

BOOK REVIEW

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

by Jemar Tisby

Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019, 253 pages

The summer of 2020 was marked by a lot of protests concerning racial injustice in America, and some Christians have shown empathy because of the death of George Floyd and Ahmad Arbery, but others have built up walls. *The Color of Compromise* addresses the typical responses concerning race. I think this is an exceptionally well-written book that aids understanding the history of the Christian church's complicity with racism in America, and how we need to overcome some attitudes related to racism still persistent today, particularly among Evangelicals and Fundamentalists. This book is a survey of that history, and it deals with specific people and turning points in American history.

In chapter one, Tisby defines racism as a system of oppression based upon race, or a social caste system that is based upon skin color. He then defines white supremacy as a concept that identifies white people and white culture as normal and superior. He focuses on prominent figures, precipitous events, and turning points in American history, stating that racists misused the Bible to support slavery and segregation, while abolitionists and civil rights activists used the same Bible to resist slavery and segregation. Some of the common tropes heard related to racism, segregation, and slavery in the United States is that it promotes a Marxist communist ideology, a victim mentality, and it abandons the gospel.

In chapter two, Tisby states that there can be no reconciliation without repentance, and no repentance without confession, and no confession without the truth. He is basically writing this book as an attempt to get at the truth of slavery, segregation, and racism not only in the American Christian church, but also within American society, and he does an excellent job of research to that end. Tisby goes on to state that, instead of black people abandoning Christianity, they went directly to the teachings of Jesus and challenged white people to demonstrate integrity.

In chapter three, the author states that "there would be no black church in America if it were not for racism in the white church." History tells us that most slaves did not become Christians prior to the American Revolution. Most slaves did not know how to read or write, which was the requirement for catechism in the Congregationalist, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches. However, after the American Revolution in particular, Methodist and Baptist missionaries told slaves that they did not have to go through catechism to experience God, they

could experience God immediately. Thus, once slaves became Christians, they did not merely adopt Christianity, they indigenized it.

In chapter four, the author goes on to talk a lot about the complicity of Christians with slavery from the 17th century up until the 19th century, as well as with segregation in the 19th and 20th centuries. While there were inter-racial congregations during these time periods, they were also expressions of paternalism that were used to control what slaves believed, and to prevent insurrections. Even in inter-racial congregations there was segregation, and this led to the formation of Bethel African Church in Philadelphia in 1794. Evangelicalism focused on individual conversion and piety, and within this framework one could adopt evangelicalism and remain uncompelled to confront the institutional injustices of slavery. In the view of many evangelicals, racial conflicts were a local issue and a social matter, and they advocated for a gradual approach to resolving this issue.

In chapter five, Tisby notes that while Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield were compromised in their position on slavery, John Wesley preached liberation to integrated audiences. Wesley took the lead as an abolitionist, along with William Wilberforce and John Newton. The author defines complicit Christianity as that which forfeits moral authority by devaluing the image of God in people of color. In contrast, courageous Christianity is defined as that which embraces racial and ethnic diversity and stands up against any person, policy, or practice that would dim the glory of God reflected in human beings.

In chapter eight, Moderate Christians upheld the belief that social change came through personal conversion, which is what led Martin Luther King Jr to write the book *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. King wanted to address the white Christian moderates who felt that King was doing too many protest marches. Jerry Falwell preached a sermon called “Ministers and Marches,” which was a thinly veiled attack on King’s practices.

In chapter nine the author analyzes the Moral Majority. This movement rose to power in the late 20th century, not as a fight against abortion, but as a fight to save Bob Jones University. The Internal Revenue Service pulled the school’s accreditation over the absence of integration on its campus. The author thus exposes that the Moral Majority was really fighting against school desegregation.

In chapter ten, the author discusses the book *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* by Christian Smith and Michael Emerson. In this book, the authors discuss the cultural toolbox that Evangelicals use. One of the tools is accountable individualism. This concept states that individuals exist independent of structures and institutions, and that they have free will, and are accountable for their actions. It also examines relationalism, the emphasis on interpersonal relationships. Those who adhere to this method believe that social problems are due to broken relationships and anti-structuralism. Invoking social structure shifts the guilt away from the individual, so it is really an individualistic Western perspective on race, whereas much of the scripture is rooted in the community.

The strength of Tisby's text is its in-depth research and historical analysis of slavery, segregation, and racism in America, as well as the complicity in the Christian church. This book has a lot of breadth, being very wide in its research, but it does also go into some detail in a lot of its stories. A weakness of the book is that it dealt primarily with slavery in the American south and did not address slavery or segregation in the north until chapter seven.

The author's solution to racism is Awareness, Relationships, and Commitment (ARC). And if you are a pastor who is dealing with questions about race, and you want to address this subject from a historical and theological perspective, then *The Color of Compromise* is an excellent book to read.

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