THE SECULAR CREED

ENGAGING FIVE CONTEMPORARY CLAIMS

"Addressing five key cultural topics of the day in this vital book, Rebecca McLaughlin deftly examines the pernicious lies that have insidiously infiltrated our world, including the church, and gives a solid and biblical rebuttal to each lie. Every Christian needs to read this book."

BECKET COOK, author of *A Change of Affection: A Gay Man's Incredible Story of Redemption* and host of "The Becket Cook Show"

"In this book, Rebecca McLaughlin offers a gentle, yet powerful biblical corrective that calls readers to holistic Christian love—a higher calling than the call of the culture, and, often, a harder calling. She examines popular cultural mantras and answers each one with the truth and application of the gospel of Christ. In her balanced and gracious approach, she paints our culture's arguments in the most compassionate light possible—and then shows the beauty of a more excellent way!"

JASMINE HOLMES, author of *Mother to Son: Letters to a Black Boy on Identity and Hope*

"Rebecca McLaughlin's first book was the best all-round defense of the Christian faith I had read in a decade. This one is the perfect complement. In it the author points the way to a different kind of 'muscular' Christianity, one that is able to flex the *muscle of conviction* and the *muscle of compassion* at the same time. For a church—and a world—too often forced to choose between smug conservatism and acquiescing liberalism, McLaughlin recovers the genius of Jesus Christ, showing us how to love the truth and humans with equal passion. The result is an utterly compelling and humane treatment of five vital contemporary issues."

JOHN DICKSON, author and historian, Distinguished Fellow in Public Christianity at Ridley College, Australia

"This book is so powerful on a thousand levels. It's compelling, accessible, informative, captivating, convicting, and empowering. It gives Christians understanding and language to be able to engage and not retreat, love and not compromise, accept and not affirm, empathize and not sympathize. It moves the conversation forward not just left or right. This is a discipleship book, not just an apologetics book. It's incredible."

CHRISTINE CAINE, founder, A21 & Propel Women

"There are few whose voices I trust more in translating the claims of Christ for a new generation than Rebecca McLaughlin. She writes with a gospel clarity, keenness of insight, and personal winsomeness that make her one of the best apologists of our generation. As with her debut book, *Confronting Christianity*, I enthusiastically endorse this one."

J. D. GREEAR, pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina; president, Southern Baptist Convention

"Rebecca McLaughlin goes where few dare to go—head first into the hardest questions and issues of our cultural moment, with compassion, clarity, and conviction in order to show the beauty and cogency of the Christian faith. She is one of the most important writers serving the church today. She proved this with *Confronting Christianity* and has cemented that status with *The Secular Creed*. A potent blend of cultural analysis and biblical reflection, this is the rare book that's vital for believers and skeptics alike. I'm eager to get *The Secular Creed* into the hands of both my congregants and non-Christian friends."

CLAUDE ATCHO, pastor, Fellowship Memphis in Memphis, Tennessee; author of a forthcoming book on African American literature and theology (Brazos)

"The people around us care deeply about diversity, equality, and justice—and many think Christians stand against those values. As a pastor of a diverse, urban church, I need help to wisely and winsomely address their concerns. This is why I'm thankful for the major assist I've gotten from this book. McLaughlin knows today's issues well and has the biblical, historical, and sociological knowledge to help us understand them and be equipped to answer them well."

VERMON PIERRE, lead pastor, Roosevelt Community Church in Phoenix, Arizona; council member of The Gospel Coalition

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For Rachel,
and for everyone who longs for
justice, truth,
and love.

INTRODUCTION

"What does that mean?"

My 8-year-old held a bracelet she'd found at school. Stamped on its rim were three words: "Love Is Love." On our drive to church, we pass a hair salon, its windows filled with posters of George Floyd and massive, multicolored wings proclaiming, "Trans Lives Matter," "Black Lives Matter," "Love Is Love," "Better Together." Across our neighborhood, yard signs declare,

> In this house we believe that:
> Black Lives Matter
> Love Is Love
> Women's Rights Are Human Rights
> We Are All Immigrants
> Diversity Makes Us Stronger

Signs like this sketch out a secular creed or statement of belief. It centers not on God, but on diversity, equality, and everybody's right to be themselves.

Seeing signs like this, Christians tend to grab hammers. Some grab one to drive the sign into their lawn. They lament racial injustice, they believe in diversity, they know women are equal to men, and they've been taught that affirming gay relationships, trans identities, and pro-choice positions comes part and parcel with these other things. If black lives matter (which they surely do), then love of all kinds must be love. Others take up hammers with a different plan.

Knowing that the Bible rejects some things that underlie this modern creed, they swing a hammer to flatten the sign. Perhaps not literally, but in their hearts and minds. If these ideas stand together, they must all be wrong.

This book will offer a third approach. Wielding a marker instead of a mallet, it will consider five contemporary claims: "Black Lives Matter," "The Gay-Rights Movement Is the New Civil-Rights Movement," "Love Is Love," "Women's Rights Are Human Rights," and "Transgender Women Are Women." Examining each claim through the lens of Scripture and in light of culture, we'll aim to disentangle ideas Christians can and must affirm from ideas Christians cannot and must not embrace. But to wield the marker well, we must get down on our knees.

First, we must recognize that the tangling of ideas in the secular creed has been driven not only by sin in the world out there, but also by sin in the church in here. We must fall to our knees and repent. The frequent failure of Christians to meet biblical ideals of fellowship across racial difference, equal valuing of men and women, welcome for outcasts, love for those with unfulfilled desire, and care for the most marginalized has allowed this mixture of ideas to coalesce under the banner of diversity. But with our heads bowed to the earth, we'll see that the very ground in which the yard sign stands is unmistakably Christian. Clear that Christian soil away and you won't find solid, secular rock. You'll find a sinkhole.

To our 21st-century, Western ears, love across racial and cultural difference, the equality of men and women, and the idea that the poor, oppressed, and marginalized can make moral claims on the strong, rich, and powerful sound like basic moral common sense. But they are not. These truths have come to us from Christianity. Rip that foundation out, and you won't uncover a better basis for human equality and rights. You'll uncover an abyss that cannot even tell you what a human being is. Like cartoon characters running off a cliff, we may continue a short way before we realize that the ground has gone from underneath our feet. But it has gone. Without Christian beliefs about humanity, the yard sign's claims aren't worth the cardboard on which they are written.

So, when we pass these signs, I tell my children that in our house we believe that black lives matter because they matter to Jesus. We don't believe that love is love but that God is love, and that he gives us glimpses of his love through different kinds of relationship. We believe women's rights are human rights, because God made us—male and female—in his image; and for that same reason we believe that babies in the womb have rights as well. We believe God has a special concern for single mothers, orphans, and immigrants, because Scripture tells us so again and again. And we believe that diversity does indeed make us stronger, because Jesus calls people from every tribe and tongue and nation to worship him as one body together.

As you walk through this book, I hope you'll feel both humbled and empowered. If you're a follower of Jesus, I hope you'll be ready to join with the call to loving arms at the end. If you're not yet following Jesus, or if you couldn't imagine ever wanting to, I hope you'll see the moral soil on which you stand is more Christian than you realize. And I hope you'll start to wonder if the poor, first-century, brown-skinned, Jewish man known as Jesus of Nazareth—who lived as a member of an oppressed ethnic group and died at the hands of an imperial regime—might truly be the Savior of the world: the one who showed us what love is by laying down his life for us (1 John 3:16).

1

"BLACK LIVES MATTER"

In Alabama in 1985, a black man named Anthony Ray Hinton was sentenced to death for double homicide. The conviction was based on a faulty ballistics report, but the prosecutor believed he could tell Hinton was guilty just by looking at him. Hinton's story is told in Bryan Stevenson's bestselling book, *Just Mercy* (2014).[1] In decades of representing poor clients on death row, Stevenson and his colleagues at the Equal Justice Initiative have won reversals, relief, or release for more than 115 condemned people. Many were convicted because white officers, lawyers, and jurors could tell they were guilty just by looking at them.

In June 2020, I watched the film based on Stevenson's book as Black Lives Matter protests multiplied. George Floyd had been slowly squeezed to death under the knee of a white police officer. Ahmaud Arbery had been hunted and shot to death by white vigilantes spitting racist slurs, and who had not initially been arrested for their crime. Breonna Taylor had been shot in her home by officers raiding the wrong house. Stevenson's book was already a bestseller. But the tales

1. Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014).

it told struck a new chord with me. Like many others, I was moved to tears as an elderly black man, whose mind had been wrecked by war, was executed, while his requested song, "The Old Rugged Cross," blared over the prison sound system. Story after story broke my heart. Person after person treated like their skin color made them criminals, like their lives didn't matter. What's more, these things had happened in my lifetime in a state recently ranked first in America for overall religiosity.[2]

As a white, Christian immigrant to America, learning about the history of race relations has disillusioned me. The bloody stain of racism that has been smeared across white churches for centuries continues to discolor Christian witness today. I understand why many of my friends see Black Lives Matter signs in part as anti-Christian protest. But while *Just Mercy* tells harrowing tales of black oppression, it also gives us glimpses of black faith: not least the faith of Stevenson himself, whose own deep-seated hope in Christ has driven his pursuit of justice.[3] In the closing minutes of the film, we see footage of the real Hinton walking free after 30 years on death row, and we hear his sister, embracing him with tears of joy, sob out the film's last words: "Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Lord!"

The question at the heart of this chapter is how Christians should relate to the statement "Black lives matter." We all bring different sensitivities. For many black Christians, it feels like an utterly self-evident truth: a claim they are tired of having to make, three words to voice centuries of anger, fear, and pain. For some white Christians, it feels like a rallying cry: a way to protest the racial injustice of which they have been keenly aware. For others, it sounds like an attack: an accusation of racism that feels unwarranted and unfair. And for still

2. According to a 2016 survey, 51 percent of people in Alabama attend church at least weekly and 82 percent believe in God with certainty, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/how-religious-is-your-state/?state=alabama.

3. Stevenson talks about his faith in Dominique Dubois Gilliard, "Bryan Stevenson Wants to Liberate People from the Lie That Their Life Doesn't Matter," *Christianity Today*, January 10, 2020, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/january-web-only/just-mercy-film-bryan-stevenson.html. See also this dialogue with Tim Keller: "Grace, Justice and Mercy: An Evening with Bryan Stevenson & Rev. Tim Keller Q&A," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32CHZiVFmB4.

others, it feels like the spearhead of a progressive agenda: a wolf in sheep's clothing that must be exposed.

In this chapter, we'll dig under the topsoil of the black lives matter claim. We'll see that, far from being the enemy of love across racial difference, Christianity is its first and enduring foundation. We'll see that God created humans of all racial backgrounds equal, and that God's covenant people included black and brown folk from the first. We'll see that Jesus broke through every racial and cultural barrier of his day and commanded his disciples to make disciples of all nations. We'll meet the first African believers, who were following Jesus centuries before the gospel came to America, and we'll see that today Christianity is the most racially, culturally, and geographically diverse belief system in the world. Finally, we'll see that the reason we believe in love across racial difference now is because of Jesus—whether we realize it or not.

IN THE BEGINNING

In 1776, the Declaration of Independence proclaimed, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." But human equality is not self-evident at all. Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari explains:

> The Americans got the idea of equality from Christianity, which argues that every person has a divinely created soul, and that all souls are equal before God. However, if we do not believe in the Christian myths about God, creation and souls, what does it mean that all people are "equal"?[4]

The first chapter of the Bible claims that God made human beings *in his image* (Gen. 1:26). If this is not true, then there is no basis for equality and rights. Writing as an atheist, Harari explains that "*Homo Sapiens* has no natural rights, just as spiders, hyenas, and chimpanzees have no natural rights."[5]

4. Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper, 2015), 109.
5. Harari, *Sapiens*, 111.

We must not be naïve about the past. The painful reality is that the founding fathers excluded enslaved Africans from their vision of human equality. But this problem isn't fixed by erasing the basis for equality. In fact, the dehumanizing ways in which black people were treated by white slaveholders were only truly *wrong* if human beings are truly more than animals, if love across racial difference is *right*, and if *right* and *wrong* are universal. The rational atheist can cling to none of these things.

If the Bible is true, however, God didn't just make our souls. He made our bodies. He made black people and white people, Asian people and Latino people, people from every tribe and tongue and nation, all equally *in his image*. This is the soil in which the roots of human equality grow. But the Bible doesn't stop there. It tells a story that begins with humans from all sorts of ethnicities becoming God's people, and that ends with people from every tribe and tongue and nation worshiping Jesus together.

MIXED MULTITUDE

In Genesis 12, God called a man from a city located in modern-day Iraq. God promised to make this man, Abraham, a great nation and that in him "all the families of the earth" would be blessed (Gen. 12:2–3). This promise is ultimately fulfilled in Christ: the descendant of Abraham who would open the floodgates of God's blessing to engulf people from every nation on earth. But even from the first, God wove different ethnicities into his covenant people.

Abraham's grandson Jacob had 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel. But one son, Joseph, was sold by his brothers and became a slave in Egypt. Joseph helped Egypt survive a famine, saved his family, and married an Egyptian woman, Asenath (Gen. 41:45). Together, they had Ephraim and Manasseh. Jacob blessed these boys and prophesied that they would grow into a multitude (Gen. 48). As New Testament scholar Esau McCaulley puts it, "African blood flows

into Israel from the beginning as a fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."[6]

During 400 years in Egypt, the Israelites went from being honored immigrants to being slaves. God sent Moses to rescue them. Moses had married Zipporah, a woman from Midian (in modern-day Saudi Arabia), and had children with her. When he led the Israelites out of Egypt, a "mixed multitude" left with them—likely including Egyptians who had seen God act and decided to join his people (Ex. 12:38). After the exodus (perhaps after Zipporah's death), Moses married a Cushite woman: in today's terms, an Ethiopian (Num. 12:1). Centuries of Western art have pictured God's covenant people as white. But the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness were from the Middle East and Africa. As the story of God's people unfolds, we see even more ethnicities woven in.

JESUS'S DNA

Thanks to a document passed down in my husband's family, we know that one of his ancestors was Cherokee. Her name was Eliza, and our second daughter is named after her. In modern, Western culture, few of us bother to trace our lineage back more than a few generations. But when Jesus was born, genealogies were highly prized.

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus particularly highlights the non-Israelite women in his ancestry, such as Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who believed the Israelites' God was truly "God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath" (Josh. 2:12; Matt. 1:5), and Ruth the Moabite, whose story generated a whole Old Testament book. In Matthew's retelling of Israel's history, we see that non-Israelites weren't just squeezed in at the fringes of God's purposes. They were plumbed into the royal bloodline.

Jesus's DNA was shaped by Rahab and by Ruth. He had non-Israelite blood in his veins. And when he preached, it showed.

6. Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 102.

SCANDAL OF JESUS'S FIRST SERMON

Jesus's first sermon in his hometown lit a fire of justice that's been burning ever since. He began by reading from the prophet Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because he has anointed me
> to proclaim good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
> and recovering of sight to the blind,
> to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18–19)

Jesus claimed to have fulfilled these words. They represent one New Testament text among many that hammer justice for the poor, oppressed, and wrongly imprisoned into the heart of God's concern for his world. At first, the response from Jesus's Jewish audience was good. Living under Roman oppression, they longed for a Messiah who would set them free and establish them politically. Maybe Jesus was their long-awaited champion! But they also wanted proof that Jesus was as good as his promise. After all, they'd watched him grow up.

Instead of performing a miracle or celebrating Jewish history, however, Jesus started showcasing how God has always cared for Gentiles (Luke 4:25–27). Jesus's fellow countrymen were so furious they tried to kill him (Luke 4:28–30). His multiethnic message was the last thing they wanted to hear. But this didn't put Jesus off. Quite the reverse.

SCANDAL OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

At age 18, I spent a summer working in Manhattan. One hot evening, I was going for dinner at a friend's apartment, and I bought a watermelon for dessert. When my friend opened the door, she looked uncomfortable. She told me she'd never eaten a watermelon. "Why not?" I asked, "They're delicious!" My friend graciously explained to me the long history of people associating African Americans with watermel-

on. As a black woman, she'd always avoided the fruit. I'd grown up in England. I had no idea.

When we step into the pages of the Scriptures, we're all immigrants. There are things we won't instinctively grasp, not least about ethnicity. We hear "Samaritan" and think, *Good!* But for Jews of Jesus's day, Samaritans were both racially and religiously despised. We don't feel the shock of Jesus's famous story of the Good Samaritan. But his first audience did.

A lawyer asked Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asked a question in return: "What is written in the law?" The lawyer responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus agreed. But then the lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded with a story in which a man, likely Jewish, is robbed and assaulted and left for dead on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. Two Jewish religious leaders walk by before a Samaritan rescues the man. Jesus asked the lawyer which of the men who came by was a neighbor to the assault victim. The lawyer, who couldn't bring himself to say "the Samaritan," replied, "The one who showed him mercy" (Luke 10:25–37).

When we read this story, we hear a call to care for strangers in need. But Jesus's first audience heard more. They heard a story of love across racial, religious, and political difference, in which the moral hero was their sworn enemy. This story isn't just a call to love. It's a call to love across racial, cultural, and ideological barriers built up over generations. It's a call to love those we were raised to hate. It's a call that should have made segregation in America and apartheid in South Africa impossible.

Luke doesn't tell us how the crowd reacted to Jesus's story. But if we map the racial and political divides of his day onto ours, perhaps we can imagine what might've been said. "It's all very well Jesus telling this idealistic story about a *good* Samaritan, but what about all the *bad* Samaritans? Have you heard about the crime rates in Samaria? And all the teenage pregnancies? I'd have no problem with Samaritans if they really *were* good."

If we're honest, we all have groups we like to dismiss. Lifelong Republicans know Democrats are immoral. Dyed-in-the-wool Dem-

ocrats know the same about Republicans. The white prosecutor could tell that Hinton was guilty just by looking at him. Jews could tell the same about Samaritans. When my non-Christian friends hear about another celebrity pastor caught in a sex scandal, they're not surprised: they know Christians are hypocrites. When we hear about violence against someone from a group we suspect, we look for evidence that they deserved it. When we see violence from a group we trust, we look for evidence that it was justified. But Jesus devastates our them-and-us mentality, not just through a story about a good Samaritan, but also through a stunning conversation with a bad one.

SCANDAL OF THE BAD SAMARITAN

In John 4, Jesus sat down by a well, while his disciples went to buy food. A Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus asked her for a drink. There are two problems with this. First, the woman is a Samaritan, and Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. Second, a respectable Jewish rabbi shouldn't be talking alone with a woman. She's shocked. "How is that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" But as the story unfolds, we find out there's another problem. This woman has had five husbands and is now living with a man she's not married to. By the Jewish standards of the day, she's about as bad as a woman could be. But what do you expect? She's a Samaritan, after all. Jesus should've known she was guilty just by looking at her. But as their conversation progresses, we discover that he did (John 4:4–26).

Jesus's discussion with this sinful woman from a hated racial and religious group is the longest private conversation he had with *anyone* in the Gospels. She's also the first person in John's Gospel to whom Jesus reveals his identity as the Messiah. When Jesus's disciples return, she goes back to her town and tells her fellow Samaritans about him. Many believe in Jesus because of her testimony (John 4:39). Jesus knew precisely what he was doing when he asked this woman for a drink. He was recruiting the last person even the Samaritans would've listened to and trusting her to be his messenger. Just as he made the fictional Good Samaritan into a moral hero, so he makes this real, live Bad Samaritan into a missionary.

Jesus tears down the racial and cultural barriers of his day and dances on the rubble.

MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS

Jesus's public ministry was mostly focused on his fellow Jews. But time and again, he commends the faith of those outside the Jewish fold. He praises the faith of a Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5–13) and a Syrophoenician woman (Matt. 15:21–28). When he heals 10 lepers, the only one who turns back to thank him is a Samaritan, whose faith Jesus commends (Luke 17:11–19). And after his resurrection, Jesus declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" and tells his followers, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:18–19).

Jesus was the one through whom all things were made (John 1:3). He created every ethnicity, and he calls people from every tribe and tongue and nation to himself. Centuries of colonialism have left many people thinking that the first black Christians emerged when European missionaries went to Africa. But if we read the Bible, we find the first black people coming to Christ on Day One of the church.

FIRST BLACK CHRISTIANS

When the Spirit is poured out at Pentecost, the apostles preach to people "from every nation under heaven," including those from modern-day Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, and Libya (Acts 2:5–11). Three thousand came to Christ. This is the birthday of the church. On this day, Middle Easterners, Africans, and Europeans started worshiping Jesus together. Luke tells us what this looked like. These first Christians devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to breaking of bread, and to prayer. They were selling their possessions and sharing their money with any who had need. They were worshiping together and eating together in each other's homes (Acts 2:42–47). This wasn't just gathering at the same church on Sunday. This was life together. But the Bible doesn't just scan the multiethnic crowd. It also zooms in on individuals.

In Acts 8, an angel of the Lord sends Philip to a highly educated Ethiopian man, who is sitting in his chariot reading from Isaiah 53. This passage subverts every modern stereotype. In the framework that tried to justify slavery and segregation in America, black people were repeatedly painted as morally, spiritually, and intellectually inferior. But this account of the first known black Christian skewers those ideas. In a world in which few were literate, this man is reading God's Word when Philip finds him. As humble as he is learned, the Ethiopian welcomes Philip eagerly. Beginning with the description of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53, Philip tells him "the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). As soon as they find water this man asks to be baptized (Acts 8:36). His enthusiasm leaps from the page.

Luke includes three details about the Ethiopian, in addition to his ethnicity. First, Luke tells us he was a eunuch. Second, that he was a court official of Candice, queen of the Ethiopians, responsible for all her treasure. Third, that he had come to Jerusalem to worship (Acts 8:27). This man was both honored and marginalized. He had a position of great authority and trust. But he was also a eunuch who had been castrated as a child and was likely technically a slave. He was already a worshiper of God, but he hadn't yet met Jesus. If we read Isaiah 53 in context, we find it is the perfect entry point for this man. We see God's suffering servant, pierced for our transgressions, despised and rejected by men, achieving victory through pain. And as Isaiah's prophecy continues, we see specific promises to foreigners and eunuchs who trust in the Lord.[7]

In Acts 8, we don't just see an individual black Christian, whose life mattered to God so much that his angel sent an apostle to help with his Bible study. We also see the continuity between the Old Testament and the New, as God's promises to foreigners who trust him are fleshed out. We see hope for those whose bodies have been violated and for those unable to have children. And we see a black man

7. "Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and let the eunuch not say, 'Behold I am a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord: 'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off'" (Isa. 56:3–5).

going on his way rejoicing because he had new life in Jesus Christ (Acts 8:39).

MULTIETHNIC HEARTBEAT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

As the story of the newborn church unfolds, we hear its multiethnic heartbeat. The church blossoms from its Jewish roots to include more and more Gentiles. The followers of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch, the ruins of which lie in Turkey (Acts 11:26). Because we're all immigrants to the text, it's harder for us to see the racial and ethnic walls being demolished by the gospel wrecking ball. But that's what is happening. Paul wrote to the first Christians in Turkey, "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11).

The Jew-Gentile divide was deeply ingrained in Jewish consciousness, and Paul speaks to it in two ways: Jew versus Greek, and circumcised versus uncircumcised. He also knocks down the slave-free divide in a culture that assumed slavery was normal and in which at least one person in three would've been enslaved. Unlike slavery in America, first-century slavery was largely not race-based, so this was not a comment on ethnicity. But Paul also speaks to racial and cultural divides when he mentions barbarians and Scythians. These terms mean almost nothing to us. We don't turn on the news and hear about barbarian immigrants or Scythian refugees. But writing to America today, Paul might have said of the church: "Here there is no black American or white American, Asian American or Latino American, there is no rich or poor, no immigrant or native born, but Christ is all, and in all." Love across racial difference isn't just a modern, progressive ideal. It started as a biblical ideal. Interracial love is part of our inheritance in Christ.

When we refuse fellowship across racial and cultural difference, we're tearing Jesus's beautiful body apart.

GREAT MULTITUDE NO ONE COULD NUMBER

In the biblical finale, John witnesses the greatest multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural gathering ever seen:

> After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9–10)

At Pentecost, the Spirit inspired the apostles to speak in different languages, so all heard the message in their native tongue. Christianity is not only multiethnic. It's also multicultural, and we should expect Christians to speak different languages, sing different songs, eat different foods, wear different clothes, and bring different insights to God's universal, timeless Word. At the same time, we must pursue love and fellowship across racial and cultural difference relentlessly—not because progressives tell us to, but because Jesus calls us to be one body with people of different races and cultures and languages. Worshiping Jesus together is our destiny. But it is also becoming our reality.

Today, Christianity is the largest and the most diverse belief system in the world, with roughly equal numbers of Christians in Europe, North America, South America, and Africa,[8] and with a rapidly growing church in China that is expected to outgrow the church in America by 2030, and could include half of China's population by 2060.[9] By that point, 40 percent of the world's Christians could be living in sub-Saharan Africa. If the experts are right, I will likely live to see black Christians become the largest racial group within the global church.

White progressives who dismiss Christianity because they associate it with white racism are failing to listen to black believers globally.

8. See "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050," Pew Research Center, April 2, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050, and "Projected Change in Global Population, 2015–2060," Pew Research Center, March 31, 2017, http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religiouslandscape/pf_17-04-05_projectionsupdate_changepopulation640px.

9. See Pew Research Center Global Religious Survey, 2010, cited by Eleanor Albert, "Christianity in China," Council on Foreign Relations, March 9, 2018, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/christianity-china. See also "Prison Sentence for Pastor Shows China Feels Threatened by Spread of Christianity, Experts Say," TIME, January 2, 2020, https://time.com/5757591/wang-yi-prison-sentence-china-christianity.

They're also failing to listen to black people in America, who are almost 10 percentage points more likely than their white peers to identify as Christians, and who poll higher on every measure of Christian commitment, from churchgoing to Bible-reading to core evangelical beliefs.[10] Both globally and in the United States, black women are the most typical Christians. As Yale Law professor Stephen L. Carter writes, "When you mock Christians, you're not mocking who you think you are."[11]

These facts don't for a moment excuse the history of white Christians treating black people as if their lives didn't matter. We'll examine that problem more fully in chapter 3. But dismissing Christianity because of the failure of white Christians means silencing the voices of black believers and acting like only white voices matter in considering Christ.

LISTENING TO BLACK VOICES

In *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*, New Testament professor and *New York Times* contributing author Esau McCaulley invites us to listen to the full choir of African American Christians. Theologically liberal black authors, who emphasize justice here-and-now at the expense of what the Bible teaches about eternal justice, are often seen by secular progressives and by white evangelicals as primary voices of black faith. This is convenient for both sides: it allows secular progressives to dismiss full-blooded Christianity, and all too often it allows white evangelicals to dismiss the critiques of black believers. But in reality, most black churches in America are theologically evangelical, even if that increasingly politicized word isn't a comfortable fit. For example, 85 percent of members of historically black churches see the Bible as the Word

10. See, for example, David Masci, "5 Facts about the Religious Lives of African Americans," Pew Research Center, February 7, 2018, http://www.pewresearch.org/facttank/2018/02/07/5-facts-about-the-religious-lives-of-african-americans.

11. Stephen L. Carter, "The Ugly Coded Critique of Chick-fil-A's Christianity," Bloomberg, April 21, 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-04-21/criticism-of-christians-and-chick-fil-a-has-troubling-roots.

of God, versus only 62 percent of mainline Christians.[12] Meanwhile, 82 percent of Christians at historically black churches believe in the reality of hell: the same percentage as among self-identifying evangelicals.[13] To listen to black voices, people on all sides must reckon with the gospel-centered, Bible-believing stance of most black churches.

Listening will be as uncomfortable for the white Christian conservative as for the secular progressive. A Bible-believing Christian himself, McCaulley explains,

> It is difficult for the African American believer to look deeply into the history of Christianity and not be profoundly shaken. Insomuch as it arises in response to the church's historic mistreatment of African Americans, the Black secular protest against religion is one of the most understandable developments in the history of the West. If they are wrong (and they are) it is a wrongness born out of considerable pain.[14]

As a white evangelical, I could easily gloss over this pain. The chronic sin of white Christian racism dishonors the name of Christ. The slow-burn holocaust of black lives across the centuries is hard to face. To pause here is uncomfortable. But Jesus doesn't call us to be comfortable. He calls us to repentance and faith. And when we pause, we'll realize that the loudest voices of protest *against* white Christian racism have been from fellow Christians. While many white Christians were complicit in race-based slavery, McCaulley reminds us that "the widespread move to abolish slavery [was] a Christian innovation,"[15] that "Black conversion to Christ began on a large scale during the Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century,"[16] and that "early

12. See Jeff Diamant, "Blacks more likely than others in U.S. to read the Bible regularly, see it as God's word," Pew Research Center, December 16, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/07/blacks-more-likely-than-others-in-u-s-to-read-the-bible-regularly-see-it-as-gods-word, based on 2014 Pew Forum survey data.
13. See Caryle Murphy, "Most Americans believe in heaven . . . and hell," Pew Research Center, November 10, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/10/most-americans-believe-in-heaven-and-hell.
14. McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 135.
15. McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 142.
16. McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 169.

Black Christians combined a strong affirmation of the need for personal salvation with varying levels of social action and resistance."[17]

Civil-rights heroes like Fannie Lou Hamer and the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. are rightly celebrated by secular people. But their message was unrelentingly Christian. Like Old Testament prophets, they called out the sin of those who claimed to know the Lord but were not living in his ways. They called for Americans to be *more* Christian, not less. Today, the most celebrated black leaders are often progressives. But they don't represent most black Americans, who are neither secular nor theologically liberal.

Amid the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, I went for a walk with a friend who directs the children's ministry at a multiethnic church. She told me that in the previous few months, she'd received messages from multiple friends and acquaintances—including people she hadn't seen since middle school—asking how she was and what they could do. She joked that she seemed to be lots of people's one black friend. But her response to each well-wisher was the same: "I'd love to talk to you about Jesus." One friend responded, "Do you really think that's the answer?" She replied that she did. And she is right, but not in the sense that Christians sometimes think.

At times, Christians have tried to close down conversations about racial justice by urging people to "Just preach the gospel." They suggest that pursuing racial justice is a distraction from the church's central mission of evangelism, and that if we preach the gospel of Jesus's death in our place, and the need for personal salvation, all other ills will naturally be healed. But Jesus didn't tell his disciples to just preach the gospel. He told them to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20). As a Christian, I believe I'm saved by Jesus's death in my place, paying the price for my sin, and bringing me back into fellowship with God. Nothing can add to or take away from this. But because I've placed my trust in Christ, he is my King, and I must walk in his ways. Living as a disciple of Jesus includes preaching the gospel (Matt. 28:19), pursuing justice for the poor, oppressed and margin-

17. McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 175.

alized (Matt. 25:31–46), and practicing love across racial and cultural difference (Luke 10:25–37).

SECULAR SINKHOLE

For most Westerners today, the alternative to Christianity isn't another religion. For all the contemporary interest in meditation, yoga, and what we see as ancient Eastern wisdom, few are looking for a full embrace of Buddhist or Hindu ethics. Radical Islam's association with violence and oppression of women tends not to appeal. And while Jewish religious and cultural practices are deeply precious even to avowedly atheist Jews, few curious gentiles find themselves in shul. For a growing proportion of people in the West, not identifying with any particular religion but retaining beliefs about human equality has felt like a safe place to land. After all, people reason, religion has done more harm than good and things like universal human rights, racial justice, and care for the poor are self-evident truths.

But as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, if there is no God who created us in his image, then human equality is a myth. Human beings have "no natural rights, just as spiders, hyenas, and chimpanzees have no natural rights."[18] Science cannot save this situation. As Yuval Noah Harari points out, "belief in the unique worth and rights of human beings . . . has embarrassingly little in common with the scientific study of *Homo sapiens*."[19] In fact, if we look to evolution as our *only* origin story and try to squeeze our ethics from its scientific husk, we have (at best) the idea that one should sacrifice only for members of one's genetic group. The idea of loving those whose origins lie in a different continent is dead in the primeval water. In fact, as atheist psychologist Steven Pinker observes, if virtue is equated with "sacrifices that benefit one's own group in competition with other groups . . . then fascism [is] the ultimate virtuous ideology."[20]

18. Harari, *Sapiens*, 111
19. Harari, *Sapiens*, 253.
20. Steven Pinker, "The False Allure of Group Selection," Edge, June 18, 2012, https://www.edge.org/conversation/steven_pinker-the-false-allureof-group-selection.

None of these points suggests that secular people don't believe in love across racial difference. Many do. But they do so on the basis of unanchored faith, clinging (whether they realize it or not) to a raft of Christian beliefs. In 2019, Notre Dame professor Christian Smith published *Atheist Overreach: What Atheism Can't Deliver*, in which he examined whether today's leading atheist intellectuals provide convincing reasons for their high moral beliefs. His conclusion? They do not. An atheist can believe in human rights if she likes. She can campaign for racial justice, volunteer at a soup kitchen, support NGOs that combat famine, and give to charities opposing sex trafficking. But she has no rational grounds for saying that *everyone* should believe in human rights, or that racism is unquestionably *wrong*. In a world without God, I may hate race-based slavery in the same sense that I hate olives. But at the end of the day, it comes down to personal preference.[21] So why do so many people today who identify as atheists, agnostics, or "nones" believe in universal human rights?

Historian Tom Holland explains that our basic moral beliefs about human equality came to us from Christianity, but that they have been deliberately rebranded as secular. In the late 1940s, with the world reeling from the horrors of the Second World War, Eleanor Roosevelt gathered representatives from various nations to establish a universal declaration of rights that would work in different cultures, including those in which Christianity was not dominant. So, Christian thinking had to be repackaged in non-religious terms. "A doctrine such as that of human rights," Holland observes, "was far likelier to be signed up for" if its Christian origins could be concealed.[22]

This rebranding has worked so well that even atheists now hold some Christian beliefs to be self-evident truths. The belief that every human life is valuable, that the oppressed and marginalized deserve justice, that we should love those whose race or culture or country is different from ours, that we should even love our enemies—these beliefs all come to us from a first-century Jewish rabbi who died on

21. For a version of this argument, see Christian Smith, *Atheist Overreach: What Atheism Can't Deliver* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 49. As Tim Keller puts it, "While there can be moral *feelings* without God, it doesn't appear that there can be moral *obligation*." Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016), 173.

22. Holland, *Dominion*, 521.

a cross and whose resurrection spawned the greatest movement for diversity in history. Without Christianity, belief in human rights, in racial equality, and in the responsibility of the powerful toward the victimized becomes blind faith. The claim that black lives matter is at heart a Christian claim.

'IS THIS A JESUS SONG?'

My daughters attend a public school that celebrates diversity. But sometimes, when they come home with a new song, I point out that what they have learned was originally a Jesus song: "Amazing Grace" sung in Navajo, without explanation of the words. "I've Got Peace Like a River" and "We Shall Overcome" taught without reference to their gospel origins. Now, my girls will ask me, "Mummy, is this a Jesus song?"

Some white Christians worry that saying the specific words "Black lives matter" signals a wholesale embrace of progressive views. This is an understandable concern. As we will see in the next chapter, the Black Lives Matter organization presents racial justice as a package deal with celebrating LGBT+ romance and identity. We must carefully disentangle these differences. Still, many theological conservatives—including many black Christians—are glad to march under the "Black Lives Matter" sign because these words are a statement of truth.

Given the history of white evangelical failure to recognize black people as their equals before God, I gladly affirm that black lives matter, despite the fact an organization with that name expresses other beliefs I cannot embrace. If there were a secular organization called Unborn Babies Matter, I would say those words, too, even if that organization also waved a rainbow flag, because unborn babies matter. If I were concerned people might think I affirmed everything else that organization stood for, I'd simply add two words: "Unborn babies matter *to Jesus*."

Some respond that *all* lives matter. But this qualifier misses the point. For centuries, black people have been treated like their lives *didn't* matter. That's the problem being addressed, the truth that needs to be upheld, just as we'd recognize that "unborn babies matter" needs to be said. But we must also recognize that from a consistently atheis-

tic perspective, *no* lives ultimately matter. Human beings have no natural rights, just as spiders, chimpanzees, and hyenas have no natural rights. Ultimately, black lives matter not because progressive people have told us so, but because the equal value of every human, regardless of race, walks off the pages of Scripture with the sound of a trumpet. Black lives matter enough for the Son of God to shed his blood, so that black men and women might have eternal life with him. Black lives matter because Jesus says so.

Christians must work for justice for historically crushed and marginalized people, because Jesus came to bring good news to the poor and to set at liberty those who are oppressed. Christians should be the first to fight for racial justice and to pursue love across racial difference, not because of any cultural pressure from outside, but because of scriptural pressure from inside. "Black lives matter" is at heart a Jesus song, and we must sing our Savior's songs, no matter who else plays the tune.

As we hear the tear-stained words of Anthony Ray Hinton's sister—"Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Lord!"—we must ask: Why would a black woman in a state with one of the worst records on racial justice and one of the highest levels of Christian identification thank Jesus for her innocent brother's release? Because she knows that Jesus is on the side of the poor, oppressed, and falsely accused. Because she knows that black people have been followers of Jesus from the first. Because she knows that black lives like her brother's matter, not because a progressive organization bearing that name has capitalized on a cultural moment, but because black lives matter to Jesus.

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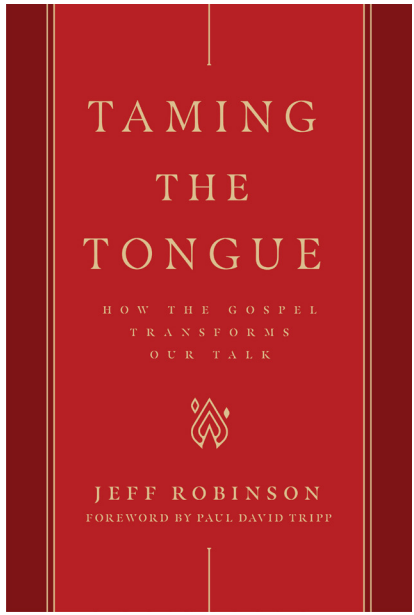

"This book hit home with me, perhaps because some of my greatest regrets have come from ways I've misused words—confidences I didn't keep, criticism I was too eager to offer, bragging to make myself seem important, dominating the conversation when I should have listened. I've also misused words by keeping silent when I should have come clean, when I should have offered praise, when I should have spoken up. These and many more insights on how we use our words are covered in this brief but wisdom-filled book—a great book to read prayerfully on your own, but even better to use to discuss with a small group."

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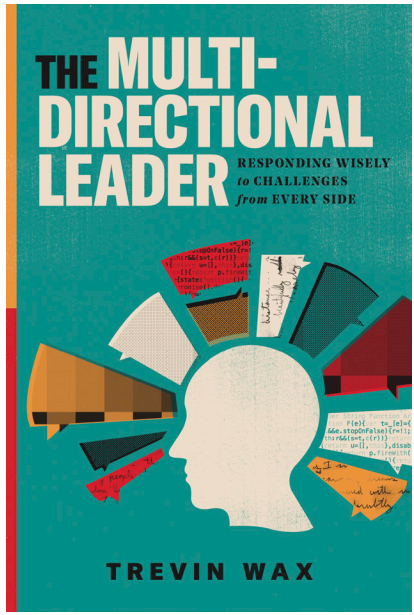

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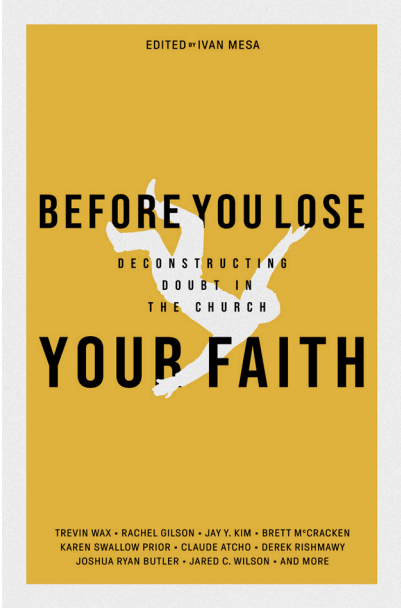

"Over the years I've met many younger Christians who aren't sure they can or even should bother any longer with this ancient faith. Some end up leaving the church with a sense of liberation. Others feel as though they're falling with no one to catch them. The church ought to be the place where they feel safe asking hard questions and sharing honest doubts. The distinguished contributors to *Before You Lose Your Faith* write with sympathy and understanding. They can help anxious readers reconstruct a stronger, lasting faith in our trustworthy Savior."

COLLIN HANSEN, vice president of content and editor in chief of The Gospel Coalition and host of the Gospelbound podcast

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