

## A Survey of FTPC's Journey

### Discussing Racial Justice in 2020-21

#### God Cares about Injustice

Isaiah 58 opens with a problem common in the Prophetic genre. The people of Israel are praying to the Lord and not receiving the answers that they anticipated. They complain before the Lord “‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it?’”<sup>1</sup> The Lord responds to them by claiming that the Lord’s request was not merely not to eat, but instead

“‘No, this is the kind of fasting I want:  
Free those who are wrongly imprisoned;  
    lighten the burden of those who work for you.  
Let the oppressed go free,  
    and remove the chains that bind people.  
<sup>7</sup> Share your food with the hungry,  
    and give shelter to the homeless.  
Give clothes to those who need them,  
    and do not hide from relatives who need your help.”<sup>2</sup>

This is an important lesson for the church throughout time. God cares about injustice, deeply. However much those reading this are concerned about injustice, about ending oppression and caring for those in need, God cares more. God is the one who saw Israel, flailing about in their own blood, and washed, cared for and loved Israel<sup>3</sup>. Jesus is the one who died for us while we were still God’s enemies.<sup>4</sup> As God reveals who he is in the person of Jesus Christ and in the Word of God, we see that God is one who is drawn to taking those who are hurting, broken, and oppressed and restoring them to a place of holiness and relationship with himself. As Jesus opened his ministry, he made this theme of justice clear as he opened his ministry quoting his intention to “proclaim good news to the poor” and “set the oppressed free”.<sup>5</sup>

#### We Care About Injustice

The foundational position on humanity in the Bible is the conviction that every person is made in the image of God<sup>6</sup>. In this position, we are all made with equal worth, dignity, and

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 58:3

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 58:6-7 NLT

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 16

<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:6-9

<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:18-19

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 1:26

value. Ethnicity, birthplace, or skin color cannot be held as an indicator of intelligence, athletic ability, ambition, or any other indicator of success.

Furthermore, for those who are believers in Christ Jesus, we are all family, expected to love one another as Christ loved us and joined together.<sup>7</sup> In this space, the Biblical expectation is that the unified Christian church will care for one another and take the concerns of one another seriously. One concern that has been brought up in our midst is the concern of racial injustice in the United States. As a community of believers committed to loving one another well, we have been in conversation over racial injustice and consideration of next steps.

In order to hold these discussions well, a point of major concern was the tone of the conversations. Our goal was not to shame our brothers and sisters, it wasn't to construct a straw man argument and rail against that, but rather to share where we are and look for where God is calling us to be. In doing this, one of our groups established 5 "presumptions", positions that we were committed to believing of those who joined with us on the journey.

1. You are committed to Jesus as Lord, and You are committed to love your neighbor well.
2. You intend to bring glory to God, and You want to know what is true and real.
3. You are being progressively sanctified. We sin. We don't have everything together this second. We need grace for one another.
4. You have reasons for thinking the things you think. This doesn't mean I think you are right. It does mean I presume that there are reasons for your statement.
5. We are utterly dependent on the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit and the Love of Christ.

In the Summer of 2020, we did several prayer walks praying, among other things: "We pray against hatred and racism in the hearts of people; we pray that those who are racist, those who are filled with hatred will come to know Christ, truly and deeply and like Paul pivot from persecutors to the front lines of the Kingdom of God. And we pray that God continues to fill us with love for those who bear His Image, that we not stand silently as we see black and brown people marginalized and oppressed, but that we intervene for them as we would intervene for Jesus himself."<sup>8</sup> We are still committed to prayer. We recognize that while racism may be bigger than any individual community, our God is greater still. In Jesus' death and resurrection, he defeated the forces of sin and death, which includes any and every prejudice. And so, we pray that Christ's bride, the church, lives into that reality well.

We also began a walk through the book [Be the Bridge](#) by Latasha Morrison. Over the course of the book, we had ample opportunity to lament of the many ways in which both the Church and the country in the United States has been unjust. As prominent denominations formed, they were formed with the goal of allowing slaveholders full participation in the life of the

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<sup>7</sup> John 13:34-35, Ephesians 2:11-22

<sup>8</sup> [Prayer Walk Statement](#)

church without condemning their sin<sup>9</sup>. Theology has been perverted to have people actively engaged in the sin of racism serve as pastors and elders in the church without seeing a disconnect<sup>10</sup>. Christian institutions have sold slaves, enforced segregation, and pushed people of color onto the margins, all of which is a travesty<sup>11</sup>. The church is intended to be a place of family that is more connected than a biological family. And it is true that the church in the US has often failed to meet that standard, acting as a place of division rather than a place of kinship. This is not the whole story of the American church, but it certainly is a story. And out of this experience, there is a continued call for lament, repentance, and forgiveness. Speaking of forgiveness in the face of horrors is difficult, and yet “Forgiving others is the most Christlike act we can carry out. It is costly and painful, transformative and life giving.”<sup>12</sup> In the below section of resources, further discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the book will be explored.

In 2021, we walked through [Reading the Gospels While Black](#), a discussion by Esau McCaulley and N.T. Wright. The presentation and ensuing discussion were helpful and lively. Particular attention was paid to the category of structural sin, which has particularly been a point of contention and discomfort throughout the year. Dr. McCaulley speaks forcefully toward systemic sin, which points to “The ways sin isn’t limited to personal acts of animus, it refers to the ways in which societies can be ordered in unhealthy ways, and this includes a society’s economy, a society’s social structure, a society’s laws, or some combination thereof”. In the Biblical imagination, it isn’t a surprise to find that a society can be ordered in unhealthy (sinful) ways, as virtually every nation we interact with in the Biblical Canon is deeply embedded in sin. The Amorites’ sin ripened and was brought to completion.<sup>13</sup> The Egyptians enslaved Israel.<sup>14</sup> The Israelites enslaved one another, trampled the poor and were sexually immoral.<sup>15</sup> The Babylonians legally mandated idol worship.<sup>16</sup> The Romans extorted people and accused people falsely.<sup>17</sup> If virtually every society that we read of in the Bible is deeply tainted by sin, it shouldn’t be a surprise to find that in our own midst. In fact, to expect that the United States has wholly overcome a sin that was so prominent in its past is to have something of an over realized eschatology.

Dr. Wright speaks a little more clearly as to cautions that should rightly be held as we work for the will of God to rule on Earth as it is in Heaven. Perhaps most helpfully, he encourages the

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<sup>9</sup> (2018). *Report on Slavery and Racism in the History of the Souther Baptist Theological Seminary*. Louisville, KY: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

<sup>10</sup>Anderson, Richard. *Jonathan Edwards Sr.* 2021. <https://slavery.princeton.edu/stories/jonathan-edwards>.

<sup>11</sup> April 30, 2018. <https://www.georgetownmemoryproject.org/wp-content/uploads/Research-Memo-Lost-Jesuit-Slaves.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Morrison, Latasha. *Be the Bridge* (p. 107). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 15:16

<sup>14</sup> Exodus 1

<sup>15</sup> Amos 2:6-7

<sup>16</sup> Daniel 3:4-6

<sup>17</sup> Luke 3:12-14

church to engage in collaboration without compromise and of critique without dualism. We must be able to engage in the good work that is in line with the revealed will of God that is going forth in the world, while we maintain the boundaries that God has set forth. We must be able to recognize the flaws, excesses, and even sin in those we are working with while not painting them or their efforts as wholly evil.

In the spirit of this consideration, the rest of this document will consist of a series of resources that were found to be helpful, though none of them are without flaws. There is a host of material that was helpful, though imperfect.

## Resources

### Books

#### *Be the Bridge – Latasha Morrison*

The purpose of the book is to mobilize believers in the US to get involved in the issue of racial injustice and racial reconciliation in general, and specifically through the Be the Bridge model. BTB seeks to bring together diverse groups of people who are willing to meet regularly to discuss the issues involved and to work individually and through churches to have an impact on race relations in the US. The book can be very educational for those who are unaware of the shameful aspects of our nation's history. It contains some heartwarming and inspiring stories of restorative reconciliation. The author expresses her hope that "...real beauty can come from the ashes of our country's history with racism."

Some concerns about the book are:

- Multiple references to reparations as "the work of the gospel" implying that concerns about reparations are unchristian.
- One of the most difficult arguments in the book was the idea that people should accept the guilt and shame of generational and corporate sin in order to repent of it. If you accept that argument, then you may be sympathetic to much of what the author has to say in the book. However, if you do not accept that argument, then it may be very hard for you to agree with much of what the book has to say.
- Some of the author's arguments or statements come across as quite absolute, leaving little room for the honest reader to have doubts or concerns as they process through the concepts and prescriptions being considered.

#### *Woke Church- Eric Mason*

Dr. Eric Mason is a Presbyterian Pastor leading a church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This book encompasses his prayer for the church. The strength of the book is recognizing how racial reconciliation is a natural outflow of the Gospel message. We cannot understand who God is, his passion for righteousness and justice, his

reaching out to the hurting and oppressed, and not work to do the same. *Woke Church* is a profoundly Christ-centered book, that effectively paints a problem that needs the rigorous application of the Gospel message.

The last section in the book discusses what moving forward looks like. He discusses a variety of paths to move forward including:

1. Imago Dei as Foundational Bible Doctrine
2. Listening to and Learning One Another's Stories
3. Enhanced Theological Education
4. Facing Our Blind Spots and Apathy
5. The Church as a Family Training Center
  - a. With Attention particularly paid to Biblical Manhood and Womanhood
  - b. Challenge the Criminal Justice System
  - c. Develop Community Partnerships
  - d. Leverage Our People Resources
  - e. Create Spheres for African-American Discipleship and Missiology

Parts of this section is where he is least ecumenical. In this section, he is largely writing to an urban church that is complementarian in theology and unified in their response to Racial Injustice. If that is not true of the community or individual reading this section, it will necessarily be less helpful.

This book was helpful in the early stages of our discussion through setting much of the table of understanding that racial injustice is not something that can be set aside, that, as a church enjoys being part of the broader American Church, that also imparts some responsibility in addressing and repenting of the sins of the broader American Church.

### *Reading While Black – Esau McCaulley*

*Reading while Black* is one of the best books to come out of 2020. As believers, we seek to understand how the Bible would have us interact with the prominent concerns of our day. Chief among them are guides to two questions that are raging today:

1. How do we maintain the moral authority of a text that was used as an ethical shield to defend slavery in the United States and abroad?
2. How does the Bible encourage us to think about our identity in Christ, and what intersection might that (or might that not) have with our race?

Esau McCaulley thoughtfully presents the voice of Black Ecclesial Theology as an interpretive lens, grounded in hope, which has relevance in our world today. Perhaps the most specifically helpful section was the work done on the Bible and Black Identity, which bled into some of our discussions. It was also as a result of reading this text that drew attention to Dr. McCaulley's discussion with N.T. Wright, which became the topic

for our Summer 2021 Discussion. Dr. McCaulley also had one of the most helpful theological understandings of Structural sin and the call upon believers in a democratic society to address those concerns.<sup>18</sup>

This book is intentionally a work that focuses on the Black Ecclesial tradition. As writers develop their arguments, they are often forced to choose who their audience is. In *Reading While Black*, Dr. McCaulley chose to write explicitly to black people who are theologically conservative and are convinced of the existence of oppression against black people today. If the Black Ecclesial tradition is suspect in your mind, or if you are uninterested in the question of how black people are to think about the injustice they have undergone and are undergoing, then this book will not resonate with you.

### Sermons/Videos

#### [Racism and Corporate Evil: A White Guy's Perspective – Tim Keller - YouTube](#)

Tim Keller's sermon here is an excellent introduction to the concept of corporate evil. As Tim Keller highlights the Lord's decision to punish the family of Achan's sin in Joshua 7, he points out that corporate responsibility is normal and assumed in the Biblical narrative. It is part of the structure of the Gospel. "At the heart of protestant understanding... our salvation ends up being corporate... At the heart of theology... there's corporate responsibility." Dr. Keller weaves together systematic theology, Biblical study, and personal stories to discuss how often we culturally ignore the corporate nature of responsibility and sin.

We found this sermon to be particularly helpful in acting as a winsome discussion of the topic of corporate evil and systemic sin. In being a relatively short sermon, this is more of an introduction than it is a thorough examination of the topic, but it serves as an able introduction.

#### [Justice and God's Story "Justice" \[1 of 3\] Tim Mackie \(The Bible Project\) 3/6/2011 - YouTube](#) –

In reviewing this sermon series, Dr. Tim Mackie paints a compelling picture of God's mission to restore Shalom to his people, and of our role to play in that ongoing story. The world is depicted as a beautiful work of art, in which each person has their place, or role to play in order to compose the full image. Each individual's presence is necessary for the image to be fully realized. And when each individual occupies their ordained space, that is a point of shalom, of peace and order ordained by God manifested before us. However, in the introduction of sin and brokenness, humanity does not exist in a regular state of shalom.

And God's justice, itself, is the re-establishment of shalom, it is the restoration of people into a state of right relation. And he further points that the Biblical

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<sup>18</sup> McCaulley, Esau. *Reading While Black* (p. 39). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

expectation of justice in the world is that as justice floods into a space, those who are most vulnerable (The Poor, The Widowed, The Orphaned, or Immigrants) benefit from that.

Dr. Mackie does not discuss racial justice with depth in this series. But what he does discuss is the Biblical expectation that we join with Jesus in his justice mission. The strength of this series is developing the conviction that part of what it means for us to follow God is being engaged in working for justice in the world that we inhabit.

## What's Next?

As we survey where God has led us in 2020 and 2021, we realize that as a church we have felt called to be incarnational in our community. Jesus was Emmanuel, which means God with Us. He was not content to remove himself far from his people as he worked out their salvation, but rather he chose to be with us. Paul, in ministering to the church in Thessalonica, eagerly desired to see his charges face to face (1 Thessalonians 3:10). Over and again, there is a drumbeat in Scripture that disciples of Jesus meet with those who God calls them to minister to.

As we minister to our community, we see this movement as necessarily ministering to the diverse population that the Lord has seen fit to put us in. In ministering in schools, apartment complexes, prisons, and other places we are empowered to engage in the restoration of shalom with the Lord and we seek to do that well.

We take the discussions, agreements, understandings, and forging of our time in discussion with us as we seek to effectively be Jesus' hands and feet in our region. We are renewed in our awareness of where the church has space to grow, and where the larger church in the United States has failed to represent Christ well. However, we are also excited to do better, we are excited to be Christ's Ambassador, urging those we come in contact with "Be Reconciled to God"! (2 Corinthians 5:19-20)

## Bibliography

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