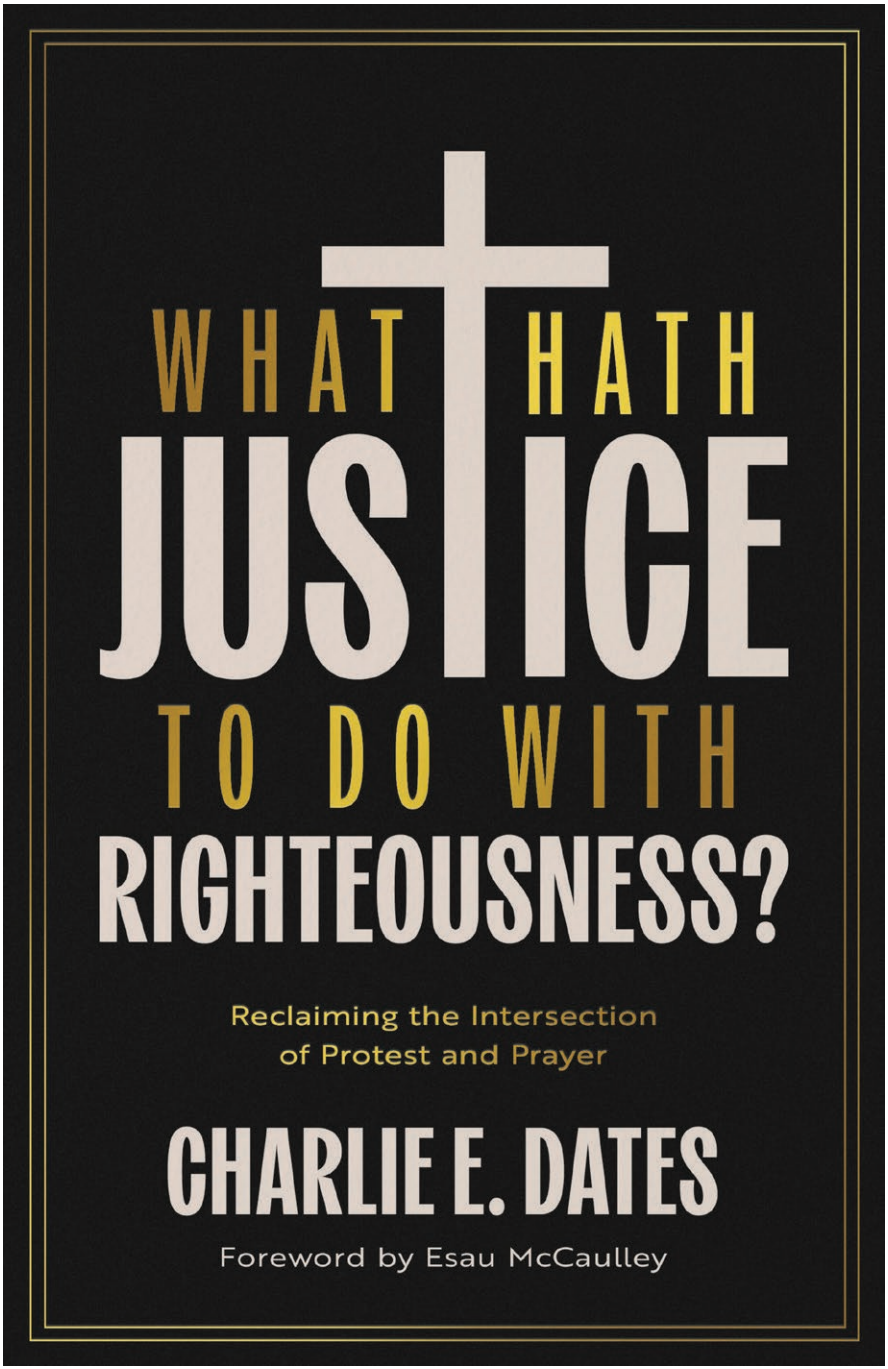


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# 1

# THE DIVORCE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS FROM JUSTICE

On April 4, 2018, I mounted a pulpit in Memphis, Tennessee, fifty years to the day of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. The conference center was just a few miles north of the Lorraine Motel where King's cold, slain body lay fifty years earlier. The Gospel Coalition (TGC) and the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC)—two largely White evangelical parachurch organizations—partnered to commemorate this historic anniversary by hosting a conference in the city where King was killed.

My invitation to preach, however, did not initially come from either of the hosting organizations' leaders. When Black and White Memphis pastors caught wind that these organizations would gather in their city to honor King—a Black Christian pastor who many of their foreparents rejected and whose witness many still resist—without their blessing, approval, or consultation, conference planning quickly came to a halt. The conference hosts met with this group of Black and White Memphis pastors where they expressed their sorrow over having "tin ears."

The compromise was to split the keynote addresses and allow for the Black pastors to invite a handful of preachers to fill the slots. It was by Pastor Rufus Smith, Bishop Ed Stephens, Dr. J. Lawrence Turner, and other pastors in Memphis that the MLK50

conference came to be what it was. At the time, I was too naive to appreciate how difficult repentance would be for these original leaders. For some of them, the conference was performative, at best. To memorialize King was safer and easier than carrying the torch of his witness into the fight for justice on the grounds of God's righteousness. It seems for American evangelicalism, commemoration is the safest and most attainable mode to absolve guilt and responsibility.

I stood at that pulpit, before a largely White, august congregation with the hope that only the gospel brings. Change could happen. But these aspirations gave way to privilege and the protection of power. It was shortly after that conference that it became clear to me: To them, remembering King was effortless. Resembling King's witness in fighting for justice was sacrifice. Commemoration costs very little. Standing on conviction, however, will cost some more than they are willing to pay. Moments like that one in Memphis reveal something deeper about the life of the church in America. They expose a pattern that did not begin in our generation.

History is theology in practice. That is, we learn a lot about God from the witness of the past. What one professes to believe about God will come to play out in how one lives. In this chapter, we will review how the evangelical church in the United States arrived in its current state of unjust complicity. Specifically, how White evangelical Christianity has filed the divorce papers between God's righteousness and the pursuit of justice. From the stalwarts of the Great Awakening to the Moral Majority and our current moment, White evangelical theological reflection has been obsessed with parsing the meaning of God's righteousness while their feet have been far from fighting injustice. What is joined in the heart and mind of God has been severed in practice by the American evangelical church. The heart of God has been sacrificed at the altar of political idolatry.

## EVANGELICALISM'S FAILURE: THEN AND NOW

American Christianity is in trouble . . . again. Its misappropriation of political conservatism with a Christian worldview has miscarried its labor for justice. However, this is not a new tale. Jerry Falwell Sr. (1933–2007) was a pastor and televangelist from Lynchburg, Virginia. He was one of the spearheading conservative architects who, in the late 1970s, convened a conservative action group named the Moral Majority. Careful observers could tell right away that this group wanted to claim political territory that the church did not own. This movement quickly became a political identity, a Republican political action group for conservative religious leaders and laypeople. To them, professing a theologically orthodox view of Jesus and the Scriptures was synonymous with a politically conservative worldview. Instead of forcing the Republican Party and its leaders to understand the true nature of justice, it functioned as its religious arm, intent on imperial power to accomplish its wishes.

What is striking is that the Moral Majority eventually made opposition to abortion its defining political issue. Abortion had been legalized nationally by the Supreme Court in January 1973. At the time, six of the nine justices who heard the case had been appointed by a Republican president, while three, including Thurgood Marshall, had been appointed by a Democratic president. The final decision in *Roe v. Wade* was 7–2 in favor of permitting abortions. One dissenter was a Republican appointee and the other a Democratic appointee. Richard Nixon, a Republican president, was in office when the decision was handed down.[1]

This history reminds us that abortion did not originally function as the partisan dividing line it later became. The ideological boundaries of the two major parties looked very different than they do today, and both parties included a range of moral and political views on the issue. For many years, pro-life advocacy had been voiced

most consistently within Catholic social teaching. Catholic leaders and activists had already been raising concerns about abortion well before the rise of the evangelical political movement. Catholic voices tended to place pro-life convictions within a broader biblical and moral vision centered on the dignity of every human life, a framework that resisted reducing the issue to a tool of partisan politics.

By the late 1970s, however, evangelical leaders and political strategists increasingly emphasized abortion as a defining marker of political identity, particularly among White Southern voters. What had once been largely absent from our national political conversation gradually became both a test of loyalty to the Republican Party and a barometer of Christian commitment.

None of this means that some of the pro-life convictions were insincere. It does suggest, however, that political movements learned how to insincerely harness peripheral moral concern for political power. There is nothing inherently holy about either American political party. We respect the rights of citizens to vote their conscience. But in America, the evangelical church asserts that the Republican party is the choice for Christian voters. When moral conviction becomes closely tied to partisan identity, the risk of sacrificing one for the other grows. Over time, if Christians are not careful, political movements can reshape how believers understand their own moral commitments.

The tragedy is that sincere, biblical convictions can be absorbed into a partisan agenda that ultimately serves power more than moral witness. How tragicomic it is that some of the very people who believe themselves to be the most moral actually excuse and support the most immoral politicians, while claiming platforms of human flourishing? When this happens, the church begins to confuse political loyalty with faithfulness to Christ. What is masked as moral clarity can instead become a form of theological arrogance and self-deception.

American evangelicalism's unwillingness to file divorce papers with the Republican Party—and its wholesale adoption of party platform politics—is but another demonstration that this historically segregated brand of Christianity is without a distinctly Christian worldview. In a current analysis, history will have to name American evangelicalism as a civil religion masquerading as Christianity. It won't be because of doctrine, it will be because of duty. This is an old tale.

In 1845, in the appendix of his autobiography, Frederick Douglass defined the distinction between the slaveholding Christianity of America and the genuine person and work of Jesus Christ. The American church in Douglass's era—as is the case today—largely ignored the prophetic cries of Black Christians and the Black Church. Black Christians with a high view of Scripture and a correspondingly high view of Christ saw the American justice landscape in starkly diverging perspectives from the larger White evangelical establishment. Douglass's words remind us that Black Christians recognized then, as they do now, the contrast between a Christianity that maintains the status quo and that of the prophetic voice of Scripture.

Douglass prophetically wrote,

> Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other.[2]

Douglass's almost two-hundred-year-old reflection is fresher than tomorrow's headlines. His words are an indictment of the established Christian worldview of his day. Yet, Douglass presents a constructive and more consistent proposal of a distinctly Christian worldview rooted in Scripture and the person of Christ than do his American fundamentalist counterparts.

What might Douglass say in his assessment of American Christianity if he were alive today? How would he respond to the unabashed support of injustice in the name of conservatism? Douglass might deny that wholesale conservatism or progressivism is equivalent to a Christian worldview. He might say that wholesale conservatism or progressivism is antithetically *Christian*: two incomplete and at times incoherent readings of the Bible.

From Pat Robertson to Robert Jeffress, prominent voices within American evangelicalism have long suggested that to be a faithful Christian in the United States is, in effect, to be a loyalist to the Republican Party. In recent years, several highly respected evangelical leaders who once expressed deep moral reservations about Donald Trump later reversed course. Their initial concerns centered on character and fitness for office. Yet over time, many concluded that policy outcomes outweighed those objections.

Judicial appointments, religious liberty protections, and pro-life legislation were cited as decisive goods. On that basis, support for Trump was framed not simply as a strategic political choice. Instead, to some, Trump had become the clear "Christian worldview" vote. That phrase shifts political allegiance from a mere preference to a morally binding, theological obligation. Therefore, Trump is not merely an endorsed candidate, but he is baptized in the language of moral authority, signaling that support for Republican politics is a test of Christian fidelity.

The privilege to vote is an American right. We find no fault in that. Citizens should vote their consciences. The problem with this kind of endorsement is the language used to file the support. The claim is that a Christian worldview effectively requires supporting the Republican Party. This kind of monolithic conservatism that disregards the other weighty matters of the law emphasizes the salvation of the individual soul over social conditions.[3] The bold declaration of support for a party and president whose policies are

not thoroughly biblical or supportive of the oppressed is a played-out excuse toward theological imperialism.

Yet the truest Christian worldview is often articulated by the poor, the marginalized, and the subjects of systemic injustice. Those in power have tended to read the bend of policy and justice in favor of their privilege. When these types of endorsements are released, the echoes of Frederick Douglass shout again from the chambers of history. Between this version of American Christianity and the Christianity of Christ, many marginalized, Bible-believing Christians recognize the widest possible difference. So wide that to be a friend of one is to be the enemy of the other.

## A CRITIQUE OF A STRICTLY REPUBLICAN "CHRISTIAN" WORLDVIEW

The eighteenth-century abolitionist sounds like a prophet for the twenty-first century. We need to revisit Douglass, but not only him. We need also observe the hundreds of thousands of Black and Brown Christians from around the United States: those who go to church, read their Bibles, and pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Take a gander at those Black and Brown Christians who give their money—at a sacrificial percentage—to the local church, and those who linger under the weight of unjust scales, who die in impoverished health systems, and who shop in food deserts.

The leading White evangelical institutions' blanket backing of the Republican Party and its president was void of any significant engagement with Black theologians. Many Black and Brown Christian communities were troubled—not because we need White evangelicals to ratify what is Christian but because there is a long history that invalidates these "Christian worldview" claims. Those who espouse this fail to look beyond their White conservative interests. Many Black and Brown pastors understand the plight and promise of women and their unborn children in a way that is more

comprehensive than the Moral Majority's abortion discussion. We are pro human flourishing.

What many White evangelicals do not understand is the moral calculus that every Black pastor makes. For instance, one of the churches I pastor in Chicago built out a justice center that housed a crisis-pregnancy counseling program. We care about the unborn. We do not need White evangelicalism to teach us to value the unborn. We do not need White evangelicalism's help with pastoral decisions. What we need is White Christians who will be allies with us in the struggle to be comprehensively pro-life. We need help with policies that give a poor pregnant mother better access to healthcare, the kind of support every pregnant woman deserves, and the promise of an education for her children—equal to that of rich, White suburbs. We need help advocating for systems that make that mother's life better and do not just ensure her child is born. The job of the government is to do more than say, "Don't kill babies."

> It is time for a pro-life agenda that enables the flourishing of Black and Brown people.

I do not write as an angry Black preacher shouting to the White evangelical community. We know enough about the Christianity of this land to know that the White Western Jesus is a figment of their imagination and a far cry from the Brown-skinned baby born in poverty in Bethlehem. Rather, I write to give voice to Black Christians who still have a high view of Jesus Christ, who believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and who, as a result, do not exclusively vote Republican because they stand against unjust systems.

Our problem with evangelicals who follow this example is that for three decades they have failed to do nothing more than prop up an incomplete pro-life agenda as a thin veneer for partisan politics

and a failure of theological imagination. They cannot consider the sovereignty of God to operate beyond their talking points. Our consternation stems from the fact that injustice reigns from the White House to the courthouse, but it is undergirded by a vacuous pulpit that cannot live up to the word *evangelical*.[4]

Our problem is that they cannot see the hurt, harm, or danger inflicted on their Black Christian brothers and sisters by their unflinching support of Trump's presidency. The most disheartening part is they would maintain their support at the expense of their Christian witness. Our problem is that they think only of themselves, their national interests, their economic powerhouses, and the furtherance of their privilege apart from the rest of the Christian church in America.

For three decades Black Christians have shouted about unjust systems while some White evangelicals have weaponized Black and Brown babies to uphold their party platform. They preach and write as though we must do church according to their incomplete norms. They act as if Black pastors have not preached about and exemplified the biblical family, or supported high schoolers through college, or built ministries that bring healthcare to the hood. Perhaps that is because some White evangelicals have used the Republican Party as a scapegoat to ignore their besetting sin: systemic injustice. Do you see the depth of the deception? They ignore the pressing concerns of Black Christians because we are collateral to exploit in their bid for White House power. One must reflect on the words of Jesus: "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36).

We will not have it. We read the Bible as well as they do. The Old Testament Scriptures call us to care for the most vulnerable (Deuteronomy 10:18-19). The New Testament's witness commands that we bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). For some White evangelicals of this nation to say that they know what is better for

the country than we do is paternalistic and disrespectful. Christians of color said that the Trump administration would tarnish the nation and the Christian reputation, and they ignored us. Christians of color said that support for Christian nationalism would sow distrust between racial groups, and they ignored us.

Some White evangelical theological institutions are bastions for propagating a White-centered Christian worldview. For too long, Black students at White evangelical colleges and seminaries have, as a consequence of having attended these schools, become suspicious of the legitimate faith of their own grandparents, their pastors, and their local churches. They have been given an implicit bias that the faith of American evangelicalism is somehow purer than, holier than, and more informed than the Christian claims of the historic Black Church in America. For too long, the portraits of White slave masters have lined the entrances and hallways of these sacred institutions with little to no explanation in the curriculum behind their dehumanizing exploitation. For too long, the only faculty that these Black and Brown students see are White men tethered to a cultural racism disguised as orthodox theology.

Those who insist that *Republicanism* is synonymous with *Christianity* make clear what non-majority Christians long suspected but hoped was not true. They refuse to recognize a Christian worldview outside their Republican preferences. In doing so, they disregard the voices of their Black brothers and sisters in Christ. We should be shocked by the boldness of such a claim and by how easily the dominant American evangelical landscape reads American Christian history in its favor.

Who created the fake war on drugs that targeted Black and Brown men, decimating entire communities? Who invented the code language of "states' rights"? Who denounced a 2007 Democratic presidential candidate who—at that time—was neither progay marriage nor supportive of partial birth abortions? Who

portrayed Black women as welfare queens and Black men as criminal savages in the 1980s presidential runs? The Republican Party with American evangelical Christian support.[5]

The priorities of Black and Brown Christians are vastly different from those of White evangelicals. We refuse to let them tell the world what a rightful Christian worldview is, since they are the theological architects of American slavery. They were the greatest antagonists to freedom during the Civil Rights Movement. They should have been our friends, but it is hard to imagine worse enemies. To date, there has been only one Black president at any major evangelical seminary, radio station, or publishing house.[6]

## TOWARD A MORE AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

An authentically Christian worldview is more expansive than the abortion debate. It laments that people in Flint, Michigan, still wait for their public water pipes to be replaced. It bemoans the fact that the USDA would not allow poor people to use their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for online grocery delivery during the pandemic.[7] It grieves that Black and Brown people in Chicago led the pack in Covid-related deaths by double digit percentage points. It is baffled that President Trump was the most publicly immoral man in living presidential history and simultaneously the candidate of choice for the largest Christian voting block in America. Oh, the irony in American life: While convicted felons are barred from voting for president, a convicted felon can still run for president and receive overwhelming support from White evangelicals.

Without contradiction, however, the major Black Christian denominations in America are grossly offended by the arrogant imposition of a Christian worldview on one party. To be fair, both parties have wide gaps that violate Christian ethics. Neither of

them fully endorses the radical claims of loving one's neighbor, caring for the widow and the orphan, or receiving the foreigner. Our Lord does not ride an elephant, and he is not returning on a donkey. He is a meek and lowly lamb.

Where then do we go to find a more well-rounded Christian worldview—a comprehensive, biblically informed, God-centered, moral vision of the self and society?

> One of the beauties of theological education is its ability to read broadly and believe narrowly. Instead, we have been taught to read narrowly and believe myopically.

## A STRANGE THEOLOGICAL CONTRADICTION

In the fall of 2019, I stood along with my wife and children on the grounds of the McLeod Plantation in Charleston, South Carolina, a plantation that began in 1858. It is a majestic ground in a beautiful city. Charleston has epic church structures of meticulous colonial architecture. It is a city that boasts history both inglorious and majestic.

There we stood on that plantation, some four hundred years after the first Dutch slave ship arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, trying to reconcile the beauty of the Charleston churches and the horror of Charleston's slavery. More Africans stolen for slavery were brought through the port of Charleston than any other port in the colonies. Many call that inhumane enterprise "America's Original Sin."[8]

Before arriving at the plantation, we visited four churches built by Christian settlers who owned slaves. What a thought! Slaveholding Christians. Frederick Douglass described Charleston as the kind of city where the church bell rang in concert with the slave

auctioneer's bell.[9] I will not soon forget the tears my son cried at dinner that night trying to wrap his eight-year-old mind around how little boys his age were snatched from parents like his mother and me and then sold at church houses. He could not understand it.

Being a student of history, I was overcome by some strange overlaps in the American evangelical timeline. These spaces were the seedbed churches grew out of after the Puritan revolution. The Great Awakening gave birth to what we now know as evangelicalism in a modern sense.

Historian David Bebbington defines evangelicalism through four key priorities: conversionism, activism, biblicalism, and crucicentrism.[10] At first, fundamentalism was an emphasis on personal, vertical Christianity. They believed that God revealed himself through the Scriptures. To know God was to know him through his self-disclosure within the Scriptures. Some of the brightest theology emerged from that era. It was an era of soaring intellect in Christian doctrine and contributed to the narrative of what became American evangelicalism. Reading some of the theology of that era, one gets the feeling that its birth was a reaction against a religion of the state.[11]

The question that confused my son and haunted me as we stood on that plantation was:

> How do we reconcile the original sin of America with some of the bright theology that emerged from that era? How could slavery and orthodox theology coexist?

This was a church that not only survived the sin of slavery but that undergirded the very institution of chattel slavery itself.

What's true of the eighteenth century remains true of the twenty-first. Hundreds of years later, we are singing the same

song with a different tune. We are still wondering how to reconcile silence in evangelical pulpits with constant social injustice toward Black people. How can we be so theologically astute yet so far from the heart of God on matters of injustice? Righteousness and justice are divorced of one another in America, and evangelicalism's track record is proof of it. For generations, through pleading, preaching, and praying, the Black Christian's cries have gone ignored and silenced.[12]

## Black Christian Theological Reflection and Toward a Truer Christian Worldview

We who are preachers with a high view of both Scripture and Christ must wrestle with the cultural contexts out of which our evangelical theology emerges. We also need to check the biases that may linger in our present day. Understanding the relationship between righteousness and justice requires rightly dividing the truth and rightly applying the character of God to the people of their society.

It is problematic when seminaries who train Christian preachers to serve the church refuse to discuss the tenets of Black Liberation Theology. It is—as some have suggested—a *too* ethnically focused theology. I can appreciate that assessment, but what is the rest of our *evangelical* theology if not too ethnically focused? While we do not have to agree with James Cone, a voice whose echo still reverberates through the corridors of the academy, we must engage with his work seriously. Cone, often regarded as the father of Black Liberation Theology, wrote in the heat of the Civil Rights era and sought to articulate a theology that affirms the dignity, experience, and liberation of Black people in America. His writings, including *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), confronted the silence of White churches and theologians amid Black suffering in the

United States. What made Cone's theology necessary in the first place? That's a question worth asking and one to which I hope we can give some careful attention.[13]

> Black Christian theological reflection—through sermons, spiritual songs, and our history—has always urged the Christian to reckon both with the slavery of sin and the sin of slavery.[14]

We must appreciate the voice of Cone, even when we reject elements of his theology, because some of the pronounced failures of the practice of Christian orthodoxy pushed him—and many like him—to look outside orthodoxy to find answers. The irony is some people are quick to affirm that Jonathan Edwards or the Puritans were "correct" about some aspects of doctrine while being wrong about race and slavery, but are unable to affirm that elements of liberation theology are true even if other elements are rejected. Some of the most powerful evangelical churches and church leaders of his era permanently disenfranchised the very people it said are made in the image of God on the basis of their skin color.

Why is it that during the First Great Awakening—the greatest recorded religious revival in American history—310,000 Africans were snatched from their native land and brought to the American colonies?[15] How is it that the supremacy of God in both personal conversion and the erection of a national government as a theological tenet grew in prominence at the same time as the slave market? How is it that Reconstruction failed and Jim Crow flourished in the same corners of a nation whose leaders attended churches manned by some of our strongest pulpiteers? How is it now that there seems to be a strange convergence between nationalism and Christianity in America? I want to propose an answer.

Christians must steward their hold of the gospel by permitting the canon to interpret culture and not letting culture interpret the canon. We cannot develop a culturally absent hermeneutic, but we can engage the biblical text and history in a way that exposes our blind spots. We can and should read in conversation with Christian thinkers outside our own cultural norm. We need to develop a hermeneutic of suspicion—not one that comes to the text questioning its authority or mythologizing its content or denying its truth, but a suspicion of our personal preference upon the interpretation we make and the application we take.

Bruce Fields, a Black scholar who gave his career to White academic evangelical spaces, taught that the formulation of doctrine is largely dependent on who does it. He wrote,

> [Many] think that social, cultural, and religious factors do not affect theological formulation. Many do not understand that the formulation of doctrine, the exploration of the relationships between doctrines, and the commitment to applying theology to life can lead to different emphases.[16]

We have been wrongly led to believe that the dominant theology taught in our evangelical schools—or promoted by our evangelical pulpits—is without color. The theologies of our heroes drip with privilege and cultural nuances long relegated to the church of yesteryear while remaining strangely unsympathetic to the injustices of today.

Who you are, where you live, what privileges you enjoy or do not enjoy, what challenges you face or do not face—each has a corresponding impact on the emphases that emerge from your theology. We all have this challenge.

All forms of preaching are affected by the color of theology we practice. The influence, impression, and subtleties of a Christian's theology can be felt in their social, neighborly, and governmental

choices. That means that the application of the biblical text is likewise shaped by the Christian's theology. For that reason, your Christian worldview and your response to this book are informed by how you do theology. That is what needs to be challenged.

For instance, I practice theology from the African American Christocentric experience. I came of age in a Black church, in a Black community that loved all people. We sang hymns, spirituals, and gospel music. Our Black pastor emerged from a family of migrants from Mississippi during the Great Migration. He preached at every major Black Christian denomination's convention. He was invited to the White House under both Democratic and Republican administrations. He didn't play partisan politics. He built Chicago's premiere Christian academy for children on the South Side, the first church to do it from the ground up.

My personal history and experience are inescapable. In some circles, that creates a scholarly discomfort, but it should not. It should create a humility in our work of theology. I was once asked by my systematic theology professor if all people could do Black theology. I understood what he was asking, but implicit in that question was an assertion that all theology is somehow neutral or devoid of cultural influence. That is a privileged assumption because all theology is affected by our cultural lenses, good and bad.

Is it possible to get the biblical text right and apply God's character wrongly toward a just society? Is it possible to read the text in its context and misread our context for application? The simple answer is yes. There are many examples we can use to draw this out, but I think a general reading of church history, with special attention to Edwards and Whitefield within early evangelicalism help us to view this challenge clearly.[17] The Christian who practices theology must do so with a view toward understanding the intersection between justice and righteousness. Otherwise, we will end up with the best of orthodoxy and the worst of corporate, social

orthopraxis because we will abandon Scripture to protect our dearly held but flawed social privileges.

This is where we might benefit from a look at theology in the Black Church context. To start, let me define Black Christian theological reflection as a practice of biblical theology that arises from the Black religious and cultural experience in America. It is not a theology that paints God Black. Rather, it is a way of doing theology that interprets God's Word through the lens of a people systemically and intentionally marginalized by the political, racial, and religious structure of the United States of America.

Within Black Christian theological reflection, liberation—as seen in the Exodus narrative—is a dominant theme explored and found in Scripture. Any Christian who seeks to diminish the bright light of human liberation in the Scriptures undermines the efficacy of their own salvation. In like manner, liberation cannot be so emphasized that the theme of justice causes the interpreter to rip Scripture from its appropriate context. Doing so leads to wrong application. One can easily perceive how such a theology of liberation is attractive to an oppressed people. Like water to a parched land, liberation becomes the sole desire of the oppressed. The compassion found in liberation theology is remarkable. It speaks of a God who cares about the powerless and helps them in their quest for freedom. It says that, in Jesus, God identifies with the meek, lowly, and dejected. It strongly promotes features of God's nature often unmentioned to the poor and exploited. One cannot help but question why dominant White evangelical theology has not been written in this way.

Expanding one's Christian worldview by inviting Black theological reflection into the conversation bequeaths to believers a greater appreciation for the breadth of God's character. It challenges one to resist partisanship, favoritism, privilege, and the sins of injustice. It makes one more willing to invite unheard voices into

our musings and congregations. And the world around the American church wishes for this kind of dexterity.

In no way am I suggesting that we develop a kind of cultural-canonical lens on society where culture and experience precede the text. That was the case with both Jonathan Edwards and James Cone. Rather I am suggesting that we develop a canonical-cultural read of society that seriously considers the intersection of Scripture with the sociological, racial, and systemic oppressions of our times as we study. We need to know both what the Bible says about soteriology and love of neighbor. We need to know Scripture not just to answer the key christological question but also the key social questions. We need to heed James's admonishment to be hearers and doers of the Word (James 1:22-25), which keep us from what Kevin Vanhoozer calls "spiritual amnesia." Doing so allows God's people to get into better shape, cultivating disciples who can think well theologically and who have the discipline and fortitude to translate theology into social action.[18]

Understanding the interrelationship between justice and righteousness will help believers discern the ways of God and urge us to fight for a more just society on the grounds of righteousness. Expanding our Christian worldview through the lens of faithful Black theological reflection exposes the inseparable link between justice and righteousness, which will help us know God more fully. Divorcing righteousness from justice relocates us into the chilly terrain far from heart of God. It turns God's righteousness into a stative matter, reduced to one's standing before God, while allowing injustice to prevail. This kind of separation gives cover to a co-opted gospel that serves some but strangles others. God's righteousness and justice are bound together.

I believe the American church is headed toward a crisis point on the matter of justice. If we are to re-engage our prophetic witness, an understanding of justice and righteousness will equip us for the

suffering ahead. If we do not, the church may fracture even deeper. We need an accurate angle from which to see God's righteousness at work in justice for our society. That's what James Cone was after, but it is also where he failed. He could read culture well but stumbled at the omniscience and omnipotence of God. Without a biblical foundation, stumbling at injustice is inevitable. But it's also where White evangelicalism failed. They claimed righteousness while ignoring injustice in favor of their political preferences.

The problem in our day is that too many Christians are presented with an either-or choice. We need both/and. If Christianity in America does not find a way to redeem its social conscience by reading Scripture rightly and standing for justice on behalf of the oppressed, future generations will resort to other sources for comfort.