through the work of the Spirit in regeneration. But unity can and often is used to refer to degrees of relational harmony, peace, and agreement between people in the Church. For example, Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:8, “Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.” According to Peter, that kind of unity requires effort on our part just like love and humility require effort. Relational unity is a working out of our positional, real, spiritual unity that we have in Christ; but it can wax, wane, and grow in application. I will talk about both kinds of unity, and I’ll do my best to distinguish between which type I’m addressing. For the most part, though, I’ll be referring to the relational unity that can grow or diminish in the Church because that’s the work set before us by our Lord. In the conclusion, we will try to capture a biblical vision for that unity in the church.

CHRIST AND OUR WALLS

I said that relational unity flows from positional unity, that our peace in the Church depends entirely on the peace accomplished for us by Christ in the cross. That is, in a nutshell, the main idea of this book.

I’m compelled to write at length about Christ at the crux of ethnic unity because it seems like often the Cornerstone is being left out of the building plans. In the struggle for ethnic unity in the Church, some would have us focus on political engagement, which is important and valuable. Others would have us spend our time and money on church programs, which can

also be helpful. The problem with both of those approaches, however, is that they can easily be built on sand instead of the Rock.

We've had too many conversations in the Church that assume the Gospel without obeying the Gospel. Oceans of ink have been spilled on Christless manifestos while the black-and-white pages of Scripture remain unread. The red letters get twisted into the message of a million authors who aren't the Author of life. Jesus must have Lordship in and through the ethnic unity of His Church. When we stand on His firm foundation, we can stand for justice and love in the Church and in the world.

In case you're not convinced that Jesus and His glorious Gospel need to ground every inch of our efforts at ethnic unity, look back to the book of Ephesians. After unloading a theological deluge of Gospel truth in chapters one through three, Paul turns his attention to the application of that truth. In Ephesians 4:1-3, Paul writes, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

The word "therefore" tells us that a drivetrain of Gospel power is behind these exhortations. And the culminating summary of those applications, driven by the reconciliation purchased by Christ at the cross, is: "walk . . . eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Paul didn't create the unity between Jew and Gentile in the Church at Ephesus. Neither did the Jews or the Gentiles. Christ did. But they are called to maintain it. And so are we. In the Church, our aim is the glory of God; our way is peace; and our ground is the Lord Jesus Christ.

I don't doubt that the following pages will be challenging for you—they've cut open and exposed my heart. But the precious unity of the Church hangs in the balance. Will we maintain what Christ has bought by His blood, or will we allow it to succumb to the bitterness and division in the world around us? Where will we look for the unity that brings eternal praise to the

Creator? Will we persevere in love and in one mind until we're ushered into the doors of that eternal Church, the multi-ethnic saints extolling our Savior around His throne? Or will we be divided by walls of ethnic hostility like so many before us?

As important as this topic is for the Church, ethnic unity is also intensely personal for me. I didn't realize how many dividing walls I'd allowed to stand in my own heart until I married my beautiful, godly wife, Darlene, who is Mexican American. Through those wedding vows, I was added to a wider family tree with my precious Mexican, Filipino, and Kenyan relatives. I've watched Christ work in my own heart and in my extended family to tear down ethnic barriers, to bring harmony out of hostility, and to magnify his awesome power to save and to sanctify people from every kind of background. So, a book about ethnic unity isn't an academic conversation to me—it's family business.

That's why I love visiting my mother-in-law's church. She may be the only Mexican in the predominantly Filipino congregation, but the parade of hugs she receives just inside the door says that these are her people. Add to that a warm smile from her faithful Chinese American pastor; a rich, multi-ethnic potluck feast for lunch; and the sounds of voices young and old singing hymns written by dead, white Englishmen. That congregation, like ours, reminds me of how powerfully Christ has brought multi-ethnic unity into my own life. And I praise Jesus for it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does ethnic division manifest in the world? What have you heard people say about racism in our country? How does that affect you?
2. How can ethnic division manifest in the Church? What does ethnic partiality in the body of Christ communicate to the world? What about to other Christians?

34 A HOUSE WITHOUT WALLS

3. Why is multi-ethnic unity in the Church worth talking about? Are there wrong ways to have conversations about ethnic division? Are there wise ways to have those same conversations?
4. In Ephesians 2:11-21 (it may be helpful to reread it as a group), how are Jews and Gentiles united as “one new man?” Why is Jesus at the center of all true multi-ethnic unity? What do you see in this passage that’s applicable to ethnic division in the church today?
5. Do you have any questions about the terms that have been defined and used in this study so far (like ethnicity, racism, reconciliation)? What do you hope to learn through this study? How do you hope to grow through this study?

HISTORICAL PRELUDE

THE CHURCH'S CHECKERED PAST

ON A HILL DOWN THE ROAD

In July 2019, just eight miles down the road from the church building where I pastor, a flash flood washed away the remnants of a segregation wall.¹²

The Hall's Hill Wall was built in the 1930s to physically separate the historically African American neighborhood of Hall's Hill from the then-burgeoning suburban community of Woodlawn. At the time of its construction, Jim Crow laws still prohibited the black neighbors from shopping at the nearby white stores, eating at the white restaurants, calling the white firefighters, or even using the white hospital (now Virginia Hospital Center). The cement sidewalks themselves were segregated. The wall stood not only as a physical barrier, but also as a reminder to the African American neighborhood of the deep, pervasive social division enshrined in America's segregation laws,¹³ a monument to a long history of humiliation.

But the Hall's Hill Wall represented an even deeper fissure between the adjacent neighbors than their separate sidewalks and malls—it divided them spiritually. To this day, Mount Salvation Baptist Church sits on North Culpeper Street just a few blocks north of the wall,¹⁴ and Mount Olivet United Methodist Church occupies a plot a few blocks south of the wall on the same street.¹⁵ One is a historically black church, the other a historically

white church, and both were planted at least fifty years before the wall was constructed.¹⁶ When the barrier was erected, it cruelly put in brick and mortar what had already been engraved into the hearts of the people who had lived there for decades: There could be no union between African and European Americans, not even in Christ.

Today, near the corner of North Culpeper and Seventeenth Street, you can see a crumbling portion of the Hall's Hill Wall still standing next to a plaque lamenting its racist origins. While a deluge of rain may have been able to carry away the bricks between the two communities, the divided demographics of the two neighborhood churches remain largely unchanged.

The sharp ethnic divide on Hall's Hill doesn't stop in Arlington but cleaves churches all across our country. According to a 2015 study, four out of five Americans attend a church where eighty percent of the congregation is from a single ethnic group.¹⁷ While there are innumerable factors influencing those kinds of statistics, the reality on the ground is that the American church has stayed staunchly separated by ethnicity. There are mostly African American churches, and there are mostly European American churches.

So, it shouldn't come as a surprise to the American Church that our ethnicity can be a profound source of division, even between born-again believers in the body of Christ. To respond to these ethnic divisions only with "color-blindness"—as in, "I just don't see people according to ethnicity"—ignores the walls all around us. Though I will argue forcefully that our identity in Christ is primary, our cultural identities aren't erased by grace through faith. I'm not a light-skinned, European American Christian, so to speak, but I am a Christian who is both light-skinned and European American. And though my spiritual union with my brothers and sisters from all nations far outweighs my ethnic background, my skin tone, or my cultural experiences, those things are still a part of my life as a Christian. We shouldn't ignore the lasting impact of ethnic differences in our church today or the long, segregated road that brought us where we are.

Before we see how Christ tears down ethnic dividing walls, we need to look back at how those walls were built and maintained. To that end, I think it's valuable to spend a few pages considering the vile history of racism in America and particularly in the Church.

My goal is not to make anyone feel personally guilty about the crimes of the past (I'll explain the concept of corporate guilt more fully in chapter five), or to stir up animosity and anger about a painful past that we can't change. More than anything, I don't want to diminish the glory of Christ by simply bemoaning the heinous sins of our country without any reference to His sovereignty over it. May it never be.

But the Church today has been meaningfully shaped by her forebearers, the attitudes they had toward each other, and the blood on their hands. Even today, the sins of chattel slavery and segregation laws are visited upon us, the children and the children's children. From my home, Hall's Hill Wall is still standing only miles down the road! If we would care well for all our fellow believers of all ethnicities, we would do well to know a little about the stories that have divided us.

A PAINFUL LOOK BACK

By the time that privateers had sunk their anchor into the Jamestown coast in 1619 with "20. and odd Negroes"¹⁸ for sale, five hundred thousand Africans had already been forced in chains across the Atlantic.¹⁹ By the late 1700s, over ten million Africans had been captured, sold to Europeans, carted to the Americas, and subjugated as slaves. Two million precious image-bearers died in the Middle Passage in the hulls of slave ships.²⁰ Countless more were beaten, treated with inhumane cruelty, and worked literally to the exposed tissue and bone. European slave traders frequently justified their barbaric treatment of African slaves by calling it "evangelization."^{21 a}

a It should be noted, however, that some European colonials initially opposed the Christianization of the African slaves because they assumed it would lead to their freedom. Eventually, states passed laws clarifying that baptizing a slave did not free them from slavery, and the evangelization continued.

But Olaudah Equiano, a West African sold into slavery in the Caribbean, saw through the hypocrisy. He wrote concerning the barbaric slave trade and mistreatment, “O, ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you—Learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?”²² So began our country’s wicked history of racism, even in the Church.

During the 1700s, Baptist and Methodist churches began to include more African slaves and freedmen in their mostly European American congregations, albeit alongside their racist convictions.²³ In many churches, the best seats were reserved for the rich, European landowners, and the back and balconies were reserved for slaves. But one African American, Methodist preacher rejected racist segregation within the Church. Under the threat of being forcibly removed for sitting with Europeans in a church service, Richard Allen walked out and started his own church. He would go on to establish the oldest predominantly African American denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church.²⁴ African American Christians flocked to these churches as safe havens in an unwelcoming land.

Frederick Douglass, a statesman and escaped slave, excoriated the hypocrisy of European American Christianity in his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*:

I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of the land . . . I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. Never was there a clearer case of “stealing the livery of the court of heaven to serve the devil in.” I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which every where surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills

the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus . . . The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master. Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave-trade go hand in hand together. The slave prison and the church stand near each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time. The dealers in the bodies of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise.

The abolition of American slavery in 1863 (followed by its full application in 1865, which we now call “Juneteenth”) did not abolish racism. States in the North and the South used the excuse of a depressed economy to pass Jim Crow laws segregating, humiliating, and denigrating the now-freed African American population. These racist laws were codified in the case *Plessy v. Ferguson* with the now-infamous phrase “separate but equal.”²⁵ Nobody during the Reconstruction era or the Jim Crow era was confused about America's radical inequalities. From voter registration to job discrimination to underfunded facilities to pig laws²⁶ to convict leasing to legalized lynching, European Americans continued to perpetrate all manner of cruelty on their African American neighbors.²⁷

The racism of the Jim Crow era infected the Church like every other institution. Under the leadership of Reverend Dr. Basil Manly, Sr., scores of Baptist churches in the South separated from their denomination to found the Southern Baptist Convention and protect their unjust claims to own African American slaves.²⁸ Just after the Civil War, Nathan Bedford Forrest convened the first meetings of what would become the Ku Klux Klan,

which tied itself to Protestant churches throughout the country, even while perpetrating despicable, violent hate crimes against African Americans.²⁹ In one horrific account of this violence, a European American mob lynched African American Georgia farmhand Samuel Thomas Wilkes by parading him through town, stripping him naked, torturing him for half an hour (the details of which are too gruesome for me to repeat), and eventually burning him alive. It was a Sunday. The thousands in the lynch-mob came directly from worshipping at church. One man, as he watched the brutal execution, called out, “Glory be to God!”³⁰

The turn of the twentieth century brought massive revolutions in industry, but the same partiality and hatred continued to mark the ethnic landscape of America. A race riot targeting African Americans in St. Louis ushered in what would become known as the Red Summer of 1919, which included ethnic violence and murder across twenty-five American cities.³¹ The Tulsa Massacre in June 1921 saw a white mob torch an affluent black neighborhood, prompting the National Guard to respond and imprison six thousand African American Tulsans.³² The danger to African Americans all across the South was felt palpably and eventually prompted the Great Migration, the movement of six million African Americans from Southern to Northern cities in search of safety from ethnic violence.³³ According to the Smithsonian, “Between 1880 and 1950, an African American was lynched more than once a week for some perceived breach of the racial hierarchy.”³⁴

Through the Civil Rights era, while many decried these widespread racist atrocities and fought for equal rights across ethnic lines, others fought back. In August of 1955, Emmett Till’s almost unrecognizable body was found floating in the Tallahatchie River after he had been beaten, shot, and tied to a metal fan for allegedly whistling at a lighter-skinned woman, and his killers walked free.³⁵ Till’s murder stoked the civil rights movement into a flame, but racism persisted. Following the protests of school integration and *Brown v. Board of Education*, church schools began to form all over the country as

European American Protestants sought to keep their children separate from African American children.³⁶ Pastors instructed their European American congregations to not allow African Americans into their neighborhoods, publishing messages like, “Please help us ‘Keep Kirkwood White’ and preserve our Churches and homes.”³⁷

From the 1980s into the 2000s, racism continued to shape America’s political and social landscape. Lee Atwater, a presidential campaign consultant, admitted to championing policies he knew would disproportionately affect African Americans, which continues to affect public policies to this day.³⁸ On June 17, 2015, Dylan Roof, a young, white supremacist, brutally shot and killed nine churchgoers at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church after attending their Bible study.³⁹ According to the FBI, the number of hate crimes in America peaked in 2018, reaching levels not seen for sixteen years.⁴⁰ America continues to reel with ethnic division.

WARNING TO WEEP

Oh, is your heart broken by such a legacy of wickedness and suffering? And this brief survey of racism in America’s past doesn’t even begin to deal with Japanese internment camps, Chinese exclusion laws, the virtual genocide of whole Native American tribes, the mass slaughter of Mexican populations in the West, and hundreds of other acts of discrimination and violence that have characterized American history. Countless other stories could be told, but just these few overwhelm me. In a way, I hope they’re overwhelming for you, too.

But be careful how you respond to a historical survey of America’s skeleton-filled closet. Your first reaction to hearing (maybe all over again) about the evil partiality woven into the fabric of our country may be to defend the country you love. The Lord has certainly blessed the United States in a number of ways, and we can be thankful for his kindness to preserve a country and protect it through years of war and depression. I’m personally grateful for my own parents, who served in the United States Army to

defend our country and the prospect of my own free future. But God has not commanded us to overlook sin in the history of a nation any more than He's called us to uncritically celebrate its virtues. You can love your country and hate her sins.

Second, if you respond to a historical survey of racism in America by trying to explain away its severity or importance, hold that thought. It's absolutely true that racism doesn't occur in a vacuum, and accounts of perceived bigotry and bias can be overblown. And it's also true that there are many other pressing concerns in the history of our nation, as in our present day. Statistically, it may even be true that other issues of injustice in our country have caused greater death or harm than racism. But be careful to not too-quickly politicize a discussion that has powerful relational implications.

Christians from all ethnic groups are suffering today because of the treatment of different ethnicities throughout American history. For many, the names Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Breonna Taylor sound just like Samuel Thomas Wilkes and Emmett Till. Of course, these are each complex instances with many diverging influences, but Christlike love should motivate us on this point to prioritize empathy over investigation. We ought to weep with those who weep before demanding an explanation for their sadness. While I'm strongly opposed to many of the cultural lies of our day that unjustly victimize people to reorganize power structures, I am even more strongly disposed to place my head in my hands and cry for my hurting fellow Christians.

So, let's be discerning, but embracing. Careful, but full of care. Thoughtful, but also sorrowful. Our country is racked by its racist roots even today. Let's not be so quick to correct that we forsake our command to be quick to listen (James 1:19). Let's love one another well and so prove to be Jesus' disciples (John 13:35).

A REASON TO REJOICE

If we've felt each other's pain from our racist past, then it's also appropriate that we go on to rejoice. In spite of the horrors of American

slavery, Jim Crow laws, and continuing racism, Christ continues to call His elect to Himself from every ethnic group. He is building His Church. Pastor Anthony Carter writes:

The African American church is an enigma. It is an institution whose existence is unlikely and unpredictable. How could African American men and women embrace the same Christ that their oppressors professed? Despite the worst intentions of many and because of the best intentions of others, the African American church, as an institution, is arguably the most indomitable in American history. God literally raises his church up from chains.⁴¹

Just marvel at the radiant grace of God against the evil backdrop of America's racist history. That He would rescue any of us from our sins is a remarkable mercy, but that He would sovereignly use wicked slave masters to get the Gospel to their slaves and continue to preserve His Church through hundreds of years of despicable violence and hatred demonstrates His unstoppable power in the Gospel. "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). Christ will redeem His people, even through the most heart-breaking circumstances, even our racist past.

Our Lord will unite His people. He will tear down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile, and He'll tear down Hall's Hill Segregation Wall as well. So, it was with the beginning of the church at Pentecost; so it has been throughout Church history; and so it is with the Church in America today. And that gives us a reason to rejoice.

CHAPTER 1

ETHNICITY AND THE GOSPEL

A SERVANT, A SLAVER, AND A SAVIOR

Lemuel never knew his parents. They had abandoned him after five months, leaving him to the Rose family, who raised him as a beloved servant. At twenty-one years old, Lemuel volunteered to fight with the Minutemen and two years later made his way into the Continental Army. After only two months, he contracted typhus and left military employment for religious pursuits. He studied Greek, Latin, and the writings of Great Awakening preachers like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Soon, Lemuel received a license to preach. In 1785, he became “the first African American ordained by any religious body in America,” and in 1788 took his post as the pastor of a church in Rutland, Vermont. He served the all-European congregation as their pastor for thirty years.⁴²

In one of his most well-known sermons, Lemuel Haynes described the fixed focus of a pastor’s heart in a world divided by slavery:

The work of a gospel minister is not with the temporal but with the spiritual concerns of men: they watch for souls. Their conversation is not to be about worldly affairs but about things that relate to Christ’s kingdom, which involves the everlasting concerns of men’s souls. When a minister’s affections are upon this world, his visits among his people will be barren. He will inquire about the outward circumstances of his flock

and perhaps, from pecuniary motives, rejoice at prosperity, as though that was of greatest concern. But he will have nothing to say with respect to the health and prosperity of their souls, having no joys or sorrows to express on account of the fruitful or lifeless state of the inward man.⁴³

While Lemuel Haynes was still preparing to enter the pastorate in the fall of 1780, John Newton had begun serving the congregation at St. Mary Woolnoth in London. A former debauched slave trader, Newton had been radically converted after facing certain death on the stormy seas. Years later, he entered the Christian ministry and composed one of the best-loved English hymns, “Amazing Grace.”

Newton partnered with William Wilberforce in his later years to oppose the British slave trade he had once served, which stirred up opposition in Parliament and in his church. In one of his letters, Newton describes his politically divided London congregation and his strategy in ministering to them:

My congregation is made up from various and discordant parties, who, in the midst of differences can agree in one point—to hear patiently a man who is of no party. I say little to my hearers of the things wherein they differ, but aim to lead them all to a growing and more experimental [experiential] knowledge of the Son of God and a life of faith in Him.⁴⁴

Both Lemuel Haynes and John Newton teach us the same truth about how Christ unites a divided Church, even though they came from remarkably different backgrounds. Haynes was separated from his congregation by ethnicity and Newton from his by politics. But did you notice their shared strategy for long-term, effective pastoral care?

They preached Christ.

They preached the primacy of the soul and its need for new life. They preached sin and repentance. They preached growth in godliness and joy in the Lord. Both of them also passionately decried the racist abomination of

slavery on their shores, but neither regarded racial justice as their first focus. The redeemed servant and the redeemed slaver relentlessly preached their precious Savior and the salvation of souls in Him.

Two men. Two worlds. Two stories. Two churches. United by one passion—the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A LONG LINE OF PREACHERS AND PREACHING

Haynes and Newton are just two of the long litany of Christian pastors who have faithfully heralded the Good News of Jesus Christ. Christ had rescued both of them from their depravity in sin, so they were compelled to share about this precious freedom with others. Their ethnicities did not change the message, and neither did the racism that engulfed the world around them. They prioritized the preaching of the Gospel, following the patterns and commands laid out for them in Scripture. Haynes and Newton carried a Gospel torch that has been blazing since the first century AD, beginning with Jesus Himself and stretching into pulpits today. They preached the Gospel.

Jesus' own ministry was overwhelmingly concerned with Gospel preaching. At the outset of His public ministry, Matthew tells us that "Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matt 4:17). Mark's account also focuses on this priority in Jesus' ministry: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14-15). Our Lord even went so far as to say to his disciples, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out" (Mark 1:38). Jesus came to proclaim the Gospel.

In his last words on earth, Jesus commanded His disciples to be "witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). So, what did that apostolic witness look like? "Now when they had testified [lit. witnessed] and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans" (Acts 8:25). When

Paul and Barnabas went on the first missionary journey, they were chased out of Iconium and went to Lycaonia “and there they continued to preach the gospel” (Acts 14:7).

Paul himself described his ministry as centered on Gospel preaching when he told the Ephesian elders, “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify [witness] to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). And in commenting on this ministry to the Corinthians, Paul writes, “Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16). The witness of Gospel preaching made up the mandatory ministry priority for the apostolic Church.

And Gospel preaching didn’t stop with the apostles. This God-given ecclesiastical priority continued through two millennia of Church history. When he was burned at the stake for claiming Christ as Lord, the early church father Polycarp preached the Gospel. Amidst doctrinal controversy in the Roman church, the North African bishop Augustine preached the Gospel. Threatened by some of the most powerful men in the medieval world, the rogue German monk Martin Luther preached the Gospel. To desperate, unbelieving masses in India, the British missionary pioneer William Carey preached the Gospel. The faithful legacy of Church leaders throughout the millennia has primarily and consistently been Gospel-preaching.

WHY GOSPEL-PREACHING?

While nuance is needed, we can confidently assert from Scripture that the Church must always preach the Gospel before and above everything else. Gospel preaching is the exclusive mission of the church. Christ has given His church orders, and we don’t change them to preach another message. To make known the Gospel of Jesus isn’t the only work the Church is involved in, but it’s chief among them. Only the Church can preach the Gospel, so the Church must preach the Gospel, first and foremost. To preach another cause

as primary would erect dividing walls in the body of Christ that can only be removed through the power of the Gospel.

It's worth asking, then, why Gospel preaching? Of all the activities that the Church could be involved in, why did Jesus and the apostles make such a big deal out of this one? Shouldn't the Church focus on meeting practical needs? Is it necessary to exclusively herald Christ and His salvation story, such that all other pursuits are, at best, secondary? Particularly in light of ethnic tensions, violent racism, and hateful oppression, which were rampant in Jesus' own day, is the Gospel enough? What does Gospel-preaching even sound like in an ethnically divided world?

Before we answer those questions, allow me to clarify what I mean and don't mean when I contend for the priority of Gospel-preaching.

First, I need to emphatically state that the Church never turns a blind eye to suffering, racism, and injustice. Our Lord is the perfect Model of compassion for the hurting—He preached, and He healed—and we always follow His lead. But the Church never substitutes her Christ-given priorities for other ambitions. Jesus charged His disciples with disciple-making (Matt. 28:18-20), so we make disciples before we do anything else. Christ himself prioritized Gospel preaching, so Gospel preaching must be the Christlike priority of His Church. And though our communities would press in on a thousand sides with worthwhile, desperate needs, they are not the Head of the Church. Jesus is the Head of the Church, and He commands us through His word to preach the Gospel.

Second, please understand that when I say Gospel-preaching is the Church's priority, I don't mean to limit church activity to evangelism only. I'm emphatically not advocating that we "just preach the Gospel" or even adhere to the "miracle motif" method for societal change.⁴⁵ Of course, churches should minister to their communities in tangible, compassionate, explicitly Christian ways. In fact, I would even advocate for Christians to participate in the political process (where appropriate) to advocate for righteous governance

in our land. But my burden is to make clear the distinction between the cross and social action. For Christians, they are related, to be sure, but they are not the same. And the proclamation of the Gospel must remain the Church's top priority, regardless of the changing winds in our country. Thabiti Anyabwile puts it this way:

The church finds herself pursuing many noble and necessary pursuits while leaving aside the one thing that only the church can do—proclaim the gospel of our salvation to a perishing world. Other agencies will assist the poor or battle injustice, but no other agency will preach the gospel. Though the church must do her part to alleviate poverty and oppression, such efforts should never become the main function of the church. If they do, the church will indeed die a terrible death.⁴⁶

Pastor Anyabwile reminds us why the Gospel has been passed down with such great care and vigilance to the Church today, such that she might continue to preach it. He calls it “the gospel of our *salvation* to a perishing world” [emphasis mine]. Why Gospel-preaching? Because the Gospel is Good News about our salvation.

Paul affirms that the heartbeat of the Gospel is salvation. “The gospel . . . is the power of God for *salvation* to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16—emphasis mine). He even calls this message “the word of truth, the gospel of your *salvation*” (Eph. 1:13—emphasis mine). Gospel-preaching is so central to the mission of the Church because what's at stake is nothing less than the salvation of God's rebellious image-bearers.

Eternal, cross-bought salvation for people from every ethnicity is God's offer in the Gospel.^b The Church must preach this Gospel to the world above all other pursuits because salvation is the greatest need of every human being. Paul contends that if the nations would be saved by hearing this Gospel

^b It should be noted that the Gospel is a many-faceted diamond with all kinds of different implications. My hope in this study is to address those implications of the Gospel that are most pertinent to the discussion of ethnic division in the Church.

message, then someone has to preach it (Rom. 10:14). We need to preach the Gospel! The Church is consumed with Gospel-preaching because all people need to hear the Gospel to be saved.

SAVED FROM

But what does it even mean for someone to be “saved”? The word “salvation” has become so ubiquitous both inside and outside of the Church that it’s almost lost the distinctly Christian meaning found in the Gospel. And some pastors and preachers today have radically redefined the Gospel to offer a salvation that Jesus never preached. We need to clarify the biblical meaning of the word “salvation” and its various implications; otherwise, we risk putting words in God’s mouth. If we’re prioritizing a message about salvation, what kind of salvation are we preaching?

To grasp the biblical concept of salvation in the Gospel and, ultimately, why it’s so critical for the unity of the body of Christ, I’ll explore this rich truth from two angles. First, I want to answer the question, “What are we saved from?” Then, I want to answer, “What are we saved to?” The first deals with the negative aspect of salvation, and the second looks at the positive aspect of salvation. It’s to the first aspect (“What are we saved from?”) that we now turn our attention.

The verb most often translated “save”⁴⁷ in the New Testament carries a number of connotations, but the overwhelming sense of Gospel salvation is this: to be saved is to be rescued from the eternal wrath of God.

That definition may at first sound simplistic, particularly because of the way we tend to use the word “saved” in the American church. But first, note that the basic meaning of the word in Greek ⁴⁸c (and its Hebrew⁴⁹ counterparts)⁵⁰ is to cause someone to escape danger, to deliver a person from harm. Of course, this word was first used in the Greek-speaking world to talk about temporal, earthly, material, tangible deliverance (like being physically healed or spared

c “To save means to deliver when there is a particularly perilous situation, a mortal danger.”

from dying in a storm), and the New Testament authors sometimes use it the same way.⁵¹ But far more often, they use “save” and “salvation” to talk about spiritual, supernatural, eschatological, God-wrought rescue.^d Significantly, in the entirety of the New Testament, the whole-person salvation made available in the Gospel is spoken about only as relating to deliverance from God’s punishment for our sin. The salvation offered in the Gospel is not from immediate, natural suffering but from eternal, transcendent wrath.⁵²

According to Jesus and His disciples, the primary focus of the salvation event described in the Gospel is not a new heart, godly living, or even incorporation into the Church (as precious as those realities are to us). Salvation comes when Christ rescues His people from the impending judgment of God.

It may also be helpful to distinguish between the promises of salvation made to national, ethnic Israel and the promises of salvation made to the Church. They are not the same, though they draw on the same theological concept and come from the same God. God often promised to deliver Israel from natural and political dangers and did so through judges, kings, prophets, miracles, and armies. Old Testament salvation promises were made to Old Covenant Israel, a theocratic, geopolitical entity whose role in God’s redemptive plan was intrinsically tied to their governance and political freedoms. The Church, however, is not a geopolitical entity but a spiritual one, belonging to a King Whose kingdom is “not of this world.” So, it shouldn’t surprise us to find the Old Testament replete with promises regarding temporal salvation because the nature of the kingdom at that time

d One hundred thirty-six (out of 192) references in the New Testament, where the root “sozo” is used, refer to salvation from a transcendent danger (rather than a natural one). This includes the words translated “Savior,” “save,” and “salvation” (Matt. 1:21, 10:22, 16:25, 19:25, 24:13, 24:22; Mark 8:35 (x2), 10:26, 13:13, 13:20; Luke 1:47, 1:69, 2:11, 2:30, 3:6, 7:50, 8:12, 9:24 (x2), 13:23, 18:26, 19:9, 19:10; John 3:17, 4:22, 4:42, 5:34, 10:9, 12:47; Acts 2:21, 2:40, 2:47, 4:12 (x2), 5:31, 11:14, 13:23, 13:26, 13:47, 15:1, 15:11, 16:17, 16:30, 16:31, 28:28; Rom. 1:16, 5:9, 5:10, 8:24, 9:27, 10:1, 10:9, 10:10, 10:13, 11:11, 11:14, 11:26, 13:11; 1 Cor. 1:18, 1:21, 3:15, 5:5, 7:16 (x2), 9:22, 10:33, 15:2; 2 Cor. 1:6, 2:15, 6:2 (x2), 7:10; Eph. 1:13, 2:5, 2:8, 5:23, 6:17; Phil. 1:28, 2:12, 3:20; 1 Thess. 2:16, 5:8, 5:9; 2 Thess. 2:10, 2:13; 1 Tim. 1:1, 1:15, 2:3, 2:4, 2:15, 4:10, 4:16; 2 Tim. 1:9, 1:10, 2:10, 3:15; Titus 1:3, 1:4, 2:10, 2:11, 2:13, 3:4, 3:5, 3:6; Heb. 1:14, 2:3, 2:10, 5:9, 6:9, 7:25, 9:28; James 1:21, 2:14, 4:12, 5:20; 1 Peter 1:5, 1:9, 1:10, 2:2, 3:21, 4:18; 2 Peter 1:1, 1:11, 2:20, 3:2, 3:15, 3:18; 1 John 4:14, Jude 3, 23, 25; Rev. 7:10, 12:10, 19:1).

was temporal, tied to the nation of Israel, its laws, its land, and its citizens. Likewise, it also shouldn't surprise us to find that New Testament promises of salvation, while holistic, deal more with transcendent, eternal realities than with nation-states and their policies.

A handful of New Testament verses addressing Gospel salvation will demonstrate that the biblical focus of this word translated "saved" or "salvation" takes on at least three unique, transcendent dimensions. These aspects of salvation in the Gospel stand over and against immediate, temporal, political dimensions that many attribute to the Gospel today.

The first dimension of deliverance in the Gospel is that it rescues us from God's righteous anger and judgment. To use the biblical term, Gospel salvation "propitiates," or satisfies, the justice of our Holy God against our condemnatory sin (Rom. 3:25; Heb 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 1 John 4:10). Note the connection between the concepts of salvation and wrath in the following verses:

- **"For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:9).** Paul contrasts the obtaining of salvation with the reception of wrath. Instead of facing wrath, Christians receive salvation from that wrath, and it comes through Christ. And in the context, Paul is addressing the future Day of the Lord when God will pour out His wrath on the earth, leading to eternal judgment.
- **"Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God" (Rom. 5:9).** In the present, those who believe in Christ have declared righteous in the court of Heaven because of the substitutionary death of Christ. But the word rendered "shall we be saved" is a future passive verb. Not right now but in the future, the living Christ will cause us to be spared from God's just anger and punishment for our sin on the basis of the justification accomplished at the cross and declared at the moment of conversion.

- **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).** According to Jesus, He was sent into the world to save people from perishing (that is, death) which is a kind of condemnation from God. This, of course, assumes that those who make up “the world” are heading for a penalty of eternal death from the Almighty, and Jesus explains in the following verses that this everlasting judgment is a direct response to their sin. When He saves people in the world, He delivers them from the wrathful condemnation of God found in the second death, which John calls “the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14).

The second transcendent aspect of Gospel salvation is that it’s forward-looking, yet-to-come, or in the future:

- **“Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11).** Note the chronology in Paul’s mind. First, they believed. Then, salvation comes at some time in the future, such that it draws nearer with the passage of time. For the Christian, salvation, in this sense, is not a reality right now but is yet to come.
- **“Who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5).** As with Paul, Peter affirms that those who have been born again will, at some later time, see a salvation that has not yet come. That is, when God pours out His wrath in the final days, they will be rescued from it at that time.
- **“You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord”**

(1 Cor. 5:5). Though there's plenty of debate about the specifics of Paul's injunction in this verse, the timing of salvation is clear: "in the day of the Lord." Here, Paul picks up on the Old Testament concept of the Day of the Lord, a future, eschatological season when God will pour out His wrath on mankind. If this Corinthian's spirit is going to be saved, it's going to happen at the time of the coming Day of the Lord.

Third, and finally, the New Testament authors relentlessly point to a singular, Divine agent as the transcendent Worker of Gospel salvation:

- **"There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy" (James 4:12).** James wants to warn us about being judgmental, and his argument is that there's only one Judge. According to James, Jesus' exclusive claim as Judge also means that he has an exclusive claim to save.
- **"This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:11-12).** If ever there were a slam-dunk statement about the unique, unimpeachable power of Christ to save sinners, it's this. Peter leaves the Sanhedrin no room for misunderstanding—Jesus, and Jesus alone, saves His people from the coming wrath of God that they deserve.
- **"Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Rev. 7:10).** What does the every-nation, tribe, and tongue choir declare around the throne of God? God alone saves because salvation belongs to Him!

Unless they are rescued, all unbelievers will one day face the full fury of the wrath of God. The second death. Eternal Hell. A torturous lake of unextinguishable fire. Every person on this planet is born facing unimaginable, infinite suffering because of their own sin against the holy,

righteous Judge. All people need to be saved from God's anger against their sin. The Good News of the Gospel message is that the God-man Jesus Christ has taken the punishment for that sin on the cross. He drank the cup of God's wrath in unimaginable, infinite suffering. He has been raised from the dead, never to die again. Whoever repents and believes in Him will be spared from eternal perishing because God will have poured out their deserved punishment on Christ. Those who come to Christ are offered eternal life with Him instead of eternal death for their sin.

Even now, hope in that coming salvation is what binds the Church together. Former slaves and former slave-traders rejoiced together on opposite sides of the Atlantic because Jesus had absorbed their punishment on the cross. Our salvation in Jesus from God's wrath creates for us a shared future, a corporate expectation, and a common confidence that transcends the divisions brought about by ethnic differences. We're pilgrims marching together toward the Celestial City, no matter our cultural background. We're sojourners longing to finally go home together, regardless of our country of origin. And we're fellow kingdom ambassadors with a message of salvation for any who would hear and join us from any people group on the planet.

This is the greatest news we could ever hear, no matter what's going on around us. The Gospel message that brings us together centers on our salvation—not from our painful, present circumstances but from the righteous anger of Almighty God and a fate more deadly than systemic racism. In the Gospel, Jesus Christ saves sinners from something far worse than injustice—He saves us from justice.

SUBSTITUTE SALVATION

Even so, as in every age, counterfeit alternatives have crept into the Church and undermined the Good News of Jesus Christ. Cries for temporal justice have drowned out the clarion call of the Gospel and have been called

“gospel” just the same. While we must rejoice in the goodness and purity of salvation from the wrath of God, we can’t afford to be naive about the voices that would sideline the work of God in His Church. So, we turn our attention to the ethnic dividing wall of man-made gospels.

It’s possible to preach *a* gospel of salvation without preaching *the* Gospel of salvation, and only *the* gospel will unite Christ’s church. Anything less than the exclusive Gospel of Jesus Christ is powerless to tear down our ethnic dividing walls. Self-styled, substitute salvation can’t create compassionate harmony between a former slave and slave-trader. The biblical Gospel alone can knit together those most divided by ethnicity; and by God’s grace, He does. A false gospel only sows more seeds of division and offers a kind of salvation that Christ did not die to secure in this life. Despite the manifold glories of the biblical Gospel, we also need to be clear about counterfeit gospels for the sake of the Church’s unity.

One of these splintered, twisted, substitute messages that subtly dominates many evangelical churches today is the gospel of liberation theology. This false gospel and similar social gospel lookalikes usually try to hide inside the language of love and justice (who could disagree with those thoroughly biblical words?) but smuggle into the message of Jesus a social, political, and ultimately racist agenda. Liberation theology seeks to reverse the New Testament teaching on salvation, putting natural, political deliverance over rescue from God’s holy wrath. Like any theological system, its proponents cover a wide spectrum of beliefs but are united in their conviction that Christ’s work is to save the poor and oppressed from their present poverty and oppression.

Liberation theology emerged first in the early 1970s when Gustavo Gutierrez in Peru and James Cone in America began to articulate their frustration with the “white, evangelical gospel.” The development of a new gospel called black liberation theology gained traction in the United States as a framework for responding to racism and injustice.

Today, the language associated with this theological position is akin to the tenets of critical race theory and intersectionality (CRT/I), a secular ideology grounded in Marxism and postmodernity.⁵³ The guiding concepts of CRT/I have often come into the evangelical world through liberation theologians and their writings. In fact, evangelical proponents of CRT/I ideas will sometimes distance themselves from some of the foundations of that secular framework but will openly acknowledge their dependence on the work of liberation theologians.

Let me be unmistakably clear—the salvation of liberation theology is no salvation at all. It opposes the Gospel and opposes Christ, even though it claims His name and invades His Church. This social gospel is incompatible with Jesus' message to repent and believe *the* Gospel of salvation from the wrath of God.

In his seminal, 1970 work *A Black Theology of Liberation*, the father of black liberation theology, James Cone, repeatedly asserted that the salvation of the Gospel is seen in political upheaval by the oppressed against the oppressor.⁵⁴ Namely, God saves in America when black people start a revolution to reverse positions of power with white people.⁵⁵ According to Cone, the work of God in Christ is the work of the black community in dismantling the institutions of white supremacy.⁵⁶ Cone explicitly argued for violent action to overthrow all institutions of white power, even if it meant murdering white people to do it.⁵⁷ And all of it, said Cone, was the Gospel of God's salvation.

The summary purpose of liberation theology, according to Cone, was “to put into ordered speech the meaning of God's activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only *consistent with* the gospel but *is* the gospel of Jesus Christ” (emphasis mine).⁵⁸ That is, Christ's message of salvation is temporal, political, and only for the black community. More recently, Cone wrote, “Salvation is broken spirits being healed, voiceless people

speaking out, and black people empowered to love their own blackness.”⁵⁹ Cone hoped to merge the contextual application of Malcolm X in the black power movement with the religious overtones of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the civil rights movement. And to get there, Cone did not mince words:

To participate in God’s salvation is to cooperate with the black Christ as he liberates his people from bondage. Salvation, then, primarily has to do with earthly reality and the injustice inflicted on those who are helpless and poor. To see the salvation of God is to see this people rise up against its oppressors, demanding that justice become a reality right now, not tomorrow. It is the oppressed serving warning that they ‘ain’t gonna take no more of this [expletive], but a new day is coming and it ain’t goin to be like today.’ The new day is the presence of the black Christ as expressed in the liberation of the black community.⁶⁰

Cone explicitly rejects the concept of a future salvation, of a salvation solely by the work of Christ, and of a salvation from the wrath of God. All of the essential components of salvation that we have already seen in Scripture Cone directly opposes and supplants with political revolution. One of his liberation theology colleagues, J. Deotis Roberts, put it baldly when he said, “Our understanding of the gospel is political.”^{e 61}

The message of liberation theology is a false gospel that condemns its adherents to eternal suffering by solely concerning itself with temporal suffering. This warped worldview only serves to deepen divides in the church and offers no healing or hope for unity. And worse, liberation theology’s errors weren’t limited to the 1970s but have been carried into our time, repackaged and reproduced.

e While Roberts did explicitly critique Cone’s violent appeals and absence of calls for reconciliation, his explanation of the Gospel shared the political dimension of Cone’s. He may have pushed back against some of Cone’s radicalism, but his critique was incomplete.

LEGACIES OF LIBERATION

The divisive worldview of liberation theology didn't stop with James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, and their contemporaries. The blight of this false gospel has reemerged in evangelicalism today in a number of different forms. Though I don't want any Christian to be overly consumed with the study of false teaching, I think it's important to know what this novel gospel sounds like to guard the Good News against it.

One current form of liberation theology remains largely unchanged from its twentieth century roots. Some continue to boldly, openly herald the dictates of this false gospel of liberation theology without apology. For example, Dr. Samuel Cruz, professor of religion and society at Union Theological Seminary, teaches courses explicitly promoting liberation theology and its attendant worldview. Cruz writes:

If you miss the reality of why Jesus was killed, you miss the whole story. Jesus was assassinated because he condemned injustice. In Jesus' day, those who could afford good health care and medicine were not happy when the marginalized received good health care and medicine from Jesus . . . He died because there were evil individuals in society who wanted to maintain their power and found it necessary to kill him.⁶²

Cruz reinterprets the cross of Christ as a political murder (which is *partially* true—John 18:12-14) in order to prop up his wholly untrue argument that Christ's chief purpose in the resurrection is to assert political dominance over His oppressors. When anyone replaces God's wrath with man's schemes in the Gospel narrative, the offer of genuine salvation is gone.

Other pastors and authors will distance themselves from liberation theology's architects while still living in the house. Without attributing their ideas to liberation theologians like Cone or Gutierrez, they use the same language and distortions of the Gospel, albeit with gentler words. For example, in his book *Reconstructing the Gospel*, Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove

completely rejects the Gospel of salvation from wrath as a “slaveholder religion [that] has infected every corner of the church in America.”⁶³ He goes on to describe the Gospel as a “political call”⁶⁴ to “[proclaim] that the unjust systems of this world must give way to the reign of a new King.”⁶⁵ He even argues that the organization Black Lives Matter, which claims for itself opposition to biblical Christianity,⁶⁶ can “illuminate the gospel for young black men.”⁶⁷ Wilson-Hartgrove continues the legacy of liberation theologians by promoting the same false gospel of political revolution in place of salvation from God’s wrath.

Still other authors have tried to blend liberation theology with biblical theology. Daniel Hill, the senior pastor at River City Community Church, writes about his own experience of discovering racial justice as a kind of conversion:

To be theologically awake is to take these words of Jesus seriously: “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3:3). It is also to embrace the fact that a spiritual rebirth ushers in both the salvation of our souls and our participation in the redemption of this world. It is also to hold together activism and evangelism; protest and prayer; personal piety and social justice; intimacy with Jesus and proximity to the poor.⁶⁸

Like many others, Hill attempts to blend a biblical understanding of the Gospel with some of the ideas in liberation theology. Notice his affirmation of the transcendent “salvation of our souls” immediately followed by an inclusion of human effort—“participation”—in the redemption of the Gospel. Where liberation theology blurs the lines between evangelism and activism (eventually to the exclusion of evangelism altogether), the Bible maintains a crystal-clear distinction. The biblical Gospel can’t be blended with any other gospel (Gal. 1:6-9).

But in its most covert forms, those who have been influenced by liberation theology will use the biblical Gospel merely as a springboard to talk about racism in America. Rather than outright deny the content of the

Gospel, some proponents will turn Christ's glorious message of salvation into a folded napkin under the wobbly table of a social platform. In churches that discretely promote liberation theology, you'll likely hear a commendable statement or two explaining substitutionary atonement, individual guilt for sin, and maybe even the existence of Hell. But the overwhelming emphasis of many who secretly promote liberation theology will be societal change, legal reform, racial repentance, and political activism.^f They assume the Gospel in order to move quickly onto another agenda. Or, even worse, they redefine the Gospel to necessarily include social and political forms of "racial reconciliation."⁶⁹ Dr. Jarvis Williams, for example, is a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary who included the following statement in his class notes: "According to Paul, racial reconciliation is NOT an implication of the Gospel and certainly not a social issue instead of a gospel issue. But it is a GOSPEL ISSUE!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

At a certain point, emphasis becomes exclusion, and salvation from wrath has been substituted for salvation from racism.

My point is not that talking about any topic except the Gospel denies the Gospel—of course not. My point is that when social action is trumpeted as the Gospel, the Good News has been subtly replaced.

In contrast to pastors who promote liberation theology's ideas, Pastor Anthony Carter brings succinct, sorrowful clarity to this lamentable legacy when he writes:

What was once the treasure chest of the church—namely, the person of Christ and the message of the gospel—has been exchanged for social expedience and financial gain. What has been lost, indeed forfeited, is an uncompromised, orthodox, biblical view of Jesus and the message of the gospel that saves sinners from the death that is due to all of us because of our sin. What has been lost is the unique message and calling of the church.⁷⁰

^f For example, Jemar Tisby's *The Color of Compromise*, Latasha Morrison's *Be the Bridge*, and Robert P. Jones' *White Too Long*.

Samuel Sey, a Ghanaian-Canadian writer, concurs with Carter on the dangers of liberation theology for the Church and suggests the only alternative:

Black Liberation Theology is one of the most destructive heresies in Black American churches today. It's shaped the way many Black people think about God and government. It's shaped the way many people in Black American churches perceive themselves and others . . . instead of capitulating to its heresies by adopting a form of their social justice theology to win their approval, we need to challenge Black Liberation Theology with the true gospel of Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and was resurrected for White, Black, and all sinners.⁷¹

Thabiti Anyabwile encapsulates the priority of the Gospel over and against Conian theology when he writes that “the salvation of souls far outranks liberation and prosperity in this life.”⁷²

The gospel of liberation theology peddles a cheap, substitute salvation in place of the wonderful, Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. Of course, we should want to be charitable and understanding with those who disagree with us. We don't want to alienate our spiritual family in Christ and unintentionally create new walls by trying to rip others down. But when the content of the Gospel of salvation is undermined, we want to be as razor sharp as the Scriptures as we rightly divide the Word of Truth from error. So, for the sake of clarity, let me summarize.

- In the Gospel, God saves us from justice, not injustice.
- In the Gospel, God saves us from Himself, not each other.
- In the Gospel, God saves us through Jesus, not through other men.
- In the Gospel, God saves us later, not right now.
- In the Gospel, God saves us from the consequences of our own sin, not the sin of others.

SAVED TO

While it's absolutely critical that we define what the Gospel saves us *from*, we must be equally clear about what the Gospel saves us *to*.

Every Sunday of my childhood, as far as I can remember, I heard about the Gospel of salvation without being changed by it. I would have told you that Jesus' death rescues me from the future, fair penalty for my sins. I would have nodded along with sermons on atonement, propitiation, and Jesus' wrath-absorbing, righteousness-imputing cross. But I thought simple agreement to the facts of this Good News equaled faith. I thought that repentance from sin and righteous living were, of course, preferable but saw them as an optional add-on to the Christian life. And I was dead wrong.

To separate a changed life from a changed mind decapitates the Gospel. There is no such thing as a believer who doesn't repent from sin or a Christian who hates good works. That's why James says, "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:17). John concurs when he writes, "Whoever says, 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4). Jesus Himself affirms the transformational character of the Gospel when He so powerfully and simply says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

While we ought to carefully distinguish between the salvation offered in the Gospel and the transformative effects of the Gospel, it is impossible to divide them from one another. If you have faith, you have works. If you know Him, you keep His Word. If you love Him, you obey Him.

We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. My tears of repentance and my works of compassion do not contribute one iota to my righteous standing before my Judge. Jesus' perfect life has been substituted for my filthy one in order that I might stand before God justified, declared holy by His mercy alone (Rom. 3:26; 2 Cor. 5:21; Titus 3:4-5). I am not saved *by* works. But I am saved *to* them.

One of the clearest passages explaining the relationship between faith and works is Ephesians 2:1-10. In describing our glorious spiritual resurrection from deadness to sin, Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Paul bends over backwards to help us see that we are emphatically not saved by our works. If we were, he argues, then we’d have something to boast about, and God is too jealous for His glory to allow humble bragging in the courts of Heaven. We are saved only by faith, which is no work but is itself a precious gift from God.

Though we are saved apart from works, Paul tells us that we are saved *to* good works. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for* good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10, emphasis mine). The word “for” after “Christ Jesus” and before “good works” is extraordinarily significant. This little preposition indicates purpose and intent. Why did God cause a dead sinner to receive new spiritual life, creating a new nature in them that’s united to Jesus? What was God’s aim in raising us spiritually together with Christ before we’re raised physically with Christ? If He’s going to save us from His wrath later, why bother making us new now? Paul answers, “for good works.”

If God intends for our present spiritual transformation to manifest itself immediately in good works, then we would be foolish to separate the root from the fruit. We are “saved from,” and we are “saved to.” It’s not one or the other but always both. In the Gospel, God offers escape from the condemnation we deserve and freedom to obey our new Heavenly Father rather than persist in sin. Ours is a message of deliverance from the penalty *and* the power of sin. We are rescued “for good works,” and God Himself prepared those works beforehand so they will surely be done! Gospel believers will produce good works. We dare not undermine the integrity of the Gospel by omitting its necessary effect on our lives today.

GOSPEL EFFECTS

But as dangerous as it may be to try to separate the future salvation of the Gospel from the present application of the Gospel, it's just as dangerous to blend them together. I'll quote D. A. Carson at length on this point for his powerful precision and insight:

The first two greatest commands—to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves—do not constitute the gospel, or any part of it. We may well argue that when the gospel is faithfully declared and rightly received, it will result in human beings more closely aligned to these two commands. But they are not the gospel. Similarly, the gospel is not receiving Christ or believing in him, or being converted, or joining a church; it is not the practice of discipleship. Once again, the gospel faithfully declared and rightly received will result in people receiving Christ, believing in Christ, being converted, and joining a local church; but such steps are not the gospel. The Bible can exhort those who trust the living God to be concerned with issues of social justice; it can tell new covenant believers to do good to all human beings, especially to those of the household of faith; it exhorts us to remember the poor and to ask, not “Who is my neighbor?” but “Whom am I serving as neighbor?” We may even argue that some such list of moral commitments is a *necessary* consequence of the gospel. But it is not the gospel. We may preach through the list, reminding people that the Bible is concerned to tell us not only what to believe but how to live. But we may not preach through that list and claim it encapsulates the gospel. The gospel is what God has done, supremely in Christ, and especially focused on his cross and resurrection. Failure to distinguish between the gospel and all the effects of the gospel tends, on the long haul, to replace the good news as to what *God* has done with a moralism that is finally without the power and the glory of Christ crucified, resurrected, ascended, and reigning.⁷³

Carson's observation has proved sadly prophetic. In many cases, the Good News has been subverted in pulpits across America because of this confusion of the Gospel and its effects. For example, one author writes, "I cannot read the Gospels without seeing social justice as an essential concept and undertaking of Jesus' message and ministry. Social justice was at the heart of His Gospel. He came to save the whole person—mind, body and soul."⁷⁴

It's absolutely true that Jesus came to save the whole person, but not through you and not just yet. He Himself will do it when He returns. To say that social justice, or the pursuit of racial harmony, or feeding the needy, or helping the hurting, or any other specific good work is "the heart of His Gospel" is to substitute the saving news of God's accomplishment with man's achievements.

Of course, Christ's followers should be the most empathetic, caring, upright, godly people on the planet because we're emulating our Lord. "Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as [Jesus] is righteous" (1 John 3:7). Where there is suffering, there you'll find the disciples of Jesus ministering, weeping, and praying. We don't ignore injustice; we don't explain away racism; and we don't dismiss the plight of the poor. Our transformed hearts beat in sync with our Savior, leading us to lives of good works, love for our neighbor, and deep, heartfelt compassion. Paul writes in Galatians 6:10, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." We prioritize the needs of our spiritual family in Christ, and we also do good works for those outside of the church (more on this in chapter six).

But our transformed lives are the *working out* of the Gospel, not the Gospel itself. Love for our neighbor is what Paul calls keeping "in step with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14), not the content of the Gospel. God has done all that is required, and we add nothing to it. Rather, we are changed by the Good News through the power of the Spirit unto good works.

NOT JUST HAMMERS

But there's another danger in talking about how we work out the Gospel in our lives: We can wrongly go beyond God's Word to define what those good works must be for every Christian. Several passages certainly do go into specific detail about how Christians must provide for the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ,^g but we're not given such direct orders about serving the world outside the Church. In fact, it may surprise you to hear what Jesus *doesn't* command.

- Nowhere in the New Testament are all Christians commanded to fight for political justice.^h
- Nowhere in the New Testament are all Christians commanded to lament for economic inequality.
- Nowhere in the New Testament are all Christians commanded to feed the world's hungry.ⁱ
- Nowhere in the New Testament are all Christians commanded to unite divided neighborhoods.
- Nowhere in the New Testament are all Christians commanded to dethrone corrupt governors.^j
- Nowhere in the New Testament are all Christians even commanded to end slavery (though Paul sows the seeds of abolition in Philemon).

g For example, Matthew 25:34-46; 1 Timothy 5:1-20; 1 John 3:17.

h Note that I used the words "New Testament" and "Christians." There were plenty of calls for corrections of injustice to Israel in the Old Testament because the Mosaic Law called for precisely that kind of work. The New Covenant community is not a nation-state, and those commands are not given directly to us, though they do reveal to us the character of God and His desire for justice in this world. More on this in chapter six.

i Every passage in the New Testament that does command feeding someone else (Matt. 25:31-46; James 2:14-18; 1 John 3:17-18) is explicitly referring to feeding fellow believers, not the world's poor. While there are several proverbs lauding the generosity of feeding the poor without qualification (Prov. 14:31, 19:17, 22:9, 31:20), those do not constitute a binding command. Giving generously to all certainly reflects the heart of God, but it cannot be included as a necessary effect of the Gospel for all Christians without going beyond the bounds of Scripture.

j Actually, the Bible commands the opposite: that Christians submit to all governing authorities (even evil ones) until they command what God forbids or forbid what God commands (Dan. 3:16-18; Matt. 22:15-22; Acts 5:27-32; Rom. 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17).

Now, understand what I'm saying. It breaks a believer's heart to see fellow image-bearers gunned down unarmed in the streets or locked up with a life sentence while innocent. Unfair suffering makes us long for justice to be done, and that will compel some to speak up and even protest in defense of hurting victims. When motivated by Christlike wisdom and compassion, working for proximate, political justice is a wonderful and righteous outflow of the Gospel.

But while these efforts may be exactly how Christians should help people in their communities, that application isn't commanded in the Bible, so we dare not make it an essential component of the Gospel. There are countless, godly ways for believers to produce "good works" as the fruit of our belief, all of which are significant and worthy of exhortation. To one is given the gift of mercy, and to another giving, and to another teaching (1 Cor. 12:8-11). So it is with our spiritual gifts, and so it is with our works. The Church isn't a wall of hammers but a workshop with every different kind of tool for a variety of tasks. If we assume that all Christians were gifted by the Spirit for the same exact work, then everything will start to look like a nail—even the screws—and we'll leave a lot of important work undone. Paul tells us that God has given Christians different burdens for different kinds of work all moving toward the same goal of building up the body (1 Cor. 12:18-19). Christians aren't just hammers.

So, to say that one particular work is a necessary component of the Gospel, thereby mandating that action for all Christians, is unhelpfully myopic and potentially legalistic. We wouldn't demand that all Christians must protest the injustice of abortion in order to genuinely believe the Gospel, so why would we demand the same for racial injustice? Compassion ought to compel Christians to alleviate suffering in the world around us in a variety of ways, including the suffering that comes through the condemnation of God in Hell. But woe to us if we replace the varied effects of the Gospel with the Gospel itself. John Piper writes, "The gospel was meant to explode with saving power

in the lives of politicians and social activists, not help them decorate their social agendas.”⁷⁵

Consider for a moment just how astonishingly silent Jesus was about the cultural sin and suffering that surrounded him. On one occasion, Jesus was given the perfect opportunity to decry racism and majority-culture oppression. Pilate had just slaughtered a group of Galileans and mingled their blood with that of their sacrifices. This was a barbaric, outrageous, ethnically charged injustice. Surely, this senseless act demanded a passionate protest from this Galilean Rabbi! But what was Jesus’ response when He was asked to comment on this atrocity? “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:2-3). He turned the focus away from injustice toward justice! Jesus used a horrific story of Roman oppression not to fire up His crowd to demand restitution but instead to plead with them to flee from the wrath they deserve.

Does the Gospel “save to” good works? Yes and amen! We should be careful, though, to distinguish between the good works that God has prepared for each Christian to walk in and the good works that others demand. Let me put it this way: if someone defines what Paul calls “good works” as “fighting for racial justice,” they are really defining “good works” as “the particular good work I want everyone to do.” Don’t buy it. You’re called to holiness, compassion, and active love for believers and those around you. That will manifest in thousands of different ways—and praise God for it because that’s how He grows His united Church.

SAVED WITH

False gospels can divide the Church, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ will unite her. Lemuel Haynes and John Newton both grasped the vital importance of Gospel-preaching as the central pillar that holds up the roof of God’s spiritual house. With Christ as the Cornerstone, this building will

continue to be knit together in love and built up evermore into the image of Christ. Jesus' Gospel is the only solid foundation for ethnic unity in the Church because only His Gospel offers salvation to every person on earth, regardless of differences in heritage, class, or pedigree. Christ, through His Good News, brings together those who were a world apart, offers them a future free from condemnation, and transforms them into hard-working, compassionate kingdom citizens who are passionate for His glory above all.

If we want to start tearing down the ethnic divides in the Church, we must first be clear about the Gospel that unites us. If we preach two different gospels, we'll have two different bodies. But in the Gospel of Jesus, there is only one body with many diverse parts.

To give us clarity and hope, Pastor H. B. Charles writes:

Racism is a spiritual battle that can be overcome. But you cannot win spiritual battles with worldly weapons. This is why the hope of overcoming racism cannot truly be found in human effort, worldly philosophies, or even civil rights. The gospel, which reconciles God to sinners, must also reconcile sinners to one another.⁷⁶

It was the Gospel that united Lemuel Haynes, a former slave, and his European American congregation. And it was the Gospel that united him with a former slave trader, John Newton, whose own divided congregation eventually found harmony in the Gospel. The Gospel transcended their ethnic differences and brought together those who were far off.

Jesus unites His Church through His Gospel. Though Haynes and Newton have since joined their voices to the heavenly choir, the universal Church they served is still bringing people together today by the preaching of God's Word. Here, in the Church, the Gospel is reconciling Democrats and Republicans to God and to each other. Here, Black Panthers, Neo-nazis, Islamic terrorists, and religious suburbanites all find the tender compassion of Christ in His Church. Here one day, when the Church is raised, the Klansman who repents

will worship alongside the black pastor he lynched. This is the uniting power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the Gospel of Jesus Christ?
2. Why has Gospel preaching been the primary task of the Church throughout Church history? What does our God-given primacy of Gospel preaching tell us about God's heart?
3. From what does the Gospel save us? From what does the Gospel *not* save us? Why is it important to be clear about those distinctions?
4. Have you ever heard a false, substitute gospel being preached? How could you tell that it was different from the biblical Gospel? How should we respond when we hear a false gospel being communicated?
5. Can we be "saved from" without being "saved to?" Why or why not? How is distinguishing between the Gospel and its effects different from dividing them? To what work has the Lord saved you?
6. How can clarifying the Gospel help us "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace?"