

Excerpts from [\*The Color of Compromise\*](#)  
Jemar Tisby

## Chapter 1 THE COLOR OF COMPROMISE

Four young girls busily prepared for their big day. It was September 15, 1963, the day of the “Youth Day” Sunday service at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and the girls, along with the other young people of the congregation, would spend the next few hours singing songs, reciting poems, praying, and giving encouraging messages in front of hundreds of beaming parents. The girls—Addie Mae Collins (14), Denise McNair (11), Carole Robertson (14), and Cynthia Wesley (14)—had just finished Sunday school and were in the church basement making final adjustments to their white dresses when the bomb exploded.

The blast, which killed all four girls and injured at least twenty others, left a hole in the floor five feet wide and two feet deep. It decapitated Cynthia. Her parents could only identify her body by her feet and by the ring she was wearing. A newspaper report at the time indicated that all of the church’s stained-glass windows had been destroyed except one. That window depicted “Christ leading a group of little children. The face of Christ was blown out.”

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Before the funeral, on the day after the bombing, a young, white lawyer named Charles Morgan Jr. delivered a lunchtime speech at Birmingham’s all-white Young Men’s Business Club. Of course, he had heard about the tragedy in his city, and this lifelong southerner jotted down some words about racism and complicity that would prove to be a turning point in his life.

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.

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Although many people from Birmingham and beyond expressed outrage at the murder of these four black girls at church, Morgan's point stands out—the most egregious acts of racism, like a church bombing, occur within a context of compromise. 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. The Color of Compromise is about telling the truth so that reconciliation—robust, consistent, honest reconciliation—might occur across racial lines. Yet all too often, Christians, and Americans in general, try to circumvent the truth-telling process in their haste to arrive at reconciliation. This book tells the truth about racism in the American church in order to facilitate authentic human solidarity.

## Chapter 2

### MAKING RACE IN THE COLONIAL ERA

The colonial museum in Williamsburg, Virginia, features exhibits detailing the earliest English settlements in North America. Plaques explaining the conditions for Africans in colonial Virginia hang on the walls. One display explains the process by which those Africans became slaves for life. The heading reads, “Key Slavery Statutes of the Virginia General Assembly,” and cites a law enacted in September 1667. 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. In the words of the assembly, “Masters, freed from this doubt, may more carefully endeavor the propagation of Christianity by permitting children, though slaves, or those of greater growth if capable, to be admitted to that sacrament.”

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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.

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As slavery became more institutionalized, more rules regulated its practice. By the mid-seventeenth century, colonies began developing “slave codes” to police African bondage. . . .

As reliance on slave labor increased, sticky questions about Christianity, race, and bondage began to emerge. Slave-owning colonists and European missionaries often clashed over the issue of proselytizing. Christianity had inherent ideas of human equality imbedded in its teachings. If slaves converted to Christianity, would they not begin to demand their freedom and social equality? How could missionaries preach to the slaves when their owners feared the loss of their unpaid labor? Over time, Europeans compromised the message of Christianity to accommodate slavery while also, in their minds, satisfying the requirement to make disciples.

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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.

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Christianity served as a force to help construct racial categories in the colonial period. A corrupt message that saw no contradiction between the brutalities of bondage and the good news of salvation became the norm. European missionaries tried to calm the slave owners’ fears of rebellion by spreading a version of Christianity that emphasized spiritual deliverance, not immediate liberation. Instead of highlighting the dignity of all human beings, European missionaries told Africans that Christianity should make them more obedient and loyal to their earthly masters.

### Chapter 3

#### UNDERSTANDING LIBERTY IN THE AGE OF REVOLUTION AND REVIVAL

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The Declaration of Independence, first drafted by a slaveholder named Thomas Jefferson, captured the spirit of revolution in its opening words.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” 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.

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[Jonathan] Edwards and [George] 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. Like these two preachers, many other Christians did not see anything in the Bible that forbade slavery. In fact, the Scriptures seemed to accept slavery as an established reality. Instead, white Christians believed that the Bible merely regulated slavery in order to mitigate its most brutal abuses.

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In 1793 the Baptist General Committee of Virginia . . . eventually issued a statement in 1785 opposing enslavement. It posted an even stronger statement in 1790 when the outspoken white Baptist antislavery minister John Leland declared the institution of slavery to be not only against the law of God but also “inconsistent with a republican government.”

Backlash against the 1790 resolution was swift and fierce. . . . Enslavers demanded rights to their “property” and promoted the idea that the Bible defended, or at least did not prohibit, slavery. In

response, the Baptist General Committee “again debated hereditary slavery and voted ‘by a majority (after considering it a while) that the subject be dismissed from this committee, as believing it belongs to the legislative body.’” 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.

#### Chapter 4 INSTITUTIONALIZING RACE IN THE ANTEBELLUM ERA

The antebellum period was a time of compromise and complicity. During this time, many Christians engaged in evangelism to enslaved and

freed blacks. The black church grew, laying the foundation for a distinctive tradition that would stand at the center of the black freedom struggle for the next century. Even as slavery became further embedded in American culture, evangelical Christianity became more mainstream. Unwilling to confront the evil of this institution, some churches lost their prophetic voices, and those who did speak up were drowned out by the louder chorus of complicity. Competing understandings of freedom, equality, and belonging in both the country and the congregation would soon explode into Civil War.

## Chapter 5 DEFENDING SLAVERY AT THE ONSET OF THE CIVIL WAR

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In 1808, the quadrennial General Conference determined that annual regional conferences could decide for themselves whether local Methodists could buy and sell black people. This led to an uneasy tension between Northern and Southern Methodists, a tension that continued to increase through the mid-nineteenth century with the surge of abolitionist sentiment among many Methodists. . . . Refusing to give up his church duties, Andrew and his allies split from the MEC to form the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS), and they allowed their clergy to practice slavery.

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The battle lines between northern and southern Baptists had been drawn, and in May 1845, almost three hundred Baptist leaders representing nearly 400,000 churchgoers from southern states gathered in Augusta, Georgia, to form a new church association, one inclusive of slaveholders, called the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). The convention's first president, William Bullein Johnson, explained the reason for the separation and the new convention. "These [northern] brethren, thus acted upon a sentiment they have failed to prove—That slavery is, in all circumstances sinful." In light of this affront to the southern way of life and the assault on the institution of slavery, Southern Baptists viewed separation as their best option.

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According to one historian, "In the 1860s the issue centered on the question of Christ and Caesar, and whether or not the Church could require allegiance to any particular nation as a term of communion." Given this

ultimatum, Presbyterians in the South viewed separation as the only option available to them. They formed the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCS), which later changed its name to the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS). The forty-eight Presbyteries that separated from the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA) were all in southern states that advocated for each state's right to determine the legality of slavery.

As northern and southern denominations drifted apart and eventually split, they each hardened their stances toward slavery. Southern Christians devised increasingly complex theological arguments to argue for the existence of slavery, and in the process, southern Christians moved from viewing slavery as something permitted to something positive.

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It should give every citizen and Christian in America pause to consider how strongly ingrained the support for slavery in our country was. People believed in the superiority of the white race and the moral degradation of black people so strongly that they were willing to fight a war over it. This is not to suggest that the South had a monopoly on racism, but we cannot ignore that its leaders took the step of seceding from the United States in order to protect an economic system based on the enslavement of human beings. From then on, the Confederacy would always and irrevocably be associated with slavery. Pastors and theologians supported the Confederacy by providing theological ballast and biblical backing for the continuation of slavery. They prayed over the troops, penned treatises on the inferiority of black people, and divided denominations over the issue of enslavement. The Civil War paints a vivid picture of what inevitably happens when the American church is complicit in racism and willing to deny the teachings of Jesus to support an immoral, evil institution.

## Chapter 6 RECONSTRUCTING WHITE SUPREMACY IN THE JIM CROW ERA

But the end of the Civil War did not bring an end to the battle for black equality. White people in the North and the South sought to limit the civic and social equality of black people across the country. They devised political and economic schemes to push black people out of mainstream American life. To keep power, white Americans used terror as a tool through lynchings and rape, violently solidifying the place of people of color as second-class citizens.

Although the demise of legalized slavery could have led to full

citizenship privileges for black people, white supremacists devised new and frighteningly effective ways to enforce the racial hierarchy. They romanticized the antebellum South as an age of earnest religion, honorable gentlemen, delicate southern belles, and happy blacks content in their bondage. They also constructed a new social order, what we refer to as Jim Crow—a system of formal laws and informal customs designed to reinforce the inferiority of black people in America.

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Jim Crow could not have worked as effectively as it did without the frequent and detestable practice of lynching. Laws alone were not enough to reify white supremacy; what bred terror was the combination of legal segregation coupled with the random and capricious acts of violence toward black people. Anyone black—man, woman, or child—could become the next lynching victim at the slightest offense, real or imaginary. Often, the murder followed a spurious accusation of sexual assault. Other misdeeds were more quotidian. For instance, white people lynched Elizabeth Lawrence for telling white children not to throw rocks at black children. Such voyeuristic and violent deaths represent the heinous apotheosis of American racism.

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Many white Christians failed to unequivocally condemn lynching and other acts of racial terror. Doing so poisoned the American legal system and made Christian churches complicit in racism for generations. While some Christians spoke out and denounced these lynchings (just as some Christians called for abolition), the majority stance of the American church was avoidance, turning a blind eye to the practice. It's not that members of every white church participated in lynching, but the practice could not have endured without the relative silence, if not outright support, of one of the most significant institutions in America—the Christian church.

Black Christians struggled to make sense of lynching from within their Christian faith. Writing many decades later, James Cone penned *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* as a theological reflection on racial terrorism. “Both Jesus and blacks were ‘strange fruit,’ ” he wrote. “Theologically speaking, Jesus was the ‘first lynchee,’ who foreshadowed all the lynched black bodies on American soil.” Cone goes on to explain, “The cross helped me to deal with the brutal legacy of the lynching tree, and the lynching tree helped me to understand the tragic meaning of the cross.” Cone showed that black people could better understand Christ's suffering by recalling their own sorrow as it related to the lynching tree. At the same time, the

cross provided comfort because black people could know for certain that in his life and death, Christ identified with the oppressed.

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## Chapter 7 REMEMBERING THE COMPLICITY IN THE NORTH

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In the book *Up South*, Matthew Countryman writes, “Racism was never just a southern problem.” Racism stretched far beyond the states of the former Confederacy, affecting every region of the country. Though it would be far simpler to relegate racism to a single region such as the South as the historic site of slavery and the Confederacy, this is simply not possible. The South has often been used as the foil for the rest of America. People in other parts of the country could always look below the Mason-Dixon Line and say, “Those are the real racists.” Yet the very conspicuousness of white supremacy in the South has made it easier for racism in other parts of the country to exist in open obscurity. Christians of the North have often been characterized as abolitionists, integrationists, and open-minded citizens who want all people to have a chance at equality. Christians of the South, on the other hand, have been portrayed as uniformly racist, segregationist, and antidemocratic. The truth is far more complicated.

In reality, most of the black people who left the South encountered similar patterns of race-based discrimination wherever they went. Although they may not have faced the same closed system of white supremacy that permeated the South, they still contended with segregation and put up with daily assaults on their dignity, and the church contributed to this. Compromised Christianity transcends regions. Bigotry obeys no boundaries. This is why Christians in every part of America have a moral and spiritual obligation to fight against the church’s complicity with racism.

## Chapter 8 COMPROMISING WITH RACISM DURING THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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This chapter focuses on the Christian moderates—mostly white and evangelical but also some black churches and ministers—who played it safe, refusing to get involved in the civil rights movement. These people of faith may not have given their full support to the most extreme racists, but neither did they oppose racists outright or openly disagree with racist

objectives. While the civil rights movement has a well-earned reputation as a faith-based movement led by Christian pastors and lay people, our collective memory of the proportion of Christians involved may be somewhat skewed. In reality, precious few Christians publicly aligned themselves with the struggle for black freedom in the 1950s and 1960s. Those who did participate faced backlash from their families, friends, and fellow Christians. At a key moment in the life of our nation, one that called for moral courage, the American church responded to much of the civil rights movement with passivity, indifference, or even outright opposition.

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One of the best-known and most respected evangelical leaders of the time, the Reverend Billy Graham, was a racial moderate when it came to segregation. To his credit, Graham went much further than many white evangelicals in an effort to desegregate his religious gatherings. At a crusade in California in 1953, Graham personally took down ropes segregating black and white seating in the audience. “Either these ropes stay down, or you can go on and have the revival without me,” he said.

Yet Graham, like many white evangelicals, held back from actively pushing for black civil rights. After the Supreme Court handed down the *Brown v. Board* decision, Graham deliberately avoided scheduling crusades in the South for a period to avoid getting embroiled in the more heated conflicts about desegregation. Shortly after *Brown*, Graham stated, “I believe the heart of the problem of race is in loving our neighbor.” While few Christians would object that racism is a failure to love one’s neighbor, Graham did not carry that statement any further into the realm of institutional racism. Like many evangelicals, Graham believed race relations would gradually improve—one conversion and one friendship at a time. He viewed racial conflict as a local issue and a social matter. Furthermore, Graham was quite vocal in his denunciations of communism, something many conservatives also associated with the civil rights movement, and this association effectively dissuaded him and others from supporting the activists who protested racism. Ultimately, Graham made it clear that his primary goal was evangelism. He took measured steps to desegregate his crusades and encourage Christians to obey the *Brown v. Board* decision, but he assiduously avoided any countercultural stances that would have alienated his largely white audience and his supporters. Of course, other ministers of the gospel spoke prophetically against segregation, and we should applaud their stand. But their numbers should not be overestimated, and the backlash they faced for their bold action should not be overlooked. During the civil rights movement, activists who

courageously risked their well-being for black freedom were few and far between, but Christian moderates who were complicit with the status quo of institutional racism were numerous.

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[S]ix days of urban uprisings in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles resulted in 34 deaths, over 1,000 injuries, \$34 million in damages, and nearly 4,000 arrests. The violence, damage, and vocal opposition to calls for civility contrasted with the peaceful marches and freedom songs of the civil rights movement in the South. Christians, like the rest of America, watched the events unfold with a mixture of curiosity and confusion.

When Billy Graham learned of the unrest in Watts, he flew to the site to personally survey the scene. Graham strapped on a bulletproof vest and boarded a helicopter to hover above the devastation and destruction. Graham was appalled. He saw in Watts the unraveling of the fabric of the nation. "It cannot be overlooked that this kind of disturbance is being used by those whose ultimate end is to overthrow the American government." He called it a "dress rehearsal for a revolution." Graham said that the nation needed "tough laws" to crack down on such flagrant disregard for authority. This "law-and-order" rhetoric resonated with white evangelicals as well, and it led many to be critical of civil rights activists in general. These Christians were not denying that blacks were discriminated against or that conditions in the inner city were troublesome. But they believed the solution to the problem was to trust the system. Christian moderates insisted on obeying the law, working through the courts, and patiently waiting for transformation.

King and other activists took a different view. King understood that the chaos of Watts did not emerge from a single incident. While not excusing the violence or the indiscriminate lawlessness, he also knew that the black residents of Watts had witnessed the nearly all-white police force repeatedly brutalizing their neighbors. The people living in this South Central Los Angeles neighborhood felt trapped by the forces of poverty, incarceration, failing schools, and racism. Though activists had been working for change over the course of many years, the cries of the people went largely unheard. As an alternative to gradual change through the system, which was frequently ineffective and ignored, they used the riots to call attention to their plight. In contrast to moderates like Graham who emphasized respect for existing laws and a crackdown on the "radicals" as the solution to urban uprisings, King saw a different remedy: "Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention. There is no other answer.

## Chapter 9

### ORGANIZING THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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At this point, readers of this book may be searching for the proverbial “smoking gun”—explicit evidence that connects the American church with overt cooperation with racism. But racism, since it is socially constructed, adapts when society changes. By the late 1960s, politicians at the national level had moved on from explicitly racist rhetoric (George Wallace’s pro-segregationist platform in the 1968 presidential election being an obvious exception), but the absence of that language did not mean that racism no longer affected politics. In place of obviously racist policies, law-and-order rhetoric “had become a surrogate expression for concern about the civil rights movement.” One of Nixon’s closest advisers, H. R. Haldeman, said, “[Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to.” At the time, several black evangelicals publicly criticized the Nixon administration, and many Christians of color likely recognized the rhetoric, even if it was subtler this time. To wit, only 4 percent of black Protestants voted for Nixon in his first presidential victory.

Should this be taken to mean that the more than eight out of ten evangelical voters who pulled the lever for Nixon were racist? It is possible that white evangelicals were not concerned with matters of race when they voted. But even a color-blind ideology is problematic since it “depended upon the establishment of structural mechanisms of exclusion that did not require individual racism by suburban beneficiaries.” Since the late 1960s, the American church’s complicity in racism has been less obvious, but it has not required as much effort to maintain. Nowadays, all the American church needs to do in terms of compromise is cooperate with already established and racially unequal social systems.

## CHAPTER 10

### RECONSIDERING RACIAL RECONCILIATION IN THE AGE OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

#### *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.” 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.” 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.” 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.” And antistructuralism refers to the belief that “invoking social structures shifts guilt away from its root source—the accountable individual.” 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.

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. <sup>14</sup> 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.

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."

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. 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, Patrisse 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.

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. 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." He goes on to say that it is a way "to express indignation and even outrage about the experience of suffering." 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 longterm 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, commenters said he was playing the “race card” and creating division. 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.

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.”

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.” 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, gospelcentered approach.” 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 antiChristian 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.”

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 blow-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.’ ”

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.”

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.