

The Color of Compromise: A Dialogue with Jemar Tisby

Date: November 4, 019

Location: Wrighton Hall 300 at Washington University in St. Louis

Shelley Milligan:

My name is Shelley Milligan; I am the managing director of the Carver Project. If you're new to the Carver Project, we are also new! We're a nonprofit that started a few years ago. Our mission is empower faculty and students to serve and connect university, church, and society. We're so glad that you're here tonight for our dialogue with Jemar Tisby and John Inazu. Tonight has been cosponsored by the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, the School of Law, and the department of American Culture Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences. We're so grateful for our campus partners.

Tonight's events will begin with a talk by Mr. Tisby. It will be followed by a dialogue with Prof. Inazu, and then we'll open the talk for questions and answers. Following the questions and answers, we'll have a reception and a book signing for *The Color of Compromise*, which we'll have for sale. I also want to say that someone left their keys at the registration table; they will be there, you will have to identify the make and model of car, that's the quiz.

First I'm going to interview John Inazu, who will be coming up second. John is the Sally Danforth Distinguished Professor of Law and Religion at WUSTL. He is the author of "Liberty's Refuge: The Forgotten Freedom of Assembly," "Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving Through Deep Difference," and a forthcoming book with Tim Keller, "Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully in the World with Difference," now available for pre-order. John is also executive director of the Carver Project.

Jemar Tisby is the president of the Witness, a Black Christian collective, where he writes about race, religion, and culture. He is also the co-host of Pass the Mic, a podcast that amplifies dynamic voices from a diverse church. Jemar's writing has been featured in the Atlantic, the Washington Post, CNN, Vox, and the New York Times. He has spoken nationwide at conferences on racial justice, US history, and the church. He is the author of *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism*. Jemar is a PhD candidate studying history at the University of Mississippi; he is studying race, religion, and social movements in the 20th century. His BA is from Notre Dame, and his MDiv is from RTS Jackson. You can follow him on Twitter at @JemarTisby. And now, the guest of honor. Thank you.

Jemar Tisby:

It was September 15th, 1963. Four little girls, Adelaide Collins, Denise McNair, Carol Robertson, Cynthia West. They were at the youth day Sunday service, 16th Street Baptist Church, and they were making final adjustments on their white dresses in the church basement when the bomb exploded and left a hole in the floor five feet wide and two feet

deep. It decapitated poor Cynthia, whose parents could only tell it was their baby girl by the ring on her finger and the shoes she was wearing. Of course, in the aftermath, people across the country expressed outrage; how could such a thing happen? In the aftermath, a white lawyer named Charles Morgan, Jr. spoke the next day to a group of young white businessmen. He changed his topic at the last minute to address this tragedy. He tells this group of all white businessmen, he asks them a question. He said, "Who threw it? Who threw that bomb? Was it a Negro or a white?" He tells this room of all white men in Birmingham, "The answer should be, 'We all did it.'" Every last one of us. He said, "We're condemned for that night, and the bombing before it, and a decade ago—we all did it." But they leave the church out of the equation. He talks about Christians, and he said, "The 'who' is very little individual who talks about the n***** and spreads the seeds of his hate in his neighbor and his son. The jokester, the crude oaf whose racial jokes draw a party laugh." He asks, "Did those ministers visit the families of the Negroes in their hour of travail? Did many of them go to the homes of their brothers and sisters and express their regrets in person and pray with surviving relatives? Do they fit Negroes into the ranks of their church?" Of course, there were plenty of people who outright constructed and supported racism and racial terror, people who donned robes and burned crosses on lawns, who planted dynamite on churches. But if that's your only definition of racism and what a racist does, then it's too easy to let ourselves off the hook. It's too easy to point the finger and say, "Look, it's them, those are the real racists. I'm not part of it." But I think what Charles Morgan, Jr. was getting at in his speech, and asking who did it, and saying it was all of us, is this idea of complicity. So, true enough, the people who were actively planting bombs and doing these racist acts may have been quantitatively a minority, but they couldn't have done what they did without the silence, the ignorance, the apathy of the vast majority of people, including Christians. So the idea of compromise is this: those egregious acts of racism like the church bombing only happen within a context of compromise. So. This presentation is entitled, "What is the color of compromise?" It's a question I'm surprised I don't get more often given the title, "The Color of Compromise." I would think it would be natural for people to say, "Okay, what *is* the color of compromise? Is it pink? Is it powder blue? Is it periwinkle?" Which, I don't know what that looks like. If anyone's wearing periwinkle let me know. But I want to propose to you this evening that the color of compromise is at least three different colors.

The color of compromise is green, because it was greed that propped up a white supremacist system and race-based chattel slavery. The color of compromise is white. An ideology that places white people at the top, the center of society, with people of color, especially black people, at the margins. And the color of compromise is red. Because the greed and the white supremacy at the end of the day had to use bloody violence. Before I talk about each of these in turn, I want to say this is all an introduction to a conversation. If you want to learn more I do a lot of ranting and raving on social media. You can visit our website thewitnessbcc.com, you can visit my own website jemartisby.com, and I have not one but two podcasts for your listening pleasure. Don't forget to subscribe if you can. Pass the Mic I co-host with Tyler Burns, we talk about everything under the sun from the Black Christian perspective and Footnotes is one I started more recently, a solo project where I talk about current events from a black perspective. I encourage you to check those out if you want to continue the conversation.

By the way, I don't like monologues. So if you want to talk back it's okay. I hope we're not in church, but if I say something you like it's okay to agree with me; you can say amen, uh huh. It's alright to talk back. Give me some help.

Also, I don't know where you are—you may love this idea, you may hate it. But we're going to be on this journey together, and I think the best way to do things in our limited time is to say things like Black, and white, and racism, and racist, and white supremacy, and all these things that are kind of trigger words in our society. But let's just agree that in this room, for the sake of time and efficiency and honesty, that we're going to go in and think the best of each other and take this journey together. Can we do that? [applause]

The color of compromise is green. Let's start with this quote by James W. C. Pennington, who was a black minister and abolitionist in the 1800s. He said this: "The bane of slavery—its soul and its body—lives and moves in the chattel principle. The property principle. The bill of sale principle. And the starvation, the nakedness are its inevitable consequence." So, a lot of people like to say that slavery was America's original sin. It might be more accurate to say that slavery was America's original symptom, and its original sin was greed. So let's break it down. Race-based chattel slavery. Chattel: C-H-A-T-T-E-L. It means property. So race-based chattel slavery means that human beings were considered property. Why? Because the capitalist system was the goal: maximize profit, minimize loss. If you've ever been in charge of a budget or even just see one, you'll know that typically your biggest outlay is towards wages, salaries, and benefits towards your workers. So you want to increase that profit, the best way to do that is to cut those wages, salaries, and benefits. But better yet, don't pay your workers at all. That's what happened in race-based chattel slavery. For centuries, people of African descent literally built this country—chopped down trees, drained swamps, picked cotton, built buildings, for no wages. The reason why slavery has such resiliency, it's not just because of racism, though there was that. But because there was money to be made. That's why if you go to the Mississippi Articles of Secession, January 1861, it says this: "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery, the greatest material interest in the world. Its labor supplies the product which constitutes by far the largest and most important portions of commerce on the earth." See that material interest? Its labor supplies commerce. There's money to be had. By the way, don't let anyone ever tell you that the Civil War wasn't about slavery. I lived in the South, a lot of people try to say, "It was about state's rights!" Well, yeah, you're right, but the state's right to do what? Enslave people! And why did it take America's bloodiest war to bring about emancipation? Why couldn't it gradually come about through a process of changing laws or changing hearts, why did it take hundreds of thousands of deaths within the United States to bring about emancipation? Because it was profitable to enslave people. This is why if you look at the slave ship, they weren't built for comfort. Most slave ships weren't built to transport many people at all; they had to be retrofitted, and when they were retrofitted the designers didn't think about the comfort of the passengers, they thought about the passengers as property or as cargo, same as you would gunpowder or boxes of produce. If you're packing to move somewhere, you pack and arrange things in order to fit as much as possible in one trip. They did the same thing with human beings. What got me is that they would always count on attrition, which meant death. As you're researching, some

random facts tend to stick out to you, and one random fact that stuck out to me was that sharks used to follow behind the slave ships because when people died they didn't have anywhere to put them, so they would just toss them into the sea and sharks are natural scavengers so they would follow the slave ships and get a free meal. Chattel. Humans being treated as property, as cargo, as commodities, to enrich the people who owned plantations and other businesses. There's a man named Olaudah Equiano. He was kidnapped from the area now known as Nigeria, he was of the Ebo tribe, he was about 11 years old when he and his sister were kidnapped and enslaved. He talks about this issue of family separation. He said, he wrote an autobiography, and in it he writes about being separated from his sister. He says this, "The next day proved of greater sorrow than I had yet experienced, for my sister and I were then separated while we lay clasped in each other's arms. It was in vain that we besought them, the slave traders, not to part us, for she was torn from me and immediately carried away while I was left in a state of distraction not to be described. I cried and grieved continually and for several days I did not eat anything but what they forced into my mouth." And then, Equiano, who became a Christian, he noticed that many slaveholders themselves professed Christianity. But as many oppressed people and Black Christians did, they saw through the hypocrisy; this is what Equiano asked of these Christian slave traders and owners. "O ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you; learnt you this from your God, who says 'Do unto all men as you would have men do unto you'?" To tear my sister from my arms and sell us like property.

One more quote I want to share with you about this greed inherent in the system, and it comes from a historian, Forest G. Wood. He says, "Cynical though it may sound, it's not exaggeration to submit that the critical fact of determining who opposed slavery and who supported it was a consequence entirely of political and economic factor. All the Christian conviction in the world could not get the purse of one slaveholder." All the Christian conviction in the world couldn't shake them of their real god, money. That's why I don't think we're having any serious conversations about racial justice unless we're talking about money. How can you say that you can enslave an entire people for centuries, enrich yourself off of their labor, rape their women to create more slaves, which creates more property, which creates more wealth for yourself, never pay them, separate families, fight a bloody war for emancipation and then say "Good luck." Without any financial consideration whatsoever. How do we look at things like the racial wealth gap. There are a lot of people who will simply say, "Well, Black people are poor because they're lazy. They don't work hard. The American dream is open to them, they just don't want it." You can say that. It would be racist. Or you can say there's something wrong with the system, and we need to do something about it. We can delve further into that, and there are economists who are experts on researching the idea of reparations. But how can we talk about racial justice without acknowledging the economically exploitative system that has been the legacy of race-based chattel slavery? The color of compromise is green.

The color of compromise is also white. It's not just an economic, material, financial aspect to all this. There's an ideological aspect to it as well. One of the themes in the book is that racism never goes away, it just adapts. And so we can look at different manifestations of racism. There would be, you could say, three major periods of racism. One was race-based chattel slavery, another after that was the Jim Crow era in which legalized segregation was

the law of the land, and then the current era we're living in is an era of systemic inequality and racialized society where many of society's benefits are portioned along race-based lines even without explicit race-based laws. Why? Why, after Emancipation weren't we done with racism? Why after Brown v. Board weren't we done with racism? It's because of white supremacy. White supremacy is a story we tell ourselves about race, or as my friend Gabby Hill wrote in her book, "White supremacy is the narrative of racial difference, the story of racial difference." So until we change that story of racial difference, we're always going to have racism creep up in different ways. Ryan Steiber, the founder of the Racial Justice Initiative, said "The North won the Civil War but the South won the narrative war." He's right; this ideological battle about race and whiteness and white supremacy and what that means is still happening every day in our society. The color of compromise is white.

So as we talk about the color of compromise being white, what I'm really talking about is this idea of whiteness. I want you to separate white people from whiteness. So what whiteness does is these three things: first of all, whiteness erases ethnicity. I'm talking mainly for white people. So at some point, you had ancestors come over from Europe. And when they came over from Europe, they were British, or French, or Swedish, or Dutch, perhaps Italian. But when they hit these shores, in this racialized society, this white supremacist society, Europeans from all these different places became white. And what happened is all that history that you had got erased. And exchanged for something called whiteness, which over here had more currency than being Dutch, or French, or whatever it was. So a lot of people willingly traded that, because it was better to be white than to be some ethnic or nationally specific group. It was certainly better to be white than black. So one of the things I think will help white people acknowledge their whiteness is the recovery of their national ethnic heritage. See, when you traded your ethnic national heritage for whiteness, some on purpose, some over time, gradually, what happened was you lost all that culture. All that history. The language, the food, the dances. And now, all of you have left to lean on is whiteness. Whiteness necessarily is anti-Black. Which I'll get to in a minute. When I was in seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, it was so interesting. It drew people from all over the nation, white people mostly, and you'd have these guys from Ohio and Pennsylvania and Wyoming and they'd come down to Jackson, Mississippi and within about a semester or two, all of a sudden these guys from all over the country started wearing bowties and growing beards and wearing seer-sucker. And I'm like, "What are you doing? This is not your culture, you're not a Southern gentleman." And I realized, in the South, there was. Very distinct culture for white people and for white males. And coming from different parts of the country into the south, where it was very apparent what it meant to be a wealthy well-educated white man, they leaned into that because it was something they could grasp, something they could celebrate. But what they didn't realize was that leaning into that whiteness meant being opposed to black people.

It creates this equal and opposite category of black. Where everything white is considered central and normal and good, and that which is black is considered abnormal and marginal and perhaps bad. Right? And then there's a spectrum of everyone in between. So it doesn't just create this category of blackness, it creates the categories of white and non-white, and there's a spectrum that encompasses Latin Americans, people of Asian descent, Native Americans, and of course, Black people. We're all caught up in this thing. And to the degree

that you look white or identify with white culture, you can make it. You can pass. You can assimilate. Until something happens that reminds people that you're really not white. So nobody is escaping this. Now, what does that have to do with Christianity and compromise?

Well, this idea of whiteness is wrapped up with Christianity and nationalism. There's been a lot of talk in the news about white nationalism. I think we need to equally talk about something called white Christian nationalism. A lot of people don't realize that the Ku Klux Klan had three different major iterations. One was right after the Civil War, one was during the Civil Rights Movement, and one was in the height of Jim Crow, in 1915, there was this movie called *Birth of a Nation*. It was the first blockbuster film of Hollywood. It was a three hour long silent film that purported to tell about the noble origins of the Ku Klux Klan after the Civil War. There's a whole thing we can get into about that movie and its propaganda. Suffice it to say it inspired Christian white nationalists. So what they did on Thanksgiving Day, 1915, was to go to the top of this place, Stone Mountain in Georgia, with its front of three confederate heroes. They go to the top of Stone Mountain in Georgia and in a tradition taken from Scotch Irish they burn a cross. They also built an altar. And on that altar they put two items; an American flag and the Bible. White Christian nationalist. This melding of race and religion and formal patriotism into this toxic blend that essentially says this is a white man's country and we're going to make sure it stays that way. Christians were complicit in this. The color of compromise is white.

But also, the color of compromise is red. I'm going to warn you, I'm going to describe a lynching. I do it not to be sensational, but because if we don't actually confront the physical violence that was part of the principle of white supremacy, then we will not respond to racism with the urgency that it requires. So, a moment ago I said whiteness has three results. It erases ethnicity, it creates this equal and opposite category of black. The other thing whiteness does is it says that in order to maintain power, violence is necessary. And so, I want to read you this quote from Ta-nahisi Coates's book, "*Between the World and Me*," because I think it captures this. He says, "It's hard to face this, but all your phrasing-- race relations, racial profiling, racial justice, white privilege, even white supremacy— serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience. That it dislodges brains. Blocks airways. Rips muscle. Extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the graphs, the charts, all led with great violence upon the body." He captures it: the end result of this greed, the end result of this white supremacy is always physical violence. Why? I'm going to be theological for a second. Genesis 1:26-27 gives us the doctrine called the *imago dei* in Latin. In English, the image of God. It says, "Let us create human kind in our image and in our likeness." And it is this doctrine that tells us how to treat one another, that tells us that everyone is created in the image and likeness of God and so is worthy of equal dignity and respect. This extends to all human beings; abled and disabled, black and white, Christian and non-christian, straight and gay, and everyone. It tells us how to treat one another. So what happens when you subjugate an entire racial group, like black people? There's something deep within us that says, "This isn't right. I'm worthy of dignity, I'm worthy of respect, I'm worthy of equality. Because I have the fingerprint of God on me. Just like you." So that spirit of resistance wells up. But nuh-uh! You're not going to mess with my bottom line. So when you get too uppity, when you start to assert yourself, I'm going to slap you

down with physical violence, if necessary. That's what happened in the case of lynching. We have nearly 5,000 recorded lynchings that we know of. This is just one example. It was 1904 in Mississippi. As with many of these cases, we don't know precisely what happened. We know there was some sort of a love triangle. There were two sharecroppers in love with the same woman. They had a dispute. One of the male sharecroppers gets the white plantation owner to come and confront this other black male sharecropper. They go to his cabin; an altercation ensues, and this black male sharecropper and the white plantation owner end up dead. Now, if that other black male sharecropper had just killed another sharecropper, not that big a deal to white people. But he killed a white man, and not just any white man, a rich white man. That was an automatic death sentence. So this man who killed a white plantation owner, his name was Luther Hulbert. He was in love with a black woman named Mary Hulbert. When this happened they went on the run, they hid in swamps, Mary even disguised herself as a man. But the possum caught up with them. The bloodhounds and the constant pursuit finally got them. But they didn't do the lynching right away. They waited for Sunday, when the most people could gather. And they didn't do it just anywhere—some open field or even the town square. They did it on the property of a black church. Why a black church? Because historically the black church had been the arc of refuge, the center for organizing and uplift in the black community. And so to conduct a lynching on the grounds of a black church says, "There's nowhere you're safe." And they didn't just execute them, they tortured them. So, more than a thousand people showed up to gawk at this lynching. The lynchers tied up the Hulberts. First, the white murderers cut off each of their fingers and toes and gave them out as souvenirs. I often wonder what happened to those fingers and toes. Did they end up in someone's attic somewhere? Years later, did someone come across them and say, "What's this?" and then just toss it? I wonder. Then they beat the bodies of Luther and Mary so mercilessly that one of Luther's eyes popped from its socket. Then the Vixburg Eagle reported, "The most excruciating form of punishment consisted of the use of a large corkscrew in the hands of some of them. The instrument was bored into the flesh of the man and the woman in the arms, legs, and body, and pulled out, the spirals tearing out big pieces of large quivering flesh each time. Finally, the Hulberts, still alive, were dragged to a pyre. They forced black men to drag them there. Then, they lit Mary on fire so that Luther could see his beloved killed. Then they lit him on fire. The red, bloody, violence white supremacy ultimately required. The color of compromise is red.

So what do we do? In the book, I walk through four hundred years of history, every major period of American history from the colonial period up to the present, and I show the Christian complicity with racism, and the question is now, what do we do? I don't know if we have audio—let's see.

[Clip of MLK plays, from the speech of the March on Washington]

That was August 1963, the "I Have a Dream" speech. This comes before that fateful line, the part we all love to quote. The beginning of that speech, King sounds a very insistent tone. Did you hear that phrase, "come to this hallowed spot because of the fierce urgency of now"? I love that language. Urgency already tells you that something/s happening that actually needs to be taken immediately. But it's not just any kind of urgency, it's a fierce

urgency. An urgency that grips you and won't let you go. It's a fierce urgency that demands action not soon, not gradually, not eventually, but now. The fierce urgency of now. That was 1963. Over half a century later, when we look at race relations in this nation, in many ways we still say that we need to respond to the fierce urgency of now. Not that there hasn't been progress, but much more still needs to be done. So the question is what do we do? At the end of the book, in the last chapter, I propose a simple model. It's called the arc of racial justice. It's an acronym that stands for "Awareness, relationships, commitment."

Now, before we unpack each of these, it's important to understand that this is not a linear progress. You don't go to awareness and then graduate to relationships and then graduate to commitment and then check all the boxes and then you're done. It's a circular, or a spiral process, and you're always engaging in one or all of them at once. It's also a never-ending process. No matter how far along you are in this journey of racial justice, you are always increasing your awareness and building relationships, and reifying and recommitting to commitment to action. When we talk about awareness, we're talking about a knowledge about race and racism work. These are the things like coming to this talk, and reading this book. I'll give you a couple concrete actions you can take to increase your awareness; you can watch documentaries. There's a helpful one called "Thirteenth" about the story of mass incarceration; there's another helpful one by Henry Louis Gates Jr. called "The African American: Many Rivers to Cross." It's about the history of African Americans in the United States. And there's one, if you can stomach it, because it's very difficult to watch, called "When They See Us," about the Central Park Five, now exonerated. Grief, the miscarriage of justice that convicted these innocent black and brown boys, put them in prison. There's another thing you can do to build your awareness; it's my favorite answer when people ask me questions. The answer is this: Google it. You have so much information available at your fingertips. Never before have we had this much knowledge accessible so quickly and so easily. Not to know about racism is really a culpable offense at this point. You don't know not because you can't know but because you don't care to know. So take action to build awareness. But don't stop there. You also need to build relationships. Again, to get theological for a moment, when God wanted to reconcile humanity to Godself, God didn't send a tweet or an email. God sent a person: Jesus Christ, who took on flesh. Why? To express solidarity with human beings so that he could develop a relationship with people, so that they could come to know him. In a similar way, we're looking at reconciliation; genuine, robust, truthful, deep reconciliation is also going to require relationships. Putting a face on oppression. To add to your awareness, read the book "Divided by Faith" by Michael Emerson and Christian Fong, a sociological account of how white evangelicals think about race. One thing they talk about in that book is that white evangelicals are individualistic; everybody in the west is pretty individualistic, but white evangelicals are particularly individualistic. And this derives partly from their theology of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; when I open my Bible, it's me and my Bible, and I'm interpreting it. And then translate that to race relations: the problem with race relations is one person not liking another, and then the solution is, "Hey, I'm going to build relationships across the color line. We're going to go out to coffee, cross the friendship line, do pulpit swaps, and then I can say, 'Some of my best friends are black! I'm not racist!'" Well, these things are good, you know. I want you to build a relationship with me, I want you to endeavor to understand people who are different than me. I don't want you to hate

me. But here's the thing; it's more complicated than that. Relationships are necessary but not sufficient. All the cups of coffee in the world aren't going to close the racial wealth gap. All the pulpit swaps in the world aren't going to do a thing about mass incarceration. That's where we get to commitment; a commitment to action against racist policies. And to talk about things like reparations, how do we change the balance of financial power which is imbalanced due to racism and white supremacy and race based chattel slavery and sharecropping and conviction—and a whole host of things. How do you address voter suppression, which disproportionately affects black and brown people and the poor? How do you change sentencing laws? All of these things are required if you want to take real anti-racist action. You have to commit to changing not just relationships but racist policies as well. When it comes to fighting racism, I don't think we have a how-to problem, we have a want-to problem. If I gave you five minutes with a pen and paper, you could all come up with a list of several anti-racism actions that would move us closer to racist action. The question is not, brothers and sisters, how to fight racism, the question is will we fight racism? As you look across the scope of history, it's not that people didn't know what to do, it's that only a precious few were willing to stand up instead of exercising compromise and complicity, they were willing to exercise a courageous form of Christianity that would confront the status quo and say, "No more! We're not going to tolerate this any more! If we're going to make a change in this generation it falls on us to demonstrate a courageous kind of action that takes the status quo and says no more." We're not going to tolerate it. And we know it's not just going to go away on its own. A lot of people say, "If I was alive during the Civil Rights Movement, I would have marched with King, I would have boycotted, I would have been on the Freedom Rides." They talk a big game. But don't say you would have been active then if you're not active now. Brothers and sisters, we're in the midst of another wave of the Civil Rights Movement. It never really goes away, but we're in another high point of it, and what you do now tells me what you would have done then. The time for compromise and complicity is long past; the time to exercise courageous action in the face of racism is now. Let's respond to the fears of the urgency of now.

Inazu:

John Inazu: This is a great book, and it's readable. I don't often remember pages of books, but I remember page 21 of this book. Let me read you part of it. "The people who will reject this book will level several common objections. What stands out about these complaints is not their originality or persuasiveness, but their ubiquity throughout history. The same arguments that perpetuated racial inequality in the past get recycled in the present day. Critics will assert the ideas in the Color of Compromise should be disregarded because they are "too liberal." They will claim that a Marxist-communist ideology underlies all talk of racial inequality. They will contend that such a discussion of racism reduces black people to a state of helplessness and a victim mentality. They will try to point to counter-examples and say that racists do not represent the real American church. They will assert that the historical facts are wrong or have been misinterpreted. They will charge that this discussion of race is somehow abandoning the Gospel and replacing it with problematic calls for social justice. It is up to the readers to determine whether the way of restoring evidence proves that the American church has been complicit with racism" (21). And the writing is just as good throughout. I wondered, though, as I read that, and as I anticipated

some of your—you spoke in a lot of places around this country, and you had probably some varied reactions. I'm wondering if you could share a bit about how people have reacted to this book, maybe specifically, or including, the people who might have had this initial reaction.

Tisby:

So I will admit, I'm sort of stealing from W. E. B. DuBois in his preface to his book "Black Reconstruction," which is a correction of the school of history that characterized Reconstruction and the period following the Civil War, when black people were getting franchised as never before, as a mistake. DuBois is correcting that in his book Black Reconstruction, which gives this wonderful presentation in the introduction that says there are some people that take the subhumanity of black people as a fact. He says, this is not a book for you. I'm talking to the people who will take it as a given that black people are indeed full human beings worthy of equality with other people. So, in the same way, this book is not necessarily for people who aren't ready for the conversation. There are some people who are so entrenched in their ideas of whiteness and the way the world should be in terms of how it's ordered that they'll reject this book out of hand. To them I'd say, "Well, this book will be here when you're ready." As to the actual reaction I have to say I've been pleasantly surprised. Throughout the process of writing this book, I kept hearing all these people I had dealt with throughout the years, and saying, "Okay, you're gonna hate this part, you're really gonna hate this part. But it is what it is." But I have to say, when the book came out, I think it came in the midst of a season in this nation and in the church when people were ready to hear something different, they were ready to learn something more. And I'm very grateful for that. I've heard some tremendous stories of transformation. I was saying earlier—a 66 year old white man, I know his age because he told me, in one of his talks he said, "I'm a 66 year old white man from the south. I thought a particular way about race until I read this book, and it changed me. I want to thank you." So I said, "Praise God, that's great." But, there have been detractors. What's interesting is that using history as a vehicle has I think been more accessible to a lot of people. It seems less polemical, less ideological. So for most of the history from the colonial era even through the Civil War and the Jim Crow era, people have been like, "Yeah, I get it, it was bad." But then you get to the Civil Rights Movement, and the rise of the Religious Right, and that's where people start to push back. Now you've got lived history, people are still alive who lived through that, and you're talking about heroes that they've grown up with, heroes like Billy Graham, and saying, "Oh, he wasn't the racial crusader that some people made him out to be." Then you talk about the rise of the Religious Right, and a lot of people see that movement essentially as a pro-life movement that coalesced to oppose abortion and Roe v. Wade, and take it as this noble moral crusade. But then you push the history back a few years, and you find it had a lot to do with tax-exempt status and losing that tax-exempt status because Christian systems for racial segregations were a violation of the law. So it's wrapped up in racism and segregation. So that's where most of the push-back comes. And then lastly, on the last chapter about ways to address racism, because I intentionally try to go beyond, "Hey, make a new friend!" Great, right, but don't stop there. I talk about the systemic institutional policy aspects of racism, and that's all sort of lumped in a box as liberal, Marxist, social justice, critical race theory, all of that, and if it's that, then I don't need to listen to it.

Inazu:

When you talk about the history, especially the rise of the Religious Right, you quote Jerry Paul Sr., the father of John Paul Jr., in his essay. In the 60s, Paul says, “Being a preacher of the gospel, I couldn’t spare a minute to talk about these issues of Civil Rights,” because that’s politics, and then 20 years later there’s a different tune as far as the histories in here as well, the current histories. I wonder, so you’re a Christian, and you are talking to a people who in some ways share an element of your own tradition. There’s a set of resources that you’re drawing from. I’m thinking particularly of some of the people engaging in current commentary—Roxanne Gay of the NYT says “I’m done with forgiveness.” Which is a pretty honest statement from her perspective. But, there’s something more that you’re calling for here. Say a little bit about what difference it makes to be a Christian in this conversation.

Tisby:

Well, I think, honestly, Christians have a lot to learn from non-Christians about racial justice. If we’re looking at different institutions, from the academy to entertainment to sports, even business, there have been a lot more gestures of diversity, equity, and inclusion in secular spaces than we often see in Christian ones. So I think Christians need to have the humility to say that there are other people doing great work out there. That’s why I have benefitted immensely from working with sociologists and historians and others who may not be Christian but have put a lot of thought and effort into understanding racial dynamics in this country. To the extent that Christians shove those resources aside, I think we impoverish ourselves. So we have a lot to learn from them. What I find in Christianity is some of the moral resources to undergird this push for racial justice, right? King talks about the arc of the moral universe being long but it bends towards justice. Well, where does that moral arc come from? What is the standard for the way we treat each other? That gets back to Genesis 1 and the image of God. This is something I say in different Christian contexts, but the Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century centered around the doctrine of salvation by faith alone, in contradistinction to what Luther and others saw were deficiencies in the Catholic Church. I think if there’s going to be a Reformation in the 21st century, the central belief it should revolve around is the image of God, and how do we treat people who are different from you. If we can really excavate teachings like that, then I think it would inform us and transform us. And by the way, it’s never going to be a majority. That may happen eventually, but the people who are in the front of change—that tends to be a small group of committed people. SO I don’t want us to delude ourselves in this work into thinking that we’re automatically going to have this broad base of support and people cheering us on. That probably won’t happen. If you look historically, people who want to instigate change on behalf of the disempowered are not typically popular. I also want to encourage people that if you don’t have a big old group of people linking arms with you, it only takes a few. It only takes a few.

Inazu:

The good thing is, though, is at least money’s not part of the problem for you. [Laughter]

Tisby:

No, of course not! [Laughter]

Inazu:

I was also struck that even though you're talking about historical awareness, at least since we're here in St. Louis you don't have to think about any of those problems.

Tisby:

I'll tell you, St. Louis is instrumental in catalyzing me, particularly in terms of history. So, when Ferguson happened and we had the rise of Black Lives Matter, I was just trying to make sense of the situation. How you have a predominantly white police force coming to police a predominantly black community and those kinds of questions. I found that historians often had the most useful things to say. They were able to talk about restrictive covenants and redlining, they were able to talk about the origins of the police force, they were able to give context to current events based on history that helped me make sense of what was happening and try to know better what to do. So I'm indebted to this really tragic event that happened in your community for leading me to history in particular as a way to understand a racial milieu even in the present day.

Inazu:

On the subject of history, we were privileged to have you in my class this afternoon, and as we were talking about history, you were saying the contingency of history means that none of this was inevitable. You went through and gave some what-ifs, and I wonder if you could give us those again.

Tisby:

So, one of the historical facts that really sticks out to me; it was in a book. In 1667 in a Virginia settlement a group of white Anglican men passes a law that says that baptism does not confer freedom on a person of African, Native American, or mixed race descent. Basically what they're saying is Jesus can have your soul, but we have your body. And ever since then, there's been this bifurcation of the physical and material over and against the spiritual. It's this interesting thought experiment to say, well, what if? What if this group of white Christian men hadn't passed that law? What if they had said, we're going to carry over our tradition from Europe which said you can't enslave another Christian? How might the racial landscape have looked different? So, it's interesting. Christian denominations were actually a bellwether and a foreshadowing of the Civil War, because in 1825 the Methodists split over slavery, in 1845 the Baptists split over slavery, in 1861 the Presbyterians split yet again, this time over slavery. But what if Christian denominations had taken the lead in image and said—you know, the Southern Baptist Congregation split not just over slavery but over the specific issue of whether a missionary could enslave

people. So think about this: a missionary charged to go overseas, probably to nations in Africa, to share the gospel with them, and meanwhile back home he owns people of African descent, and that's okay. So the contradiction and the mental gymnastics you have to do to make that okay are mindboggling. But what if? What if they said, "Mmmm, no, that's not okay." And if you take that stance that you can enslave people and still be a Christian in good standing, then you need to go find your own faith. So the point is this, as we look from the perspective of 2019 back on US history, all this seems almost destined to happen. And what history teaches us is there are particular people and particular places in particular circumstances that made particular decisions, and they could have chosen differently. And that tells us now that we can have hope too, because now we are particular people in particular places in particular circumstances making particular decisions, and we don't have to make the decisions that reinforce racism and inequality that people before us did. We can make a different future.

[Applause]

Inazu:

What are some of the what-ifs of 2019?

Tisby:

The big one is what if there's not this 1:1 correlation between the modern white Evangelical movement and the modern white Republican party. I say this not to convince or persuade a Republican to be a Democrat or a democrat to be a republican, but to be a principled person in your party, especially if you're Christian. To hold your party accountable. I was in these churches, I was a black person in these seminaries and churches and contexts in 2015 when Trump comes down the escalator and announces his candidacy by saying some people crossing the border from Mexico are rapists. I'm in these churches when he calls some African countries and Haiti "s-hole countries." I'm in these churches when he refuses to repudiate the full page ad he puts out about the exonerated five. And me and other people of color and women and immigrants and refugees virtually every marginalized people are saying, "Hey, this is bad! He's not even in power yet and this rhetoric, we've heard it before. And we know it leads to bad outcomes for us." And I'm in these churches, having these conversations, hearing people give lip service to reconciliation and to inclusion and then when they get into the voting group, it's as if our voices didn't exist. And what I came to understand very painfully, very personally, in that season, was that in many white Christian spaces, they value people of color for our presence but not for our perspectives. So you can be there, but to have our voices heard, we don't have that same ability. I know there are some Republicans here, Trump voters: all I want you to hear from me is the impact this has on their stated commitment to race relations. I encourage you all—this is in the awareness category—read a NYT article by Kendall Robinson called "A Quiet Exodus." He profiled black Christinas in white churches who made a quiet exodus out of white churches particularly because of the 2016 election due to a feeling of betrayal and feeling like we weren't heard. You can maintain your political convictions; all I'm asking you is to also deal with the ramifications as it comes to race relations

Inazu:

Since we haven't said anything controversial yet, I'm wondering if we could talk about the R-word, reparations.

Tisby:

Word, yeah.

Inazu:

You mention this at the end of the book, but it's a two-step process. The first step is, let's think about this as a political matter. And a quick comment from me on reparations, as we were talking earlier, my family was interned during WW2 as Japanese Americans, my dad was born in the camps. In 1980 they got 20 grand from the US government, and it was a bit of a washing of the hands, as though we've done the handshake and now we can move on. So there's a caution from some about reparations, some call for a greater political and social challenge. But then, you make the move and say, but churches could do this. Churches don't need a law to be passed or policy to be enacted. Churches could start with something like reparations within churches. Can you talk about that a bit, have you seen that movement happening anywhere?

Tisby:

Right, so, that's a great word about reparations. I think even if it were somehow possible to make political progress in this country, there would certainly be the temptation on the part of many to say, okay, we made these financial arrangements, now we're done, let's move on, what more do these people want? It would be a great set up, but it doesn't mean the conversation or the action is done. I made the case earlier that the color of compromise is green for the greed, and said how can we really talk about racial justice if we're not talking about money. General Wilkins Sherman right after the Civil War passes field order 15, takes a strip of land along the East Coast, and apportions it to a portion of black people. 40 acres, they would get, and a mule to work the land. This actually passes, people take collection of the land, but very soon after that, this ordinance is rescinded, people don't get their 40 acres and a mule, which is symbolic of economic independence. So, this formerly enslaved people are freed physically but put in the shackles of poverty. I grew up in the Mississippi Delta, cotton country, and there's a direct line from the generational poverty that makes the county where I live the 4th poorest county in the nation, back to sharecropping, to race-based chattel slavery. So, usually when the question of reparations come up the first issue is practicality. How do we determine who gets it, how much do they get, it's so complicated that we can't do it. Well, the reason it's so complicated now is that we didn't do it in 1866. It would have been real easy to figure out who gets it then. But down the road, generations and generations and generations, it's incredibly difficult to tell who gets it. The answer now, then, is to say, "It's so confusing, because it's been so long, so we're not going to do anything, and make it more confusing for the next generation"? I don't think that's a great

response. So that's the practicality question. Then there's the political question. It'll never fly. People aren't going to take this seriously. Which, again, the North winning the Civil War, the South winning the narrative war, there's something to that. Now, you have Democratic candidates for president at least entertaining, or committing to study reparations, which seems like a big move. It's only a commitment, right? But, that was not even in the conversation one election cycle ago. So perhaps it's in the realm of political possibility. But regardless of that, if you read this history, if you agree that race-based chattel slavery was economically exploiting the system, and you're a Christian, why do you need to wait on the federal government to act? There are churches, there are seminaries, there are colleges and universities that benefitted from slavery, that benefitted from segregation, and there is case for financial compensation, for reparations, to be made. So, some people talk about ecclesiastical or ecclesial reparations. You can find a principle like this in the Bible; Zakias was a tax collector who defrauded people. When he met Jesus and transformed his life he said, "Anyone I've defrauded, I'm going to pay you back four times. And I'm going to give half my money to the poor." This whole idea of repair is a very Biblical and Christian idea, I think, if you look for it.

Inazu:

We've got a little under twenty minutes left. I'm interested in hearing questions from you. We've got people with microphones.

Audience:

Thank you so much for your very well-researched book, I have very much benefitted from reading your book. When I read the last chapter, "The Fierce Urgency of Now," one of the things I wish you had included in that chapter was the connection of Africa to the African American. Full disclosure, I am someone who has lived half his life in Africa and half his life in the United States, and I currently live in that space. I was really encouraged in your presentation when you talked about how whiteness causes people to lose their ethnicity. Will you please comment on the importance of African Americans to Africa. Again, full disclosure, I have come to the conclusion that the African American is not going to be truly American until he or she makes peace with Africa. Thank you.

Tisby:

That's good, thank you so much, you're asking—there's a Pan-African connection. I think activists now, and especially during the Black Power movement in the 60s and 70s, were noticing the connection of Black people or people of African descent in the United States and globally connected to this colonialist, imperialist project that spanned different nations. I think you're absolutely right, I need to make more explicit that connection to the global pan-African movement, because much of the dynamics are similar, not exactly the same, but similar to what I've heard from Africans from other countries. A lot of what I've written about in this book, even though it applies specifically to the United States, there's a lot of crossover and carryover there. So we do need as people of African descent to recognize our interconnectedness and the joint project of liberty. Because none of us are

free until all of us are free. So, God willing, I'll be travelling to South Africa next week, hoping to make some of these connections, and to come back with enough material for a blog post or an article or another book connecting our experiences.

Audience:

Thank you so much for this—I know it was a tedious endeavor—I'm looking forward to reading it. I'm not sure if this relates to the content in your book, but maybe it's something that's adjacent. I'm really wrestling with internalized racial oppression as a Black woman in the context of the church, and I've wondered if you have some thoughts that could speak to that, because I find that it's not just in me, it's certainly something that's happening with the mass exodus of folk leaving the church.

Tisby:

Thank you. In many ways, I need to be a student here and learn from you about your experiences as a Black woman in the church and in society. You'll see often online this hashtag or this phrase, "listen to black women," and I think that's so true, not only listen to but follow and learn from Black women because black women exist at this intersection of race and gender, experiencing this multiple and exponential kind of oppression, which also gives you a perspective on justice, because you experience so much injustice, about what it looks like and what you should do. I'm very encouraged by the historical example of black women as well as black women scholars. The historical example of black women such as Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, one of my heroes, Hamer, Ella Baker—these are people we have to highlight and learn a lot from. I will encourage anyone to read biographies of these people I've named. In addition, some black women historians out there doing incredible work. One of my advisors, Chanette Garret Scott, is studying black finances and looking at the history of the way finance and capitalism has affected the black community. Another historian Tiffany Gill wrote about beauty salons and beauty shops as sites of political activism and organizing, because they're one of the only places that black women have their own spaces, and they were radical, they dreamed and envisioned what freedom would look like there. Keisha Blaine is the founder and president of the African American Intellectual Historical Society. Here's a podcast I recommend: Truth's Fable. Three black Christian women, confident in their womanhood, confident in their Christianity confident in their color, who teach me every time they get on the mic, about their experience particularly in black Christian spaces. Black men, we are perpetrators of misogyny that we have immense responsibility for some of the oppression that our sisters feel. Again, I'm a student here and trying to get better at that, so it's one of those things that we can't separate from the issue of race, but I consider it a whole lot more about gendered violence, gendered labor, not just physical labor of their hands, but the reproductive labor of having children, raising not only their own children but the children of the master's family, not only their own children by black men but their children from rape of white men, and just this heaping on of oppression has been so heavy. Chanika Walker Barnes wrote a book called "Too Heavy a Yoke" about black women constantly being complimented for their strength, but it's a strength they've had to develop because of injustice that they've had to bear, and it's not fair, it's not right.

Audience:

Jemar, this is a personal question, I apologize if you've answered this before as it relates to your book. Sometimes there's an experience or situation that's kind of the last straw that gets someone to write a book. I want to know, was it like that, and if it was, what was that situation.

Tisby:

It was a combination of situations. Like I said, Ferguson, and trying to understand it and find a history was helpful. But it wasn't that long ago, there's this period from the end of 2014 with Mike Brown all the way up to the present but especially up to 2017, you remember what happened, right? We had Black Lives Matter but the stream of cell phone videos showing unarmed black people getting killed, sometimes two in a week, and we could barely deal with one before another came up. Then we had all the controversy over what that meant and all the massive divisions between black and white highlighted for me where we were racially. It wasn't only that—things like the Emmanuel Nine Massacre and the rise of white supremacy, things like the Unite the Right rally in Charlotte, that's in 2015, then the primary's in 2016 with the election, you have the election. The 81% of white evangelicals voting for the current president, and that revealing so much of the ideological gap between black and white Christians. So it was the confluence of all these events, and then I'm reading in coursework hundreds of books about history where if race comes up and religion comes up, and most of the time white Christians are on the wrong side of justice. And I'm mad! And I want to write this book as a way to get that out there and have other people mad along with me, because perhaps if we all get mad together we might do something about it. So it's a way to share that burden and that pain. I will say one particular moment stands out to me, a trauma I'm really still trying to process. I remember the day of the elections, it was after midnight when they finally called it for this current president, and I remember just being stunned—did this just happen? Is this our new reality right now? I mentioned the podcast I had, Pass the Mic, and I went on the mic with our producer, and he was asking me questions, and I said something that really made people mad. I said that that Sunday, following the election, I didn't feel emotionally or spiritually safe worshipping at a predominantly white church, because it felt to me like it was dangerous. Because all this time we'd been making gestures at racial reconciliation and togetherness and when it really came to listening and hearing our voices, it felt like we were ignored. I thought of the analogy of a blind spot when you're driving—the best of intentions, but a blind spot. You can't see, so when you change lanes, you can hit someone else. That someone else might be me or my spouse or my child. So I said, I can't do this. And some folks online got hold of it and went to town. They called me everything but my name. Questioned my theology, my orthodoxy—that's the move they always try to make. If you start talking about racial justice, then you don't understand the bible. You have to introduce me to all these white theologians who will fix your understanding. Then they questioned my salvation, like, you're not really Christian if you didn't support this man. Interesting. Then Youtube videos on it and podcasts and comments—it was terrible. It got to the point where I couldn't go online without my eyes twitching because of the stress. So it was instances like that, and many, many more, that happened to me personally. But that said, okay, part of the thing we

need to do is help people understand how we got here racially speaking and what the church had to do with it. That's not the end all be all, but it's the start of a conversation, hopefully.

Audience:

Thank you. I wanted to first say that the Virginia Theological Society is paying reparations to descendents of the slaves that worked in their seminary, so there's a start. Second, I wanted to ask you how you see your work being as an outbreak of, or any connection to James Cohen and black liberation theology.

Tisby:

So, just a bit of background. James Cohen is regarded as the father of black liberation theology, he's part of the tradition. When I was in seminary, which was a predominantly white, theologically conservative seminary in the South, if James Cohen and black liberation theology came up at all, which it rarely did, it was brought up as what not to do, how he got theology wrong. You read it to critique it. Meanwhile, we're reading the theology of slaveholders like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield without any qualification or hesitation. So that was the dynamic. Then I started reading Cohen for myself, and he specifically says in his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, that what he was trying to do was reconcile the messages of Martin Luther King and the messages of Malcolm X. I think what he was tapping into was this centuries-long struggle of identity that black Christians have had. How do you have an affirmation of your racial identity as well as adopt the same religion that your oppressors practice? How can you be a black Christian in a white Christian supremacist society? So I think folks like Cohen and black liberation theology take blackness seriously as a theological category in a way that's empowering, that argues back against—so, there was a whole generation of black Christians who in the midst of the Civil Rights, the Black Power movement, a lot of people are saying, this is a very old argument, that Christianity is the white man's religion. And there were black Christians who were not willing to give up their Christianity but wanted it to affirm their embodied experience of blackness. So I think what Cohen and many others did, and black women theologians did, was take seriously the issue of racial identity in a white supremacist society, that Christianity could be in the hands of the powerful a force for oppression, but in the hands of the marginalized and the oppressed, it was a force for liberation.

Audience:

So, I was listening to you talk the other day, and y'all was talking about—

Tisby:

Did you read my review? [Laughter]

Audience:

Nah, I be lazy, I've got no idea—[Laughter]. But, so what y'all was talking about at the conference was the phrase, I might get the phrase wrong, but you were saying about daring to be black without the seatbelt on. Was that the phrase? I just wanted you to tell people here, and the people who don't understand—I grew up, I'm a black boy who grew up in a white space, and grew up in white evangelical Christianity, so for me, the idea if you could speak to what it means, what it can look like, to be black without your seatbelt on, and what that looks like and what that can feel like when you're trying to interact with your white brothers and sisters. I'm going to let you answer this.

Tisby:

First, I need to get a picture of you all. Everybody wave, quick video. So, what a lot of folks don't realize, is if you're black in a white space, you can be black, but not too black. When it comes to your hair, your language, even in predominantly white churches, if I stand up and clap, [laughter]. That's why I say in groups, it's okay to talk back to me. That's something cultural in a lot of minority communities, not just black. And what I try to do wherever I go is to tell black people specifically—I say black people specifically, because that's my experience and that's what I study, I don't know the Native American experience, or Asian American, Korean American, any of these other experiences. Also, they're distinct—your experience with Japanese in your heritage.

Inazu:

[Unintelligible]

[laughter]

Tisby:

I wouldn't dare presume to speak about that experience. Here's one of the things we say at We're the Witness, we're a black Christian collective. For along time, people were like, why aren't you the multiethnic collective, or the mosaic collective, and I'm like, the more you try to be all things to all people, the less impact you can have. We focused on the black experience, and what we always say is specific does not mean exclusive. It's so interesting, because on our website, we have contributors of all races and ethnicities, the people who follow our content come from not only the United States but around the globe are accessing this stuff. So somehow, being specific, if you do it in a certain way, it doesn't mean being exclusive. When I go to, it can be Christian or secular campuses, you can be black but not too black, and that is soul crushing, because it means I have to check part of my identity at the door for the sake of your comfort. It's not anything just or justified, it's just because you're not familiar with it, and me being my full black self is going to make you uncomfortable. And that's not right. So I think one of the fastest ways we can make change is not to apologize for our blackness, not to apologize for our cultural heritage. Because so much of the time we are black but black with a seatbelt on. So what we try to do in this conference is to take the seatbelt off, do what you gotta do, and be you. We were very

strategic; everybody who touched the main stage was black, from the AV person to the keynote speaker. But all of our conference presenters for workshops were black except one, he was a white guy, he did a workshop for white people, and he's on our team. We already had an invitation to the good guy [?]. Especially when we talk about Christian spaces, I grew up in a lot of white evangelical spaces, and it's very difficult to be a person of color in general or a black person in particular in those spaces, so we wanted a conference, and we got this—we had students from Christian colleges come and say, "I didn't know how to be black and Christian, I didn't know how to be that black and Christian, and this is okay?" And I said, "Praise God," because now you're going away a little bit more liberated, a little bit more free, and I really want you to go back with a whole new restlessness wherever you are, your corporate world, your school, your church, and say, I've seen what it's like to be my full self, and it's not heretical, it's not evil, it's not tiptoeing, and I'm not going to settle for any less wherever I go.

Milligan:

I don't know about you, but I would love to stay all night. However, it's 9:05 and we want to honor your time. I will be walking Mr. Tisby up to a book table to sign books. They're for sale, and there's also a reception, but if it's okay with you please do not mob us up here so that we can get upstairs and continue the conversation. Thanks for coming.

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