



THE FUTURE OF CHURCH-RACE RELATIONS

Why looking back might be the best way for the church to look ahead.

by Jemar Tisby with Wesley Hill

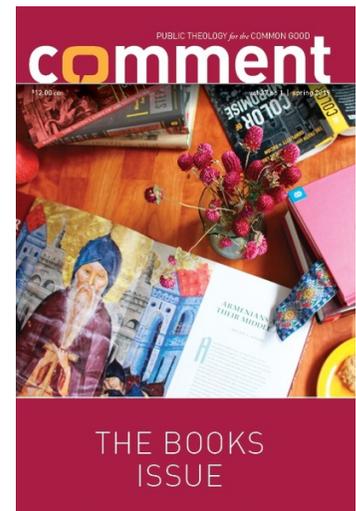
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*At the end of 2018, Comment contributing editor and New Testament scholar Wesley Hill sat down with Jemar Tisby, president of The Witness, to talk about his book *The Color of Compromise* (published in January 2019). Both Tisby and Hill care about the future of the church, but—as their discussion reveals—the future of the church depends on its ability to know and own up to its past. Because “the past,” as Faulkner once quipped, “is never dead. It’s not even past.” And it’s on the back of historians that Tisby helps the church to see future, and potentially hopeful, horizons.*

—The Editors

Wesley Hill: How would you describe the main idea of *The Color of Compromise*? What is this book about?

Jemar Tisby: This book is about the present and the future of the church, which is a bit ironic because it is a historical survey. I use the past to talk about the present. My burden for this book is that Christians in America would take, or at least be open to taking, the sometimes drastic steps I think are necessary to see true racial justice in the church and beyond. By highlighting some of the very sobering history of race in the American church, my hope is that people would see the depths of the problem and respond.



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WH: That's interesting you say that because one of the questions I wanted to ask you was about the genre of the book. When I heard it was coming out, I wondered if it would be more focused on the present (and maybe even more focused on theology and exegesis) than it was, but it really is a history. I know you're a historian by profession, but talk a bit about the decision to write history rather than some other genre.

JT: The historical aspect is critical. I live in two worlds. I got a master's degree in divinity, and so I'm in a theological world. I go to churches to preach, for instance. But I'm also in the world of academic history. I'm a PhD candidate at the University of Mississippi. What I've observed is that most of the books directed toward Christians about race are either memoirs, recounting people's personal journeys and experiences, or sociological, like the wonderful book *Divided by Faith* by Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, or theological, exegeting passages of scripture in regard to race and ethnicity.

All of them touch on history to a degree, but none of them use history as the main vehicle to propel the narrative about race in America. I'm observing that as I'm reading literally hundreds of books about US history, and no matter what the topic, whether it's labour or politics, race is always coming into play, and the church is always coming into play. I'm saying we need to bring these two worlds together. We need to put history front and centre, and help folks know more about race and the church, because we have historical amnesia about all aspects of US history but especially when it comes to these topics. We

just don't know what happened. We don't know the names, the places, the contours of the events. I wanted to bring that out in the book.

WH: I think that came through powerfully, and when I finished it, I was really glad you'd written it in a historical mode. Let me back up a bit, though. You mentioned getting a master of divinity degree. For those who aren't familiar with you and your work, talk about how [The Witness](#) came about and the journey that led to you being president and the theological concerns that motivate that effort.

JT: Sure. I have been a Christian since high school. In most of the religious communities I've been a part of, I've been in the racial minority. It's always been part of my spiritual journey to seek out racially inclusive communities. What I've discovered along the way is that many times, you have to form those communities. They're not already there, and you have to make them.

That is really the driving force behind what started as the Reformed African American Network (RAAN) in 2011. What I wanted to do was blend this historic Protestant Christian tradition called Reformed theology, and all of the biblical weight that it brought with it, with a kind of race consciousness. RAAN was not saying race is the primary human identity, but it is an important one.

So we wanted to apply that in a black Christian context. In 2017, as we'd grown and gained a clearer sense of our distinctive voice, we changed the name to The Witness: A Black Christian Collective. We started a podcast along the way called "Pass the Mic" as a different platform that could enhance the work we were doing on the website.

WH: Is it fair to say that you view this book as growing out of the work you've been doing with the Reformed African American Network and now The Witness?

JT: It does grow out of the work I do with The Witness. By God's grace I've been able to talk to Christians from coast to coast in churches and conferences. Part of the genesis of this book was going to spaces where very well-meaning Christians would say, "Yes, we're for racial reconciliation, yes we're for diversity," but then not much would change. That's for a lot of reasons, but one of the transformative pieces of my journey was learning the history of racism in America and seeing this as an urgent issue—not something we can just add on to other stuff we're doing. We have to take this as a foundational problem in

the church and in the nation. I hope that the book will help to convey the urgency of the racial issues in America.

WH: One of my observations, as I look out at the world of primarily white evangelicalism, is that the culture-war posture does not encourage people to view themselves as guilty. Conservative partisans want to lay blame on others: “They’re the ones who created the problem. They’re the ones who are trying to infiltrate our homes, our churches, our schools.” And I’m struck by how different that is from the gospel, which invites everybody to interrogate their own complicity, their own share in the world’s evil.

As I was reading your book I was thinking of other books that I would put in the same conversation: Willie James Jennings’s *The Christian Imagination*, Lauren Winner’s *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, Ephraim Radner’s *A Brutal Unity*, and others reminding us that evil is not just “out there,” it’s also right here in the church. I think your book is very much in that vein. I wonder if you could just talk a bit about why the gospel demands that the church confront its own racism, not just the racism of “society” or of the folks somewhere outside the community of faith, but our own complicity in it.

JT: That’s something I’m glad you picked up on. Christianity has the doctrine called original sin. We recognize that every part of ourselves and anything we touch as human beings is subject to corruption of sin. Christians, of all people, should be able to look in the mirror and say, “I’m guilty. I have been part of systems that have oppressed and marginalized other people.” That’s the thrust of the book. I think one of the big criticisms people will eventually come out with is that the book is not balanced. That’s for two reasons. First, the history itself is not balanced. The story of race in the church involves recognizing that there were people who were actively racist or complicit with racism. That group outnumbered the people who actively fought against racism. The analogy I use is of a football game. The referee isn’t fair if he or she calls an equal amount of penalties on both teams. The referee is responsible for calling the penalties against the team that deserved them, even if one team has many more penalties than another.

The other reason why the book may seem imbalanced is because we’ve told and celebrated the story of Christians fighting racism. We’ve done this to a detrimental degree because we take the exception—the minority of racism-conscious people—and we claim them as our own without recognizing the church’s broad complicity in racism. I wanted to make sure that we took a long, hard look at the way a majority of the American church for the majority of American history has helped to propagate and perpetuate a racial caste system.

WH: One of the criticisms the book may receive, as you say, is that it's simply too bleak. Its diagnosis is much more far reaching than what a lot of white Christians would prefer it to be. We don't want to believe things are really that bad. You mentioned the Reformed theological tradition, and the Reformed tradition has always insisted that things are much worse with sin and evil than any of us want to imagine. We're actually in bondage to it, and the only thing that can deliver us is a divine intervention. I wonder if one of the gifts that your book will bring is the freedom to stare the fullness of our guilt and complicity in the face and not try to evade that or water it down.

JT: To that point, it's going to be a tough book for people on a couple of levels. First, we have to face the fact that racism is not just a feature of the American church. In many ways it's endemic. That doesn't mean that there aren't real Christians, but it means that racism has been there since the foundation, which means that it has affected everything that's been built on top of it. Learning about the pervasive aspects of racism in the church will be challenging to people because we've learned a narrative about our faith traditions that is more triumphal than that. "Look at all the progress that's been made," some people say, "so we don't have to worry about it as much now."

It will also be difficult on a spiritual level. We know that the battle we wage is not against flesh and blood. In many ways, racism is not simply a sin; it's a demonic narrative about racial inferiority and superiority. Many people have been deceived by that to varying degrees, so fighting it will take prayer. It will take discipleship and spiritual effort to even begin to see the scope and the depth of the problem, let alone to begin to formulate solutions to overcome it.

WH: Your book has some hard things to say about the Billy Graham era of evangelical life and the way that white evangelical Christians counselled patience and moderation with regard to the civil rights movement; they were fearful that the movement was developing too quickly. Some of your readers may want to defend Graham and the evangelical heritage. What would you say to them?

JT: Billy Graham's interaction with racial issues was complex in many ways. At the macro level, we have to recognize that a lot of changes were happening in the '50s, '60s, and '70s in terms of race relations in America. That affected evangelicalism as well. After legislation such as *Brown v. Board*, the Civil Rights Act, and so on, white people in general, including white evangelicals, were negotiating how they would approach the race issue. Many said, "We don't agree with the cross burning. We don't like the

lynching. We don't want to call people names." They attempted to be open-minded. Billy Graham reflected that. He made some bold, symbolic actions, given his platform and his audience, such as pulling down the ropes of segregation at his crusades in 1953, and praising Martin Luther King Jr. in 1957 before he hired Howard O. Jones as his first black evangelist.

On a deeper level, though, we have to recognize that individualism is characteristic of evangelicalism and that Graham's preaching partook of this inclination. Black people as a minority group are more used to thinking in collective, communal terms and also more accustomed to thinking and viewing events in terms of broader systemic contexts and historical continuity. White evangelicals are primed to view life through an individualizing lens, imagining that circumstances don't exert overpowering control over one's choices. You look at an instance of brutality and say, "Well that was just an isolated event. What are the circumstances there? Let's not talk about law enforcement as a whole; let's talk about just what happened on this date with these people." Whereas a lot of black people think, "We've seen this before, a lot of times. Whatever this particular circumstance is, it's part of a pattern." That's something that Billy Graham didn't understand or attain to.

In addition, Billy Graham was quite aware of his platform. However much he wanted to move on race personally, he knew that to do it would cost him influence. He calculated that he could be a more positive influence on race relations with audience of millions than risk losing all of them for the sake of some anti-racist standpoints. We're not in his shoes, so who knows what we would have done. But I think an honest historical accounting will simply take a realistic look at a man who's widely admired but, by his own admission, was not flawless.

WH: I come to the topic of evangelical individualism from my vantage point as a New Testament professor in a seminary. I did my doctoral work on Paul, and I teach Paul a lot. And I'm struck by how he viewed human beings not as free agents but as under the control and power of cosmic forces—sin, the flesh, death, and the devil. Paul's canvas is much more cosmic than many evangelicals have recognized. It's not just about an individual guilty conscience. We're actually part of systems and structures that make it impossible for us to act virtuously apart from divine grace. I wonder whether this framework provides more impetus to move away from a problematic individualism in the evangelical church and actually confront in a more direct way the kinds of structural, societal dimensions of racism?

JT: Absolutely. I think it's imperative to interrogate evangelical individualism. We're not going to get far in racial justice if that doesn't change. White evangelicals who are

sympathetic to the themes of this book are going to say, “Well, how can I convince people in my circles that this is accurate or has some validity to it?” One of the best ways is to start with Scripture because white evangelicals trust the Bible a lot more than they do a historical study. One of the themes in the Old Testament (and the New Testament too) is that community can have a very positive role in shaping a person’s morality and outlook. We see this in Proverbs: “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens another.” We see this in Acts and its portrayal of the early church.

But there’s also a flip side to it that we don’t often talk about, which is that community can malform you; it can misshape you as well. With regard to race, we’ve been part of communities that tell stories and engage in practices that dehumanize people of colour, especially black people. If community can positively influence me, it must also be possible for community to negatively influence me.

WH: When I finished your book, I was thinking about the way that Willie Jennings starts his book *The Christian Imagination*. He tells a story about white churchgoers coming up to his mother and inviting her to church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, not knowing that she’s one of the most faithful church people there ever was. Jennings says what haunted him as he grew older and thought about that interaction was the question, Why did they not know us? Why did they not see us? Why did these deeply Christian people knocking on doors not see my mother as the Christian she was? That question—Why do we not see?—is what I thought about as I finished your book. I’ve learned a lot of the history you recount in your book, but, growing up in the church, I wasn’t taught it. And I think a lot of your readers also will not have been taught these stories. They won’t know this history. How does that happen? How have white evangelicals managed to avoid knowing what black Christians cannot avoid knowing? What’s the nature of this blindness?

JT: White evangelicals don’t have to see and, to some extent, don’t want to see what black people go through. That’s not just an evangelical problem; that’s an American problem. Sociologically, if you’re in a majority group in the dominant culture, your norms are standard. White people, and white evangelicals specifically, can go through their entire lives without any meaningful interaction with the black experience. You may go to a preschool that’s all white or majority white. Same for elementary and middle school. Maybe it’s a private Christian school, and you have your four to five Asians and one or two black people. Then you go to a college, which is almost certainly going to be predominantly white; your professor is white, your pastors are white, the theologians that you read and access are white. Then you have kids and the cycle repeats itself.

When would white people ever have to, by necessity, have meaningful interaction with anyone else? There are a lot of people who don't. If you're in the majority, you have to intentionally seek out diversity. There's a sense in which white folks don't have to learn the black experience because it doesn't affect them personally in the same way. I would argue it *does* affect them by producing a distorted sense of self and racial identity. And then there's the problem of not *wanting* to engage the black experience. If it is true that America and the church are implicated, to a large degree, in white supremacy, then it is also true that white people, no matter what their personal beliefs may be, are implicated in that system of white supremacy, and who wants to admit that?

WH: There seems to be a deep divide between white evangelicals who see racism as pervasive and endemic and white evangelicals who don't. The famous (if slightly misleading) 80 percent figure would be a tangible symbol of that. What would you say to the person who is not convinced by the story you tell? Are there ways we can try to open up conversations with fellow believers who might be implacably opposed to agreeing with us about the scope of the problem?

JT: There's a degree to which this book is not for people who are not at least open to acknowledging the scope of the problem. I say to those folks that this book is here when you're ready. The burden is really on that person or on that group of people to come to a point where they're ready to learn more about it or they're ready to listen to the voices of not only a racial minority like myself but a scholar who's in training about this stuff. There are dozens of scholars who have spent a collective amount of hundreds of years studying these topics. To dismiss the story I tell in the book, you have to be prepared to say, "Nope, that's not true." I think that's pretty bold, given the evidence.

We often think of the pastoral and the prophetic as two very separate roles. But I recently read someone who was described as being pastoral-prophetic, and I hope this book is pastorally prophetic in the sense that it's speaking truth (the prophetic aspect) in a pastoral way, in the sense that the hard truths are the wounds of a friend.

WH: The vast majority of this book is story-driven. It's about remembering incidents. It's about remembering people and their suffering and the injustices inflicted on them. Only at the end of the book do you start to say what could we do. That weighting is very important because I think evangelicals are addicted to activism—to figuring out what can we do to fix this right now. It seems to me that the very structure of your book is saying, "Hold on, let's not talk about what we can do until we face the history that has made us who we are in the present." You could have written a very

different book that was filled with strategies and bullet points of things to do, but you saved most of that for the very end.

JT: That's right. I'm glad you caught on to that. The structure of the book was intentional. Maybe in the future there can be an entire book that expands on the last chapter, which talks about solutions. In this book, which is just one piece of a broader canon of literature on this topic, it is critical that before you get to what to do next, you have a better understanding of what's wrong. You don't want a physician to prescribe you a medication without doing a full diagnosis of the condition. The idea in *The Color of Compromise* is that after reading ten chapters of US history where you're confronted with this cascade of compromise, you should be open to solutions and practical steps to address the problem with the appropriate vigour and urgency that it requires.

WH: **So you're appropriately shaken by the extent of the problem and then your activism is fuelled by an accurate judgment of what the contours of this problem actually are.**

JT: You'll notice I begin the last chapter with what I call the ARC model of racial justice: *awareness, relationships, and commitment*. I offer that model as a stepping stone for people who are new to this conversation, but really, what I hope Christians will consider are systemic and institutional responses to racism. That's where the bulk of my suggestions come. It's not to grab coffee with a friend or have a panel at church; it's make Juneteenth a national holiday; it's considering what reparations might look like not just on a state level but within the body of Christ.

If you think of the parable of the good Samaritan, it works on multiple levels. First was the sin of the passersby. It wasn't that they beat the good Samaritan—they weren't overtly causing that person harm—but by bypassing the person who was hurt they were not showing neighbourly concern. I would say that is the sin of the American church when it comes to racism. It's not that the majority of Christians are out there hanging people or by calling people the N-word. It's that faced with an entire group of people who are proverbially beaten and bloody on the side of the road, the church has chosen to bypass them. That's one level.

The other level it works on is this. What if the good Samaritan did all that he did for the stranger and then walked along that same road, and saw another person beaten, and walked along the road again and saw another person beaten again, and again, and again? At some point you would ask, "What is it about the conditions of the road that are causing people to be harmed?" You would want to get to the structural and the contextual aspects of it. That's what *The Color of Compromise* is asking Christians to do:

not just to provide relief for individuals or in specific cases, but to look at the broader causes and concepts of the inequality in the first place.

WH: Where does *The Color of Compromise* fit in your understanding of your trajectory vocationally? How do you see this launching you into further work along these lines?

JT: I hope it will help me to be salt and light in circles beyond Christianity. We call our ministry The Witness. We're actually very concerned about representing the good news of Jesus Christ to people who haven't believed yet. I want to present a non-culture-war version of Christianity and say that you can have what some might term traditional beliefs about the Bible but not be lumped into a certain brand of Christianity that has, I think, done a lot of damage to the witness of the gospel in America. I hope it will open up conversations.

WH: Is there anything you'd want to say specifically to readers of *Comment*?

JT: Yes, a couple of things. Number one, for any and all readers, this book is an invitation to further exploration. One of my professors said every book is an introduction, and I love that. That's especially true with a historical survey where I only skim the surface of a large number of events. I invite readers to find a chapter, or a story, or an individual, or an event, and dig into it. You can search the footnotes and, man, there are scholars doing amazing work on this. I stand on the shoulders of a lot of historians.

WH: You've included some great sources in the notes. I hope people will flip to the back and read those.

JT: It's worth the price of the book just for that. I invite all readers to continue to explore. The most frequent question I get when I give talks or interviews is, "What do I do?" Here's a real practical action step: If you get this book and you resonate with it, then you become part of the front line of people who can help explain it to folks who don't resonate with it. In other words, it shouldn't just be black people or the author saying, "No, racism is an endemic problem in the American church, and we have to confront it with urgency right now." It should be white Christians who get it, who understand. You're going to have more cachet with your social network than I will. So when this book comes out and the critical blog posts are written, and the hit pieces, and people are recording YouTube videos and they're on social media making critiques of it, I would love to see readers of this book come along and say, "No, here's why we see it

differently.” That’s going to put readers to the test. For those who haven’t been outspoken about this before, it’s going to position you. It’s going to publicly categorize you in the minds of other people. For some people that’s a big risk, but I guarantee it’s a risk that all of us who want to be involved in anti-racism have to take at some point. Maybe after you read this book that’s your contribution. It will also open you up to the critiques and the barbs and the jabs, but that’s what solidarity looks like. You take the blows along with the marginalized for the sake of justice.

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Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian (Brazos, 2015).

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