

CHAPTER 10

RECONSIDERING RACIAL RECONCILIATION IN THE AGE OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

The close of the twentieth century brought about many changes in the American church and race relations, changes that may have resulted in violence had they happened in earlier generations. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the nation's largest Protestant denomination that had been founded to protect slaveholders within its ranks, finally apologized for its racist roots. They issued a resolution repenting of racism and slavery at their annual meeting on the 150th anniversary of the denomination, a statement which read in part, "We lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest, and we recognize that the racism which yet plagues our culture today is inextricably tied to the past."¹ The resolution went on to ask forgiveness from African Americans and pledged to "eradicate racism in all its forms" from their denomination. In ages past such words of racial equality would have engulfed entire congregations in controversy.

New racial reconciliation movements arose in the final decade of the twentieth century as well, notably a movement begun by Bill McCartney. McCartney was a good athlete but an even better coach.

After graduating from the University of Missouri in 1962, he went on to coach high school football, and several years later, legendary University of Michigan football coach Bo Schembechler took notice of him and made the rare decision to hire a high school coach to work at the Division I college level. McCartney's talents landed him a head coaching job at the University of Colorado eight years later. His prowess eventually earned him a place in the College Football Hall of Fame. But McCartney is perhaps best known as the founder of the Promise Keepers movement.

In 1990, McCartney, a Roman Catholic who became a "born again" Protestant Christian, attended a Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) banquet where he and a companion discussed the need for men's discipleship. McCartney pictured a stadium full of 50,000 men gathered to learn about what it means to be "godly men." Promise Keepers was incorporated in December of 1990 and held its first conference the following year. By 1993, McCartney's vision of tens of thousands of men filling a stadium had become a reality.

McCartney, who is white, cited his experience recruiting and working with black players as one of the reasons he made the decision to turn Promise Keepers toward racial reconciliation.² In 1996, organizers for the annual conference chose the theme of "Break Down the Walls" and Ephesians 2:14: "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility."³ In what was touted as the "world's largest gathering of clergy," 39,000 pastors of varying races, ethnicities, and denominations who attended the Promise Keepers rally in Atlanta ended their time in tears and hugs. "Better than any other national or visible movement, Promise Keepers is not only preaching racial reconciliation, but they are doing something about it," said Silas Pinto, a Latino pastor who attended the rally.⁴

In addition to movements like Promise Keepers in the '90s, the start of the new millennium witnessed the growth of intentional, multiethnic churches. The historic dictum that 11:00 a.m. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America has been challenged by the growth of these churches. A 2010 survey found that about 12.5 percent

of churches could be considered multiethnic—meaning no single ethnic group comprises more than 80 percent of the congregation. Contemporary attitudes toward diversity in the church show a desire for even more integration. A 2014 study by Lifeway Research indicated that 85 percent of senior pastors in the Protestant churches surveyed said, “Every church should strive for racial diversity.” Speaking about evangelical pastors and congregational diversity, Mark DeYmaz, founder of the multiethnic church network Mosaic, said, “Increasingly, their question is not, ‘why should I,’ but ‘how can I?’”⁵⁵

Yet beneath this apparent racial progress, divisions have lingered. Voters elected Barack Obama as the nation’s first black president in 2008, and immediately talk began of a “postracial” society. Obama’s election, however, stimulated racist backlash in some quarters, only to be followed by a slew of grisly videos depicting police officers slaying unarmed black women and men. The ensuing debate over “law and order” once again highlighted the stark racial divisions present in America today. In 2015, a white supremacist entered a Bible study at a historic black church and murdered nine worshippers, sparking divisive debates about monuments to and symbols of the Confederacy.⁵⁶ Amidst the furor of racist words and events, Christians today remain divided along racial lines.

One of the challenges we face in discussions of racism today is that the conversation about race has shifted since the civil rights era. Legislation has rendered the most overt acts of racism legally punishable. Hate crimes of various forms still occur, but most American Christians would call these acts evil. Yet the legacy of racism persists, albeit in different forms. Sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith studied white evangelical ideas about race in their book *Divided by Faith*. To frame their study, they used the concept of a “racialized” society which they defined as a society “wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities and social relationships.” It is, as they say, “a society that allocates differential economic, political, social, and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines; lines that are socially constructed.”⁵⁷ Racialization functions differently from straightforward racism. Emerson and Smith go on to explain that discrimination in a racialized society is increasingly

covert, embedded in the normal operations of institutions, and it avoids direct racial terminology, making it invisible to most white people. The relative invisibility of these racialized structures to white Christians often leads them to unknowingly compromise with racism.

This chapter examines the ongoing conflicts between black and white Christians today and offers some suggestions as to why racism remains a persistent problem—even in the twenty-first century. We will examine how the racial divide between Christians has, in some ways, become even starker in recent years. Through an analysis of the role of contemporary black activism, stubborn patterns of segregation, and political polarization (especially in the presidential election of 2016), we will take a closer look at why the American church is in the midst of a reevaluation and a reckoning about its identity and future.

THE WHITE EVANGELICAL CULTURAL TOOLKIT AND POLITICS

In *Divided by Faith*, Emerson and Smith introduce the notion of a “cultural tool kit.” They explain that “culture creates ways for individuals and groups to organize experiences and evaluate reality. It does so by providing a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of ideas, habits, skills, and styles.”⁵⁸ The particular religio-cultural tools that white evangelicals use to understand race actually tend to perpetuate the very racial problems they say they want to ameliorate. A brief explanation of the white evangelical cultural tool kit will help explain how Christians from different racial backgrounds can have such different views of contemporary racial and political problems.

Accountable individualism means that “individuals exist independent of structures and institutions, have freewill, and are individually accountable for their own actions.”⁵⁹ This belief promotes skepticism toward the idea that social systems and structures profoundly shape the actions of individuals. The white evangelical understanding of individualism has this effect, and it tends to reduce the importance of communities and institutions in shaping the ways people think and behave. Another belief in the cultural toolkit is *relationalism*, “a strong

emphasis on interpersonal relationships.”¹⁰ According to relationalism, social problems are fundamentally due to broken personal relationships: “Thus, if race problems—poor relationships—result from sin, then race problems must largely be individually based.”¹¹ And *anti-structuralism* refers to the belief that “invoking social structures shifts guilt away from its root source—the accountable individual.”¹² In other words, systems, structures, and policies are not to blame for the problems in America; instead, the problems come from the harmful choices of individuals. “Absent from their accounts is the idea that poor relationships might be shaped by social structures, such as laws, the ways institutions operate, or forms of segregation. . . . They often find structural explanations irrelevant or even wrongheaded,” Emerson and Smith explain.¹³

While black and white citizens in general exhibit vastly divergent views of American life and governance, these differences tend to be especially pronounced among American Christians. Speaking very broadly, black Christians tend to agree that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is necessary for a saving faith. However, they also recognize that structures influence individuals and that addressing America’s racial issues will require systemic change. In accounting for the black-white wealth gap, for instance, black and white Christians have remarkably different understandings of the problem and the solution. Sixty-two percent of white evangelicals attribute poverty among black people to a lack of motivation, while 31 percent of black Christians said the same. And just 27 percent of white evangelicals attribute the wealth gap to racial discrimination, while 72 percent of blacks cite discrimination as a major cause of the discrepancy.¹⁴ The differing cultural tool kits applied by black and white Christians help illuminate some of the conflicts over racial justice at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

BLACK LIVES MATTER AND CHRISTIAN RESPONSES ACROSS THE COLOR LINE

On July 13, 2013, Alicia Garza, a black activist and writer in Oakland, California, sat down at her computer to pen what she called “a love

note to black people.” In the brief post she wrote, “Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.” Her friend and fellow activist, Patrisse Cullors, responded to the post with the words, “Declaration: black bodies will no longer be sacrificed for the rest of the world’s enlightenment. i am done. i am so done. trayvon, you are loved infinitely. #blacklivesmatter.” Together with their friend Opal Tometi, these three black women started a hashtag that flowered into a movement that would significantly change the conversation about race and justice in America.¹⁵

The event that prompted Garza’s initial post was the news that George Zimmerman, a Hispanic and multiracial man patrolling on neighborhood watch, had been acquitted of all charges in the killing of Trayvon Martin, a black seventeen-year-old high school student. On February 26, 2012, Martin had been walking back to his father’s fiancée’s townhouse, a place he had visited several times before, in a gated community of Sanford, Florida. He wore a “hoodie” sweatshirt and had Skittles and an iced tea in his hand. Zimmerman, who happened to be driving in the neighborhood at the time, called the police to report Martin as a suspicious person. A transcript of the call records him saying, “We’ve had some break-ins in my neighborhood, and there’s a real suspicious guy.” At some point, Martin started running. Zimmerman pursued him, even though the dispatcher told him that was not necessary. Zimmerman can be heard saying, “These assholes, they always get away.”¹⁶

What happened next remains a mystery because only one person remains alive to tell the story. Somehow, Zimmerman and Martin got into a physical altercation. In the ensuing battle, Zimmerman, a licensed gun owner, shot Martin once in the chest. Zimmerman phoned police at 7:09 p.m., and paramedics pronounced Martin dead at 7:30 p.m. In the span of a few minutes an innocuous walk to the local convenience store for snacks had resulted in a homicide.

Police eventually arrested but then released Zimmerman, who claimed to have acted in self-defense. Florida’s controversial “stand your ground” law permits the use of lethal force if citizens feel threatened in a given situation. A jury acquitted Zimmerman. Black and white citizens viewed the incident from drastically different perspectives.

A Pew Research poll found that 49 percent of whites were satisfied with the verdict that acquitted Zimmerman, while just 5 percent of black people surveyed agreed with the trial's outcome. When asked whether Trayvon Martin's death should spur further conversations about race, 28 percent of whites agreed that more discussions needed to take place compared to 78 percent of black people surveyed.¹⁷ Trayvon Martin's death became a proxy for age-old debates about law enforcement, respectability, and criminal justice.

Just a year after Martin's homicide, Parris Cullors first used the #blacklivesmatter hashtag, but the phrase did not become ubiquitous until 2014 when another black teenager, Mike Brown, was killed. On August 9, Mike Brown and a friend, Dorian Johnson, were walking in the neighborhood of Ferguson, Missouri, near St. Louis. Video camera footage shows that a short time before, Brown had stolen a pack of cigarillos from a convenience store and forcefully shoved the clerk out of the way as he left. Darren Wilson, a white police officer, spotted Brown and Wilson walking in the middle of the street and ordered them to move. Wilson stopped his police SUV very close to the two youth. According to Wilson, Brown reached in the car and attempted to wrestle a sidearm away from the officer. Wilson fired the gun twice while in the car with one of the shots hitting Brown in the hand. Brown and Johnson then fled. At some point, Brown and Wilson faced each other again, and Wilson continued firing at Brown, hitting him several more times. The final shot entered the top of Brown's skull and killed him. Initial witness reports indicated that Brown had his hands up in a gesture of surrender when he was shot, prompting protestors to chant "Hands up! Don't shoot!" in the following days. A Department of Justice report released in March 2015 indicated, however, that all the shots had hit Brown from the front and that he likely did not have his hands up when this happened. After he died, the teenager's body lay in the street for several hours in the summer heat in front of an ever-growing crowd of community residents before officials finally removed him from the scene.¹⁸

After a highly atypical grand jury procedure, District Attorney Robert P. McCulloch announced that Officer Wilson would not be

indicted. Black people and their allies across the nation responded in outrage. Protestors took to the streets in more than 150 cities. The reality that yet another unarmed black youth had been killed and no one would face legal penalties communicated a message that black lives could be extinguished with impunity.¹⁹ Observers not only considered the isolated incidents that led to the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown, they looked at the longer history of similar events, from the absolute power of life and death slaveowners had held over black slaves to the decades of lynching during the Jim Crow era, when few of the murderers had paid for their crimes against black people and their communities. Even in the past few years, the list of black human beings who have become hashtags has grown ever longer—Stephon Clark, Philando Castile, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Jamar Clark, Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, to name just a few. Activists have deployed the phrase *black lives matter* because the cascade of killings indicated that black lives did not, in fact, matter.

Black lives matter served as a rallying cry for protests, but it also acted as an assertion of the image of God in black people. In Christian anthropology, saying that black lives matter insists that all people, including those who have darker skin, have been made in the image and likeness of God. *Black lives matter* does not mean that *only* black lives matter; it means that black lives matter too. Given the racist patterns of devaluing black lives in America's past, it is not obvious to many black people that everyone values black life. Quite the contrary, the existential equality of black people must be repeatedly and passionately proclaimed and pursued, even in the twenty-first century.

The words *black lives matter* also function as a cry of lament. Theologian Soong-Chan Rah explains in his book *Prophetic Lament* that in the Bible lament is "a liturgical response to the reality of suffering and engages God in the context of pain and suffering."²⁰ He goes on to say that it is a way "to express indignation and even outrage about the experience of suffering."²¹ Racism has inflicted incalculable suffering on black people throughout the history of the United States, and in such a context, lament is not only understandable but necessary.

Black lives matter presents Christians with an opportunity to mourn with those who mourn and to help bear the burdens that racism has heaped on black people (Rom. 12:15).

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO BLACK LIVES MATTER

It may be helpful for Christians to distinguish between Black Lives Matter as an organization and *black lives matter* as a concept and movement. Many Christians, including some conservative black Christians, have rejected the concept or phrase *black lives matter* because of the Black Lives Matter organization. The organization that developed to channel passion into long-term change includes a strong platform advocating for gay, queer, and transgender rights, a position that is contrary to a conservative evangelical definition of marriage as between one man and one woman. The Black Lives Matter organization does not identify itself as a faith-based organization like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and other organizations that formed during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. As a result, many evangelicals have distanced themselves from or even opposed both the Black Lives Matter organization and the phrase. But the American evangelical church has yet to form a movement as viable and potent that addresses the necessary concept that black lives do indeed matter. This is not to suggest that evangelicals have not responded to present-day racism but that the national presence and influence of Black Lives Matter, as both an organization and a concept, should prompt critical engagement rather than a reflexive rejection.

Although opinions about the organization vary widely, the phrase itself resonated at a deep level with numbers of Americans across the nation, and in particular it spoke to black people who sensed those words addressing a deep and painful longing—the longing for others to recognize their full, unqualified humanity. Sadly, many white Christians did not realize this, and they responded with opposition.

Many white Christians viewed the killings that made national headlines as isolated events, and they could not understand why black people and other keen observers had such strong reactions.

Evangelicals would agree that black people should be treated fairly and have all the civil rights other citizens have. But the root of the disagreement over racial issues lies deeper beneath the surface. It is a failure to acknowledge the subtler ways that racism operates today. Because their religious beliefs reinforce accountable individualism, relationalism, and antistructuralism, many white Christians wrongly assume that racism only includes overt acts, such as calling someone the “n-word” or expressly excluding black people from groups or organizations. It is good that black and white people generally can agree that racism of this type is wrong, and it usually elicits swift and unequivocal condemnation in public discourse. But the longer arc of American history reveals that Christian complicity with racism does not always require specific acts of bigotry. Being complicit only requires a muted response in the face of injustice or uncritical support of the status quo.

When Grammy-winning hip hop artist Lecrae, who is both Christian and black, began speaking up about Ferguson and *black lives matter*, the backlash from his white evangelical fans came swiftly. In response to his posts on social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook, commentators said he was playing the “race card” and creating division.²² And when Lecrae said he was praying for Ferguson, the first response in a long thread of replies reads “#Pray4Police” as if in rebuttal to the need to pray for the black people affected by the tragedy.²³

After repeatedly using his platform as a famous artist to speak out against racialized injustice, Lecrae wrote an op-ed in the *Huffington Post* expressing the frustration he felt from battling the misperceptions of conservative Christians. “I hit a serious low on tour at one point. I was done with American Christian culture. No voice of my own. No authenticity. I was a puppet.” He went on to explain that his difficulties in talking to white Christians about race in America even affected his relationship with God. “I’d seen so much fakeness from those who claimed to be my brothers and sisters that I didn’t even know how to talk to my Heavenly Father.”²⁴

Early in 2016, while *black lives matter* and discussions of racial justice still inundated blogs and social media timelines, Thabiti

Anyabwile, a black pastor and writer living in Washington DC, expressed empathy for black people in the midst of the ongoing criminal justice crisis. Because of his comments, he lost support among some white evangelicals. In a blog post early in 2016, Anyabwile pointed out that his rejection came not as a result of changing his positions on the longstanding "culture war" issues of the Religious Right and evangelicals such as gay marriage, homosexuality, and abortion. Rather, the controversy began when he started talking about justice. "But mention 'justice' and that wall of evangelical troops splits like the Red Sea and turns against itself. Men who worked as fellow combatants in the traditional 'culture war' begin to suspect and even attack one another when 'justice' becomes the topic."²⁵ Anyabwile wrote his post in response to a message posted by another Christian, Phil Johnson, who served as the director of a prominent evangelical ministry. Johnson posted a video of Anyabwile at an evangelical conference in 2010 preaching a message called, "Fine-Sounding Arguments: How Wrongly 'Engaging the Culture' Adjusts the Gospel." Along with the video came Johnson's caption: "Before he became an agitator for the radical left wing #BlackLivesMatter movement, Thabiti Anyabwile was arguing for a more biblical, gospel-centered approach."²⁶ As Anyabwile pointed out in his blog post, Johnson's implication was that speaking about racial justice somehow indicated a drift away from the "true" gospel.

Some of the most pointed debates among Christians about *black lives matter* came in the wake of the triennial Urbana missions conference organized by the evangelical organization InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. On the second night of the conference, some of the staff members and hosts on stage wore t-shirts that read, "Black Lives Matter." The shirts were only a prelude to a firestorm of controversy about to be unleashed by the evening's next speaker, Michelle Higgins. Higgins is a black woman who leads the music during worship at her theologically conservative and multiethnic Presbyterian church in St. Louis. When the Ferguson uprisings took place, she got involved alongside other Christians from her church and throughout the city, and eventually she became director of outreach for an organization of Christians in the area called Faith for Justice.

Higgins's talk lasted only twenty-eight minutes, but that was plenty of time to spark heated disagreement over her remarks. "Black lives matter is not a mission of hate. It is not a mission to bring about incredible anti-Christian values and reforms to the world," she informed the audience of 16,000 college students. As if speaking about *black lives matter* head on was not enough, she went further still and criticized the primacy of abortion in the evangelical canon of sins. "We can wipe out the adoption crisis tomorrow," she said. "But we're too busy arguing to have abortion banned. We're too busy arguing to defund Planned Parenthood."²⁷

This combination of an endorsement of *black lives matter* and a negative assessment of pro-life efforts to combat abortion resulted in a flood of condemnation. In a *New York Times* article, Greg Jao, a senior administrator for InterVarsity, said the organization "got blown back from just about every side." He spoke candidly about reactions from financial contributors to the organization. "Certainly we have donors and friends who have raised concerns and questions. They want to know how to interpret this [focus on *black lives matter*]." Jao also mentioned that comments did not take on a universally negative tone. "And we've had friends and donors say 'Bravo, that was brave and courageous.'"²⁸

Reactions to Lecrae, Anyabwile, and Higgins merely illustrate common attitudes that many white evangelicals have regarding issues of racial justice. A survey by the Barna Research Group revealed the mixed responses to *black lives matter* and how the responses often split along racial lines. When it came to *black lives matter*, just 13 percent of evangelicals said they supported the "message" compared to 27 percent of adults overall and 45 percent of millennials. On the same question only 7 percent of those who identified as Republicans supported the movement. Perhaps predictably, 94 percent of evangelicals thought the Christian church "plays an important role in racial reconciliation" as compared to 73 percent of all adults. In a summary of the survey's findings, researchers concluded, "If you're a white evangelical Republican, you are less likely to think race is a problem, but more likely to think you are *victim* of reverse racism." They further

contended, "You are also less convinced that people of color are socially disadvantaged." Citing the importance evangelicals attribute to the church in racial reconciliation, the researchers said, "This dilemma demonstrates that those supposedly most equipped for reconciliation *do not see the need for it.*"²⁹

Many Christians may agree with the principle that black lives matter, but they still wonder whether they should get involved with an organization that espouses beliefs contrary to his or her religious convictions. There is no single answer that will fit every person's situation. There should be efforts to critically engage rather than reflexively dismiss, and Christians should consider that the best way to start is to start local. Many national organizations are intentionally decentralized, so the character of individual groups varies. It helps to learn who is involved and what issues they prioritize. Contact the nearest Black Lives Matter chapter and speak with representatives. It may be that the people involved are people of faith. Countless ministers, Christians, and other religious adherents have been involved with the organization. Organizations sometimes host their meetings at churches or religious venues. Some people decide that they can participate in certain actions but not others. Ultimately, the organizations with which one chooses to affiliate in the cause of antiracism is a matter of conscience. The only wrong action is inaction.

The longstanding failure among many white Christians to acknowledge ongoing discrimination embedded in systems and structures means black and white Christians often talk past each other. One group focuses on isolated incidents; the other sees a pattern of injustice. To properly assess and move toward a solution to racism in America, both perspectives are needed. Every person makes choices and is accountable for the consequences. At the same time, injustice imposes limits on the opportunities and choices people have. In the church, conversations about injustice should include an examination of the circumstances of each incident, but Christians should also analyze the larger patterns—ones that can operate independent of malicious intent—to see the historic and systemic picture and advocate for more effective solutions.

THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND THE 81 PERCENT

According to Franklin Graham, son of evangelical powerhouse Billy Graham, even Vice President Mike Pence thought he and his running mate, Donald Trump, had lost on election night in 2016. "[Pence] thought they had lost the election," said Graham. "I said, 'Listen buddy. If you guys win tonight, you make sure Donald understands that it's the Lord.'" When the results became official, Trump had, against the predictions of most pollsters and prognosticators, emerged as the forty-fifth president of the United States. In a text to Pence that night, Graham said, "Mike, look what God did tonight." [Pence] said, 'Isn't it awesome?'"³⁰

Graham serves as one of the faces of what historian John Fea calls the "court evangelicals," those who publicly and consistently support Donald Trump as president despite a string of decidedly non-evangelical character traits.³¹ Trump, who had never held political office until he won the presidency in 2016, has been divorced and remarried. In 2017, a former adult-film actress with the stage name "Stormy Daniels" alleged that she had an affair with Trump several years earlier, just after his current wife, Melania, gave birth to their son. A month before the election, a tape obtained by the *Washington Post* recorded the presidential candidate making lewd comments about women, including kissing them and groping them without consent, while boasting that "And when you're a star they let you do it. They let you do anything."³² Trump hardly fits the "family values" mold that conservative evangelicals had cast for their ideal candidate.

Trump traffics in harmful racial stereotypes as well. Long before he ran for president, Trump had a dubious record on race. In 1973, the US Department of Justice sued his company, Trump Management, for discrimination against potential black renters of his apartments. Under directions from their superiors, apartment managers refused to show certain apartments to black people or claimed that the rent was much higher in order to dissuade them. The company settled the case with no admission of guilt in 1975, but the Department of Justice reopened

the case three years later, alleging that the discrimination, a violation of the 1968 Fair Housing Act, had continued.³³ In 1989, police accused five black and Latino teenagers of beating and raping a white woman in Central Park. In response, Trump paid \$85,000 to place full-page ads in four New York City newspapers calling for a return of the death penalty. "Muggers and murderers should be forced to suffer and, when they kill, they should be executed for their crimes," he wrote. DNA evidence exonerated all five youth of the crime, but Trump never publicly changed his position.³⁴ In doing so, he perpetuated the assumption of criminality that many still hold toward black and brown people.

Trump gained political notoriety before the 2016 election with his comments about Barack Obama, who became the nation's first black president in 2008. Trump promoted a right-wing conspiracy theory that Obama, whose mother was white and from Kansas and whose father was a black Kenyan, was not actually born in the United States and was therefore ineligible for the presidency. In a series of interviews in 2011, Trump expressed his doubts about Obama's citizenship. "I'm starting to think that he was not born here," he told the hosts on NBC's *Today Show*.³⁵ Observers accused Trump of racism in questioning the American-ness of the country's first black president and of leading the charge to force Obama to reveal his long-form birth certificate to the public.

Trump's questionable stances on race have not been confined to black people. In a speech announcing his presidential candidacy in 2015, Trump promised to build a wall along the Mexico-US border because Mexicans entering the United States were "bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."³⁶ In a meeting about immigration with top officials during his presidency, Trump asked why the United States should accept more immigrants from "shithole" countries such as Haiti and countries in Africa. In response, a United Nations representative said, "There is no other word one can use but 'racist.' . . . It is not just a story about vulgar language, it's . . . validating and encouraging racism and xenophobia."³⁷

On August 12, 2017, America experienced a flashback to its racial past when white supremacists descended on Charlottesville, Virginia,

to protest the possible removal of a monument to Confederate general Robert E. Lee from a local park. This time the protestors, who called their rally "Unite the Right," did not wear the white robes and hoods of the Ku Klux Klan; instead, they wore khaki pants and polo shirts and held tiki torches. During a counterprotest, a white supremacist rammed his car into a crowd of people and killed one woman, as well as injuring many others. In his first statement about the events that the Department of Justice labeled "domestic terrorism," Trump failed to unequivocally condemn the racist acts. Instead, he simply denounced "hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides."³⁸ Many viewed his comments as creating a false equivalency between white supremacists and those who assembled to oppose them. Add to these incidents the support the president has received from white nationalist groups, his call for a ban on Muslim immigration, and his tendency to positively and uncritically quote from white nationalist media sources, and it's clear why Trump's actions have elicited repeated accusations of racism.

Black people recognized the pattern of prejudice from Trump, and they showed their distaste at the polls. Eighty-eight percent of black voters, including 94 percent of black women, supported the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. By contrast, 58 percent of white people voted for Trump. Breaking the 2016 voting numbers down even further reveals overwhelming support for Donald Trump among white evangelicals. According to a Pew Research report, 81 percent of voters who self-identified as white evangelicals pulled the lever for Trump. While white evangelical support for the Republican presidential candidate has regularly hovered around 75 percent or above, their support remained high in spite of his deplorable comments, especially concerning race.³⁹ Further reports demonstrate that during his presidency, Trump has maintained strong support from white evangelicals, especially more frequent church-goers. "Eight-in-ten white evangelical Protestants who attend church at least once a month approve of the way Trump is handling his job as president."⁴⁰

Why did so many white evangelicals support Trump despite his obvious racist tendencies? First, it should be acknowledged that

plenty of evangelicals did not support him. Many took a #NeverTrump stand and objected to his rhetoric and policies. They voted third party or refrained from voting altogether. Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, vocally opposed Trump during the primaries and the early part of the election campaign. He called evangelicals might risk Trump "illogical." He went on to suggest that evangelicals might risk losing credibility among black people by supporting Trump: "When evangelicals should be leading the way on racial reconciliation, as the Bible tells us to, are we really ready to trade unity with our black and brown brothers and sisters for this angry politician?"⁴¹ Apparently plenty of white evangelicals did not mind trading unity with people of color, because they threatened Moore's job. In an episode reminiscent of Southern Baptist opposition to Martin Luther King Jr.'s visit decades prior, more than 100 Southern Baptist churches promised to withdraw their funding from the collective cooperative fund unless Moore changed his tone or was dismissed.⁴²

Evangelical support for Donald Trump can be attributed to a combination of policy issues they thought he would champion as well as an intense dislike of Hillary Clinton. White evangelicals looked to Trump to support their pro-life stance. They wanted him to oppose gay marriage and, of vital importance, to appoint conservative Supreme Court justices who would protect and promote their policy interests. In addition, many evangelicals did not necessarily cast a vote for Donald Trump so much as vote against Hillary Clinton. Aside from being a Democrat, Clinton's public championing of abortion and alignment with Planned Parenthood, her relatively rare public expressions of her faith, her lack of outreach to conservative evangelicals, and her "emails" all combined into a mix that many white evangelicals found repugnant. But other Republican candidates in the primaries had more credible conservative bona fides than Trump and could have stood up for evangelical political priorities. Evangelical support of Trump and dislike of Clinton went beyond policy concerns.

Trump tapped into the latent sense among some evangelicals that they were losing their influence in American culture and politics.

Increasingly, evangelicals believe they are the ones experiencing persecution. That gay marriage is now the law of the land, the lasting effects of *Roe v. Wade*, the controversy over whether Christians can refuse certain services to gay and lesbian customers, and the general trend toward liberalism make some evangelicals feel like people without a home in the American political landscape. A Public Religion Research Institute survey found that the only religious group that thought Christians in America faced more discrimination than Muslims were white evangelicals: 57 percent of evangelicals thought Christians faced a lot of discrimination compared to 33 percent of Americans overall.⁴³ Trump's campaign slogan promised to "Make America Great Again." In the conservative Christian political mind, Trump, despite his, promised to "Make Evangelicals Great Again."

The impact of the 2016 election cannot be underestimated. In an interview for a *New York Times* article, Michael Emerson, coauthor of *Divided by Faith*, gave his assessment: "The election itself was the single most harmful event to the whole movement of reconciliation in at least the past 30 years," he said. "It's about to completely break apart."⁴⁴ The Trump campaign and presidency revealed just how tenuous the interracial coalition of Christians that had emerged in the past two and a half decades really was. The forty-fifth president did not produce the racial and political divide between black and white Christians, but he exposed and extended longstanding differences while revealing the inadequacy of recent reconciliation efforts.

THE COLOR OF COMPROMISE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The never-ending struggle for black freedom has resulted in tangible gains for all Americans. Black people who once largely inhabited this country as slaves have become *Fortune* 500 CEOs, media moguls, award-winning academics, and even president. It has become more difficult, though not unheard of, for the American church to openly make racist statements and argue for the inferiority of black people. But racism has by no means disappeared from the headlines.

Examples abound. In a culturally obtruse move, a group of white professors at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary thought it would be funny to send off a retiring colleague by posting a posed picture of themselves in baggy pants, hoodies, and crooked caps. One professor even held a real gun.⁴⁵ The Presbyterian Church in America, a denomination founded in the 1970s but with connections to Southern Presbyterians, decided to deliberate for a year before passing a resolution about their complicity in racism during the civil rights movement.⁴⁶ The Southern Baptist Convention faced a public relations debacle when a committee refused to consider a proposal by a black minister to condemn the racism of the alt-right.⁴⁷ And while multiracial congregations have become more commonplace, many churches remain some of the most segregated places in America.

Plenty of white evangelicals have promoted reconciliation and have attempted to address the racism that has defined large portions of the American church in the past. Yet, spurred by evangelical support for Trump, many black Christians have distanced themselves from white evangelicals. In a widely circulated op-ed for the *New York Times*, black Baptist minister Lawrence Ware renounced his membership in the Southern Baptist Convention. "My reasoning is simple," he explained. "As a black scholar of race and a minister who is committed to social justice, I can no longer be part of an organization that is complicit in the disturbing rise of the so-called alt-right, whose members support the abhorrent policies of Donald Trump and whose troubling racial history and current actions reveal a deep commitment to white supremacy."⁴⁸ Ware articulated a keen sense that white evangelicals have continued to compromise with racism even in an age when the obvious racist actions of the past have been denounced. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, now a professor of theology in Atlanta, left her position on staff at a majority white church after the 2016 election. "We were willing to give up our preferred worship style for the chance to really try to live this vision of beloved community with a diverse group of people," she said. "That didn't work."⁴⁹

Christian complicity with racism in the twenty-first century looks different than complicity with racism in the past. It looks like

Christians responding to *black lives matter* with the phrase *all lives matter*. It looks like Christians consistently supporting a president whose racism has been on display for decades. It looks like Christians telling black people and their allies that their attempts to bring up racial concerns are "divisive." It looks like conversations on race that focus on individual relationships and are unwilling to discuss systemic solutions. Perhaps Christian complicity in racism has not changed much after all. Although the characters and the specifics are new, many of the same rationalizations for racism remain.

Centuries of racism in the American church cannot be overcome by "pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities" that ignore the deep social, political, and cultural divides that persist across the color line.⁵⁰ If the church hopes to see meaningful progress in race relations during the twenty-first century, then it must undertake bold, costly actions with an attitude of unprecedented urgency. The solutions are simple though not easy. They are, in many cases, obvious though unpopular. No matter their difficulty or distastefulness, however, they are necessary in order to change the narrative of the American church and race.