

**BOOK**

*The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*

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**SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]**

The Color of Compromise is not a call to shame or a platform to blame white evangelical Christians. It is a call from a place of love and desire to fight for a more racially unified church that no longer compromises what the Bible teaches about human dignity and equality. A call that challenges black and white Christians alike to stand up now and begin implementing the concrete ways Tisby outlines, all for a more equitable and inclusive environment among God's people. Starting today.

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Reflecting on the events he said, " 'Who did it? Who threw that bomb? Was it a Negro or a white?' The answer should be, 'We all did it.' Every last one of us is condemned for that crime and the bombing before it and a decade ago. We all did it." Morgan recognized that no matter who had physically planted the dynamite, all the city's white residents were complicit in allowing an environment of hatred and racism to persist. The acts that reinforced racism happened in countless common ways. Morgan explained, "The 'who' is every little individual who talks about the 'niggers' and spreads the seeds of his hate to his neighbor and his son. The jokester, the crude oaf whose racial jokes rock the party with laughter."

The failure of many Christians in the South and across the nation to decisively oppose the racism in their families, communities, and even in their own churches provided fertile soil for the seeds of hatred to grow. The refusal to act in the midst of injustice is itself an act of injustice. Indifference to oppression perpetuates oppression.

History and Scripture teaches us that there can be no reconciliation without repentance. There can be no repentance without confession. And there can be no confession without truth.

King's words apply to racism in the church. The festering wound of racism in the American church must be exposed to the oxygen of truth in order to be healed.

Although activists have achieved a remarkable amount of racial progress at great cost, racism continues to plague the church.

What do we mean when we talk about racism? Beverly Daniel Tatum provides a shorthand definition: racism is a system of oppression based on race.

Another definition explains racism as prejudice plus power. It is not only personal bigotry toward someone of a different race that constitutes racism; rather, racism includes the imposition of bigoted ideas on groups of people.

Christians participated in this system of white supremacy – a concept that identifies white people and white culture as normal and superior – even if they claim people of color as their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Historically speaking, when faced with the choice between racism and equality, the American church has tended to practice a complicit Christianity rather than a courageous Christianity. They chose comfort over constructive conflict and in so doing created and maintained a status quo of injustice.

Even if only a small portion of Christians committed the most notorious acts of racism, many more white Christians can be described as complicit in creating and sustaining a racist society.

My concern for the church and for the well-being of its people motivates my exploration of Christian complicity in racism. The goal is to build up the body of Christ by "speaking the truth in love," even if that truth comes at the price of pain.

Black Christians have played a vital role in shaping the history of America, and they have much to share with the church universal.

Critics will assert that 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 the talk about racial equality. They will contend that such an extended discussion of racism reduces black people to a state of helplessness and a "victim mentality." They will try to point to counterexamples and say that racists do not represent the "real" American church.

They will charge that this discussion of race is somehow "abandoning the gospel" and replacing it with problematic calls for "social justice."

What readers like this may find difficult about *The Color of Compromise* is that very rarely do historical figures fit neatly into the category of "villain." Many individuals throughout American church history exhibited blatant racism, yet they also built orphanages and schools. They deeply loved their families; they showed kindness toward others.

By surveying the church's racist past, American Christians may feel the weight of their collective failure to consistently confront racism in the church. This should lead to immediate, fierce action to confess this truth and work for justice.

On the question of whether baptism would render slaves free, the Virginia General Assembly decided, "It is enacted and declared by this Grand Assembly, and the authority thereof, that the conferring of baptism does not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom." This statute encouraged white enslavers to evangelize their human chattel since baptized slaves would not be freed.

Over the next 300 years, the transatlantic slave trade transported more than ten million Africans to the Americas in a forced migration of epic scale. About two million people perished on the voyage. The human cost in terms of suffering, indignity, and death caused by this commerce can never be fully comprehended, but the experience is often misunderstood or downplayed in the present day. The appalling nature of Christian cooperation with slavery cannot be understood apart from a description of bondage and its effects on Africans.

Black people immediately detected the hypocrisy of American-style slavery. They knew the inconsistencies of the faith from the rank odors, the chains, the blood, and the misery that accompanied their life of bondage. Instead of abandoning Christianity, though, black people went directly to teachings of Jesus and challenged white people to demonstrate integrity.

"I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was, once, an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders," he wrote.<sup>12</sup> Newton, a celebrated example today, stands out because he eventually repudiated slavery. If Newton had simply remained a slave trader, he would have been so typical that it is likely no one would remember his name.

Yet abolitionism did not arise from purely altruistic motives. The decline of slavery in Britain coincided with the rise of the Industrial Revolution. The factory became the urban farm that produced most British goods. The poet William Blake called factories "dark Satanic mills." Men, women, and children worked twelve-hour days in stifling heat tending whirring, steam-powered machines that could slice off a finger or crush a skull in the blink of a sleep-deprived eye. Although British slavery declined around this time, the rise in industrial productivity fed an

astronomical demand for raw materials. The demand for cotton grew twentyfold in the decades after the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> North American slavery supplied the ravenous international appetite for cotton.

In 1619, a Dutch trading ship landed off the coast of Virginia with “20. and odd Negroes.” The arrival of these enslaved women and men was a matter of economic convenience. The British colonists had not requested slaves, but the Dutch ship had stolen the Africans from a Portuguese slave trading ship called São João Bautista, or Saint John the Baptist, and were looking for a place to sell their “cargo.” As historian Gregory O’Malley explains, “The arrival of African captives had less to do with planters’ demand for enslaved laborers than with the privateers’ desire for a market in which to vend stolen Africans.”

As life expectancy increased, lifelong labor became a more lucrative investment. Tobacco, the most profitable crop in Virginia at the time, required less capital and less punishing labor than producing a commodity such as sugar, which was popular in the West Indies and parts of South America. Enslaved men and women thus lived longer making lifetime bondage even more attractive.

“Slave codes” to police African bondage. The codes determined that a child was born slave or free based solely on the mother’s status. They mandated slavery for life with no hope of emancipation. The codes deprived the enslaved of legal rights, required permission for slaves to leave their master’s property, forbade marriage between enslaved people, and prohibited them from carrying arms. The slave codes also defined enslaved Africans not as human beings but as chattel – private property on the same level as livestock.

The effort to convert indigenous people to Christianity was always tied to ideas of European colonization. Europeans evangelized non-Europeans with the intention not only of teaching them Christianity but also of conforming them to European cultural standards. One of the most well-known illustrations of how Europeans conflated religion and culture is in the marriage of John Rolfe and Metoaka (or Matoaka), better known as Pocahontas.

Even though European missionaries sought to share Christianity with indigenous peoples and Africans, social, political, and economic equality was not part of their plan. Missionaries carefully crafted messages that maintained the social and economic status quo. They truncated the gospel message by failing to confront slavery, and in doing so they reinforced its grip on society.

When Le Jau was able to persuade African slaves to adopt the Christian religion as their own, he confirmed their profession by baptizing them. The vows he made the slaves recite show how European missionaries maintained a strict separation between spiritual and physical freedom. “You declare in the presence of God and before this congregation that you do not ask for holy baptism out of any design to free yourself from the Duty and Obedience you owe to your master while you live, but merely for the good of your soul and to partake of the Grace and Blessings promised to the Members of the Church of Jesus Christ.”

So from the beginning of American colonization, Europeans crafted a Christianity that would allow them to spread the faith without confronting the exploitative economic system of slavery and the emerging social inequality based on color.

He took freedom into his own hands just like the colonists believed they were doing. He represented the racial mix of America and stands for indigenous men and women as much as black Americans. Moreover, he died for a nation that failed to recognize his freedom because of his racial background. Attucks symbolizes that bitter combination of freedom and bondage, racism and patriotism, that characterized the Revolutionary era.

Yet Jefferson, as with so many of his day, did not consider black people equal to white people. Few political leaders assumed the noble words of the declaration applied to the enslaved. A draft of the document denounced the transatlantic slave trade by accusing the British monarch of “violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people . . . captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.” The antislavery clause was excised from the final draft of the declaration due to the objections of delegates from Georgia and South Carolina as well as some northern states that benefited from slavery.

Although the proportion remained small, the Great Awakening initiated the first significant number of conversions to Christianity among enslaved Africans in the colonies. Evangelical preachers, although European, pushed against the traditional customs of established denominations, including the segregation or exclusion of African people. Revivalists emphasized the spiritual equality of all people and preached to interracial crowds. They baptized anyone willing to accept Christ as their Savior. Black people even became ordained ministers and missionaries.

Faced with the vicissitudes of starting a nonprofit organization and ensuring its financial viability, Whitefield looked to slavery to secure Bethesda's welfare. He turned to the wealthy allies he had gained during his revivals in South Carolina for support. With the help of his friends near Charleston, Whitefield purchased a 640-acre plantation and planned to use the profit from the crops produced there to support the work of the orphanage. Whitefield was virtually guaranteed a profit from his plantation activities because he did not plan to pay his laborers. "One negro has been given me," he wrote in a letter. "Some more I plan to purchase this week."<sup>16</sup>

Although Edwards remains a significant figure in American religious history, his significance must also include the fact that he compromised Christian principles by enslaving human beings. By 1731, Edwards had purchased his first enslaved African, Venus, at an auction in Rhode Island. Throughout his lifetime he owned several other people, including Joseph, Lee, and a young boy named Titus. Edwards's slaveholding speaks for itself, but an unpublished manuscript provides the only written record of Edwards directly addressing his views on slavery.

Edwards represented an educated and elite class in New England society. Wealthy and influential people populated his congregation. Slave owning signified status. More deeply, though, the particular brand of evangelicalism developing in America during the Great Awakening made an antislavery stance unlikely for many. Mark Noll explains, "As a revival movement . . . evangelicalism transformed people within their inherited social setting, but worked only partial and selective transformation on the social settings themselves."

Edwards and Whitefield represent a supposedly moderate and widespread view of slavery. Both accepted the spiritual equality of black and white people. Both preached the message of salvation to all. Yet their concern for African slaves did not extend to advocating for physical emancipation.

Thus Baptists in Virginia declared slavery to be a civil issue outside of the scope of the church. Slave ownership became an accepted practice in most Baptist congregations, and whenever someone raised objections, leaders could demur and insist that the topic was an issue for the state, not the church.

The divide between white and black Christians in America was not generally one of doctrine. Christians across the color line largely agreed on theological teachings such as the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, and the importance of personal conversion. More often than not, the issue that divided Christians along racial lines related to the unequal treatment of African-descended people in white church contexts.

Black Christians have repeated their exodus from white churches throughout American history on both large and small scales. For instance, in 1833 Charles Colcock Jones, an early proponent of evangelizing the enslaved, preached to a slave congregation from the book of Philemon. When he said that the apostle Paul admonished slaves not to run away from their masters, "one half of my audience rose up and walked off with themselves." The remainder "looked anything but satisfied, either with the preacher or his doctrine."

At the annual diocesan convention in 1846, the leaders of St. Philip's once again applied for admission, a status that would give them a voice in denominational matters and place them on equal footing with white churches. When the matter of the church's status came before the Committee on the Incorporation of Churches, someone objected. After considering the matter, the committee made its determination. They stated that "neither St. Philip's, nor any other colored congregation [will] be admitted into union with this Convention, so as to entitle them to representation therein."

"We object not to the color of the skin, but we question their possession of those qualities which would render their intercourse with the members of a Church Convention useful."

Without question, the Constitution had the rights of wealthy, white men in mind while other groups like indigenous peoples, women, and enslaved blacks held a lesser status. These other groups could not always count on the legal protections declared by the Constitution.

Although the word slave is absent, this section clearly means that any enslaved person crossing state lines from a slave state to a free state had to be returned to his or her owner. From the beginning, the Constitution ensured that nowhere in America would be safe for an escaped slave.

The South had a vested interest in protecting slavery (though the North benefitted as well), and some southern states refused to ratify the Constitution unless they had specific assurances protecting their right to possess human chattel.

Congress passed the Missouri Compromise of 1820. This agreement admitted Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state to preserve the balance of power between slave and free states. The Missouri Compromise effectively guaranteed that slavery would remain an American institution for the next several decades.

If there is one concept that helps unlock the twisted logic of American slavery better than almost any other, it is the chattel principle. The chattel principle is the social alchemy that transformed a human being made in the image of God into a piece of property.

Tragically, the economic value associated with an enslaved person was of more value than their family ties. According to Johnson, of the more than 600,000 interstate sales that occurred in the decades prior to the Civil War, 25 percent destroyed a first marriage, and 50 percent broke up a nuclear family.

White slave owners sought to erase African religion and cultural customs and endeavored to control the Christianity they dispensed to their involuntary laborers. Although groups of white Christians had insisted on evangelizing indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans, their efforts never produced a church defined by racial equality. Instead, paternalistic attitudes toward black people defined much of American Christianity.

Before emancipation, black and white evangelicals typically prayed, sang, and worshiped together.<sup>13</sup> Yet this interracial interaction did not come from the egalitarian aspirations of white Christians; rather, interracial congregations were an expression of paternalism and a means of controlling slave beliefs and preventing slave insurrection.

One of the most well-known revivalist preachers of the day was Charles Grandison Finney. Finney led Oberlin College, which became the first institution of higher education to accept both women and black people. Finney was an outspoken abolitionist, but he was not a proponent of black equality. He advocated for emancipation, but he did not see the value of the "social" integration of the races. Though he excluded white slaveowners from membership in his congregations, he also relegated black worshipers to particular sections of the sanctuary. Black people could become members in his churches, but they could not vote or hold office.

Finney's stance for abolition but against integration arose from his conviction that social reform would come through individual conversion, not institutional reform. Finney and many others like him believed that social change came about through evangelization.

Two facts about the Civil War are especially pertinent to our examination of race and Christianity in America: that the Civil War was fought over slavery and that countless devout Christians fought and died to preserve it as an institution.

Amid the myriad streams that combined to break the dam of national political unity and usher in the Civil War, five events stand out: the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, the Dred Scott decision of 1857, John Brown's raid in 1859, and the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860.

"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."

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.

Effective remedies to the present state of racial injustice—a situation created by an unbending commitment to ideas of racial superiority and inferiority—are deemed too inconvenient to pursue.

The ARC (Awareness, Relationships, Commitment) of racial justice helps distinguish different types of antiracist actions. They are not formulaic; they can happen nonsequentially and simultaneously. Nor should this process ever be considered complete. Even the most seasoned racial justice activists constantly learn, question, and reform their own attitudes and actions. Though not the final word on antiracism, the ARC of racial justice provides a useful framework for taking decisive action against discrimination.

Watch documentaries about the racial history of the United States.

- Diversify your social media feed by following racial and ethnic minorities and those with different political outlooks than yours.
- Access websites and podcasts created by racial and ethnic minorities.
- Do an internet search about a particular topic instead of always asking your black friend to explain an issue to you.

But awareness isn't enough. No matter how aware you are, your knowledge will remain abstract and theoretical until you care about the people who face the negative consequences of racism.

Find new places to hang out. We are creatures of habit and convenience. We go to particular places simply because they are familiar. A purposeful effort to develop relationships with people from diverse backgrounds will carry you to different restaurants, grocery stores, and hangouts.

Presbyterian minister Duke Kwon distinguishes between reparation and reparations.<sup>10</sup> The former refers to the principle, and the latter refers to the practice. In terms of the principle, reparation simply means repair. Injustice obligates reparation. Reparation is not a matter of vengeance or charity; it's a matter of justice. The concept of reparation has biblical precedence.

Reparations, on the other hand, can take many forms. Kwon distinguishes between "civic reparations" and "ecclesiastical reparations."<sup>11</sup> Civic reparations come through the state.

According to Kwon, ecclesiastical reparations occur mainly from and within Christian churches. These pertain to the obligations that the faithful have to one another in light of historic injustices.

Another way churches could also help immediately is by funding black-led church plants and religious nonprofit organizations. Black Christians have an abundance of innovative ideas for evangelism, apologetics, discipleship, media, and the arts. What they often lack is funding.

More than 150 years after Union and Confederate forces laid down their guns, America is still fighting the Civil War. Instead of firing canons and muskets, the combatants fire off blog posts and petitions to either take down or preserve monuments to the Confederacy.

Removing Confederate statues and symbols from public places will not eradicate racism. Indeed, even some black people express indifference at the endeavor. But statues and symbols are supposed to represent the community. Symbols of the Confederacy only represent a part of the community, a part that stood for the preservation of slavery. Those who declare that Confederate symbols represent "heritage not hate" must recognize that part of that heritage was hate in the form of slavery and white supremacy.