

Setting the Biblical Context: Reclaiming an Anti-Racist Gospel

*“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words
will not pass away.”*

—MATTHEW 24:35

Starting with Scripture

It should be clear by now that the aim of this book is to address the church with hard and critical questions about an extremely difficult subject. It is understandable if readers might feel a bit anxious about this at first and worry that someone might ask, “Who do you think you are? Who gave you the right to do this?” In response, I believe it is important to affirm that we *do* have the authority to undertake this bold venture. In fact, we have a mandate to do so—a mandate that comes directly from God.

We do not need to devise new holy words or invent new teachings in order to claim religious authority to work against racism or any other form of injustice. Centrally placed within the Holy Scriptures is an indelible foundational message of God’s intention for justice and peace for all humanity. The Bible and the historic Christian faith call the church and all Christians to take a stand uncompromisingly against the evil of racism and for the equality and unity of all humankind. We need to place our efforts to understand and eliminate racism in church and society squarely in the context of these teachings, allowing them to become our essential tools and primary guides in understanding racism and how it can be brought to an end. If we do not do this, but attempt instead to reflect on racism and work to end racism without the support of our beliefs and our faith, we risk making our faith irrelevant to matters most central to our lives. On the other hand, if we do take our faith with us on this journey, we will not only have

authority and guidance, but we will be affirmed and strengthened to go places where we otherwise may not have the courage to go.

To help us begin thinking theologically and biblically about racism, I offer four principles concerning how the Bible and our faith can guide us. These are foundation stones upon which to build a biblically supported analysis of racism. Throughout the book, I will expand on these and invite you to add your own examples, images, and insights:

1. We are the family of God.
2. We are called to work for justice at the center of our Christian faith.
3. We are called to reject stolen stories and to reclaim an anti-racist gospel.
4. We are being carried on the shoulders of witnesses who struggled before us.

These four foundation stones represent the clear understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith that the whole human family is created by God to exist in unity and equality, and they represent a clear judgment that any violation of God's intentions, including racism, is a sin against both God and humanity. The scriptural message of God's intervention and redemption is an invitation and a command to us today to repent of our divisions, to be forgiven, restored, and empowered to rebuild God's human family on the basis of unity, love, and justice. Let's look at each of these foundation stones more closely.

Foundation Stone I: We are the family of God.

God created us to be family, and, by virtue of God's creation, we are all sisters and brothers. This may sound like an obvious statement that everyone agrees with, but, in fact, it is a very radical statement that establishes the primary rationale and motivation for working against racism. This message is central to the Bible, from Genesis, the first book, to Revelation, the last. God is our Creator/Parent, and therefore all human beings are sisters and brothers in a common family. Sisterhood and brotherhood is a God-given relationship every human being shares.¹

This familial relationship is indelible. Our sisterhood and brotherhood in the family of God is imprinted in our hearts, minds, and souls. It is part of our spiritual DNA. We did not choose it and we cannot choose to undo it. We may love it, we may hate it, we may protest it, or we may ignore it. But the truth is, regardless of our color—red, brown, yellow, black, or white—we are all in the family for good.

The reason it is so important to emphasize this first theological principle is that racism and all forms of injustice seek to deny this familial relationship and to exclude groups of people from the family. The entire story of human injustice is a history of people attempting to kick each other out of the family. We are constantly faced by one group of humans saying to another:

I don't like you because of your race. I don't want you in my family. I don't like you because of your gender, your class, your tribe, your religion, your nationality, your sexual orientation, your looks, your size, your behavior. *Get out of my family!* You and everyone like you are no longer my brothers or my sisters.

It is even more frightening and horrifying that when one group thinks they have successfully removed these “others” from their family, they then assume the right to hurt, torture, and slaughter those people whom they have made into “aliens and strangers,” those whom they have cast out of the human family. This is the history of the broken family of God. Each of us has stories to tell about being part of a group that was cast out or that cast out others—or both. Our acts have done terrible damage to our sisters and brothers and to ourselves. The consequences are brokenness and division in the human family, God's family. Like Humpty Dumpty, it is seemingly impossible to put us back together again.

Nevertheless, the basic scriptural message is that no matter how hard we try to end this relationship, we cannot stop being sisters and brothers. The ones we hurt, torture, and kill are never strangers and aliens outside the family, but rather our sisters and our brothers within the family. God has created this family, and this relationship between us is indelible. The central purpose of the Christian faith is to put the family of God back together again. The incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus are God's actions to overcome brokenness and division, to restore our relationships as sisters and brothers. To participate in the restoration of the family is the central mission and calling of the church. Whenever and wherever we work for justice and peace, we are working to restore the family. Our affirmation that we are the family of God and our work to end racism are part of God's highest priority to restore God's family and make it whole again.

Foundation Stone 2: The inseparability of Jesus and justice.

Justice is at the heart of the biblical message. God's opposition to all forms of societal inequality and the call for a radically inclusive community are at the center of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus made it abundantly clear throughout his ministry that God is on the side of the broken people—the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, and the oppressed. In his first sermon, he quoted from the prophet Isaiah in announcing the central purpose of his ministry:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

In recent decades, a "theology of liberation" has emerged as an exciting new articulation of theology by churches living in the context of poverty and oppression. With its central focus on justice, liberation theology has become increasingly popular and influential in many churches, particularly in communities of color in the United States and in developing nations around the world.

Liberation theology emphasizes that the actions of God recorded in the Old and New Testaments are almost always described in terms of liberating broken and oppressed people. Moses was sent to free the Hebrew people from enslavement in Egypt. Isaiah proclaimed comfort and release to the captives of Babylon. The prophets were sent to demand justice for the poor who were being oppressed by rich countrymen. The psalmist prayed for rescue from those who do injustice. Jesus came proclaiming good news for the downtrodden and oppressed.

The central themes of liberation theology are that God takes sides where issues of justice are concerned, that God's first option is for the broken and the oppressed of the world, and that justice and liberation should be the central focus of the ministry of the Christian church. This theological perspective insists that the gospel of Jesus Christ has always been and is still today a message of freedom intended first and foremost to reach people suffering from the injustices of poverty, racism, and other forms of oppression. Jesus himself is understood as a victim of oppression who lived and died for the sake of those who are downtrodden, poverty-stricken, suffering, sick, and dying.

Liberation theology insists that this central Christian message is unchanging and unchanged. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of freedom for oppressed people in the twenty-first century as it was for those in the first century. It is good news to those who are poverty-stricken in the ghettos of our land and throughout the world. It is the proclamation of liberty to the captives in our prisons and on our reservations. It is sight for those who cannot see, strength for those who cannot walk, community for those who are lonely, and freedom for the oppressed people of the United States and the world.²

A Radically Inclusive Gospel

Liberation theology's understanding of the priority of Jesus for justice and his identification with poor and oppressed people does not, however, leave out the rich and the oppressor. Quite the opposite. Jesus is very explicit in his teaching that *everyone* is broken and in need of liberation, the oppressor perhaps even more so than the oppressed, the rich even more so than the poor.

When this becomes clear, the "exclusiveness" for the broken and oppressed that is the distinctive mark of liberation theology quickly turns around to reveal itself as a mark of radical "inclusiveness." From the biblical point of view, "broken

and oppressed” defines the reality of all humanity. We are all in need of liberation, and we are all offered the gift of unconditional acceptance, and this unconditional acceptance is seen as the true heart of the gospel of justice.

In terms of racial justice, this means that liberation is not only needed by people of color, but by everyone on all sides of the racial divide. God’s liberation is for people of all colors. For the sake of all of us, the pursuit of racial justice becomes central to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Tension about Justice in the Church

Not everyone in the church agrees with the premise that justice belongs at the center of the biblical message. Throughout history, there have been great tensions about the place of justice in the gospel and in the mission of the church. Many Christians allow issues of social justice only at the far edges of the gospel’s implementation. Some even believe that such “earthly matters” are totally unrelated to and irrelevant to the gospel.

Tragically, in predominantly white and middle-class churches of European descent, the centrality of justice in Scripture is not usually given much prominence and is not proclaimed to be a central purpose of the churches’ ministry. In fact, in the United States the most serious theological tensions and divisions in many churches revolve around whether “social gospel” has a legitimate place in the church at all. The theological subjects of sin, salvation, and eternal life are all too often dealt with as purely spiritual matters and are kept separated and segregated from the secondary concerns of social issues and charity.

Even when there is general agreement on the importance of justice, groups within the church often stand on opposite sides of specific issues of justice. While such differences of opinion are understandable, they can have disastrous consequences. There is no clearer example of this than the tragic reality that the church has stood just as often on the side of those who endorse racism as it has been on the side of those who struggle against it

In this book there is no place for debating the question of the biblical priority of justice, including racial justice. The underlying assumption is that anyone who names the name of Jesus is called to participate in the ministry of justice in the world as a central part of the mission of the church. Moreover, no justice task is more important in the Christian church than to stand against racism and to work for the dismantling of racism in the church and in society. I am completely convinced that the weight of the biblical message and the historical theology of the church lead incontrovertibly toward this belief. In fact, I believe deeply that the temptation to maintain a church where justice, especially racial justice, can be placed on the periphery of our mission is comparable to the temptation of early Christians to place a pinch of incense on the emperor’s altar as a sign of their allegiance to the emperor. In doing so they sought to keep themselves safe from the consequences of choosing Christ above all else.

I was not taught this always, nor did I always believe it. Over the years, I have gained theological understanding that I did not get when I went to seminary more than forty years ago. I have learned to believe that God's call to work for earthly justice, especially to end racism, is not a marginal or unimportant social teaching of the church, but is a central part of the Christian message of redemption, transformation, and reconciliation. Racism needs to be understood as a devastating expression of the sinfulness and brokenness of humanity. The struggle to overcome racism is part of the completion of God's redemptive plan to restore justice and wholeness in our world and to all of creation.

Foundation Stone 3: Taking back stolen sacred stories.

In every era of history, those who have sought to exclude sisters and brothers from the family have used the word of God—the Holy Scriptures and the teachings of the Christian church—to support their aims. The Bible and other sacred stories have been twisted and distorted to make it seem that God is in favor of racism and supports other forms of oppression. Opposing racism and other forms of injustice is deemed to be political, and, consequently, not something Christians are supposed to get involved in. When this happens, the truth is being stolen and made into a lie; the Bible is being turned upside down. If we are going to be equipped to work for the elimination of racism, we need to turn the Bible right side up again. We need to take back stolen stories and reclaim an anti-racist gospel.

One of the most pervasive misinterpretations of the Bible that has been taught and believed throughout United States history—both in the church and society in general—is that God endorses the superiority of white people; that God actually approved of the enslavement of Africans and mass killing of American Indians. This is just one example of the perversion of truth. Sexism, classism, nationalism, warfare, and racism have all been defended as religious causes backed by God and supported by the church. Time and again, preachers have stood in pulpits, waving a Bible over their heads, to justify an evil action by one group against another by claiming God's approval.

Throughout much of United States history, the blatant lies of white supremacy were believed by most of society, not just by the Ku Klux Klan and other hate groups. They were even taught and believed within most of our own churches. Though most of us no longer believe the teachings that claim religious support for overt racism, there still exist many dangerously subtle and sophisticated ways in which the Bible and the Christian faith are misused to defend racism. Many of us are caught up easily in believing these stolen stories, and we pass them along to others without even realizing we are promoting racism and white supremacy. Consider the following examples.

Stolen Story 1: The Defense of Individualism

- “I don’t need anyone. I only need to rely on myself.”
- “My relationship with God is strictly a private and individual matter.”
- “I got what I have by my own personal initiative. It had nothing to do with my gender, my class, or my race.”

Individualism and exaggerated private initiative are principal doctrines of American civil religion that are taught everywhere, including within the church. Not only is individualism in direct conflict with the central teachings of Christianity, it is a primary support for racism. We need to recognize and support individual rights as part of all human rights, of course, but not the “I-pulled-myself-up-by-my-bootstraps” mentality that places individual self-reliance and self-achievement above reliance on community. This “super individualism,” which brags, “I got what I have because I earned it, and if they had ambition and initiative, they could have it too,” is destructive of community. It represents itself and identifies itself as part of the teachings of the Christian faith, and it is used in overt and subtle ways, especially by white people, to take personal credit for what actually are the benefits of racism and to blame people of color for not having what racism has taken from them. To some degree, all of us have been socialized into an individualistic mindset that supports racism and perpetuates this stolen story.

Stolen Story 2: Charity in Place of Justice

- “Please help the poor and needy this Christmas by giving toys and turkeys.”
- “You can rescue this child from poverty—or you can turn the page.”
- “The Bible says, ‘The poor you will always have with you.’”

It feels good to give from our plenty to help someone in crisis or struggling to survive. Churches in the United States, along with private and public agencies, are justifiably proud of their charity, the social services they provide, and their acts of goodwill toward those in need. However, we often are caught on an endless treadmill of contributing to the immediate needs of the poor without also working to bring poverty to an end. It is not enough to work to reduce the effects of poverty, racism, and other forms of oppression, when justice calls us to dismantle the systems that create and perpetuate these evils.

Doing charitable deeds is a clear biblical mandate, but there is something wrong if in feeling good about doing charity we forget about doing justice. “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). When charity is a substitute for justice and a means to support racism and other forms of injustice, it is a stolen sacred story.

Stolen Story 3: Justification of Riches

- “You’re so rich; God has really blessed you.”
- “God just gave me a new car, and you can have one too, if you believe.”
- “God has blessed America with riches and strength.”

The most blatant of all stolen stories may be the attribution of wealth and other material blessings as gifts of God. On radio and television, from the podium and pulpit, we hear over and over again that we are a blessed nation, a blessed people. We hear it so often that it flows from our lips without thinking: “I feel so blessed.” But if the riches of a select people reflect the intentional blessing of God, does it not follow that the poverty of so many others must also be the will of God? If I am rich because of God’s blessing, others must be poor because of God’s curse.

We would be shocked to hear a purse snatcher describe his booty as a blessing from God, but it is acceptable religious language for us to describe our country as a gift from God, despite the fact that this land we call “our land” is property stolen from America’s indigenous peoples. If 2 percent of the world’s people own more than 50 percent of the wealth, while the bottom half of the world’s adult population owns barely 1 percent of global wealth; and if one billion people in the world suffer from hunger and malnutrition, and 24,000 people die every day from hunger or hunger-related causes, there has to be some reason other than the will of God to explain this inequality.³

Taking Back Stolen Stories

Is there any one among us who hasn’t been taken in by these distortions? In order to effectively deal with racism in the church and in society, we need to reject these and other stolen sacred stories and reclaim that which the Bible and the Christian faith truly teach us. We need to clearly renounce the way God’s name has been used throughout history to support poverty, racism, war, and genocide, and we need to reject every effort to continue that practice in our present-day lives. We must turn the Bible right side up, and rid ourselves of the conscious and unconscious use of sacred stories to uphold injustice.

There is plenty of biblical precedence to help us do this. The righteous anger of the prophets and of Jesus himself at the support given by religious people to the injustices surrounding them should help put words into our mouths.

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:23-24)

Then [Jesus] entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer’; but you have made it a den of robbers.” (Luke 19:45-46)

A surprise awaits us when we take back sacred stories that have been stolen to defend racism, the surprise of an anti-racist gospel. This gospel isn't new, but it has been so distorted and disguised that we didn't recognize it. It is up to us to reclaim this gospel in our efforts to understand and combat racism.

Foundation Stone 4:

We are called and carried on the shoulders of witnesses
 who struggled before us.

We are not alone in this journey to reclaim an anti-racist gospel and shape an anti-racist church. We are part of an enormously large, centuries-old movement of saints who have been called by God to stand against all forms of injustice. With the birth of the church, this calling became part and parcel of the Christian faith. In our own calling, we are being carried on the shoulders of a great cloud of Christian witnesses who struggled before us.

To understand this in greater depth, we need to go back to the time of the church's beginning, when the early Christians were learning to be Christians and suffering great oppression and injustice at the hand of the emperor for the efforts. The Christian community then faced the same terrible dilemma we face today: they knew that God had called them to carry out an extremely difficult task, but they were having trouble finding the courage to do it. Like the church today, they had trouble hearing and following their own message. It was only as they discovered their collective power in working and praying that they were able to overcome enormous odds and win victories over oppression.

The Company They Kept

One of my favorite examples of standing together against evil is found in the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament. Hebrews was written at a time when Christians were being forced to choose between allegiance to Christ and allegiance to the Roman emperor. If they remained true to their faith, they faced losing their lives. But if they switched their allegiance from Christ to the emperor, their lives would be spared. All they had to do was acknowledge the emperor's claim to be God by taking a little pinch of incense and placing it on the emperor's altar. Once done, the rewards of Roman citizenship would be restored and they would be permitted to continue to worship Jesus. They only had to acknowledge that the emperor was equal in power and authority to God.

With their lives on the line, the choice was tempting. The writer of Hebrews wrote to motivate Christians to persevere in saying no to the emperor and to recommit themselves to Christ, even if it meant death. The writer reminded them that, in centuries past, thousands upon thousands of God's people were faced with the same choice. The writer named heroes of the past, including Noah and his family, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the Hebrew people who fled from

Egypt, and many more—a great cloud of witnesses—to inspire the early Christians to remain steadfast in faith and to stand strong in the face of threat of persecution by the government.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. (Hebrews 12:1)

A choice had to be made: either to join the cloud of witnesses or to be cut off from them forever. Saying yes to the emperor's tempting offer would result in cutting themselves off from this great body, a fate far worse than any imaginable form of torture and death. But saying no to the emperor meant maintaining a living connection to these saints of God—a connection that not even the emperor's sword could sever. The choice was theirs. The fate of the church and its connection to God's people throughout the world and throughout the ages was in their hands.

The Company We Keep

The same choice is before us today as we work to restore the family of God. Do we follow the witness of those who went before us by standing faithful to our God of justice and righteousness? Or do we capitulate to the values of the empire and, in doing so, continue to receive the rewards produced by racism, classism, nationalism, and other forms of oppression and injustice? The fate of the church today and its connection to God's people throughout the world is in our hands. As we stand with many other sisters and brothers in this early part of the twenty-first century preparing for the next steps in working to end racism and other forms of injustice, we need to be clear that the call of God heard in the past by the saints who struggled before us is now ours to hear. God's call and the company of a cloud of witnesses are invincible weapons for combating racism and for building a multiracial and multicultural society.

The struggle against racism that has been going on in our country for more than five hundred years is one of many campaigns against injustice over the centuries. This courageous and indefatigable movement of resistance began in response to the first act of racism in 1492. Millions of resisters have gone before us; millions more will follow after us until the job is finally done and we have become a racism-free society. As Christians we are called by God to join this movement; this is an essential and fundamental part of what it means to follow Jesus. When we said yes to the invitation to follow Jesus, we were saying yes to being workers for justice, and in particular to being workers to end racism and to construct a racially just church and society. Who from your denomination, either from the distant past or in recent times, has worked for peace and justice in our nation?

Whether sitting alone reading this book or part of a study group in a congregation, university, or seminary, you are part of the much larger community of the

family of God, a family to which we all belong. Perhaps you use traditional theological language to describe this community, such as “the communion of saints” or “the body of Christ.” Or maybe your experience and orientation has taught you to add new and more contemporary expressions describing your participation in “The Movement” or “The Struggle” for “The Beloved Community.” These different expressions are not incompatible with traditional theological language, but are complementary ways of seeing ourselves in the company of others, working for justice in the world. All great efforts to correct injustice in the world, whether they deal with oppression of nation against nation, class against class, gender against gender, or race against race, are interrelated and are part of the sacred task of restoring the family of God. Like the early Christians, the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that we too are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and we too are called to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

Who from your denomination, either from the distant past or in recent times, has worked for peace and justice in our nation?

Looking Racism in the Eye

Make no mistake about the seriousness of the task before us. To confront racism is to confront the diabolical presence of evil. To take on this enemy within the church and society is to take on a threatening killer that will resist elimination until its very dying moment. Yet, only by recognizing the presence of this enemy in ourselves, our churches, and every part of society is there a chance of actually overcoming this monster that will not easily be made to go away.

It takes courage to stare this malicious enemy in its face. We need to pray fervently for the ability to overcome our fear of doing so. As St. Paul has taught us, we cannot take on the power of evil without putting on the armor of God. If we are going to take on the diabolical power of racism, we need a solid rock to stand on.

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. (Ephesians 6:12-13)

Part I

The Past:
Racism and Resisting Racism
in Church History

“The only way out is back through. In order to get well you have to go back through what made you sick in the first place.”¹

—REV. JOHNNY RAY YOUNGBLOOD

The present is a product of the past. In the church’s past is a painful history of racism, resulting in a divided and sick Christianity today. There can be no understanding of how racism functions today in the church or anywhere else in society without knowing this history. Nor can we begin to comprehend our task of eliminating racism in the church or in society without having a clear picture of efforts to end racism in times before us. In order to move forward to the future, we must remember the past and deal openly and honestly with it. Following are two stories that illustrate that remembering history, particularly the long and complex history of racism and resistance to racism in the church, is critically important and, in the end, profoundly spiritually healing, even if agonizingly painful.

The MAAFA Suite

St. Paul’s Baptist Church, a large African American congregation in Brooklyn, New York, has a weeklong observance each year called the MAAFA. Named after a Kiswahili word describing an unspeakable and inexpressible catastrophe, MAAFA is used to represent the African holocaust of enslavement of an

estimated 70 million people and the indescribable horrors it produced. The Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood, senior pastor of St. Paul's Church, led his congregation in creating a movement to commemorate the MAAFA as an annual passion story. At the center of this annual event is "The MAAFA Suite . . . A Healing Journey," a three-hour dramatic psychodrama portraying the pain of African enslavement and the power of survival. Other churches and community groups around the United States have adopted the MAAFA observance as a means of "healing through remembrance."

The MAAFA observance places strong emphasis on healing the "wounded warrior" from the destructive power of racism. The goal is not only healing, however, but also reclaiming the power to struggle to dismantle racism and to change the society responsible for the wounding. In the end, the restored warrior and the restored faith community become a stronger part of organizing the struggle to change society.²

Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North

In 2006, filmmaker Katrina Browne produced a historical documentary called *Traces of the Trade* that even today dramatically affects the lives of many white people, including members the Episcopal Church USA, the denomination within which it originated. *Traces of the Trade* explores the story of white wealth inherited from the slave trade.

Years before making the documentary, Browne discovered that her ancestors, the DeWolf family from New England, were one of the largest slave-trading families in United States history. From 1769 to 1820, three generations of DeWolf men trafficked in human beings. The family owned forty-seven ships that were used to transport thousands of Africans across the Middle Passage into slavery and enabled the DeWolfs to amass an enormous fortune.

In the film, the DeWolf descendants retrace the steps of the Triangle Trade, visiting the DeWolf hometown of Bristol, Rhode Island, slave forts on the coast of Ghana, and the ruins of a family plantation in Cuba. Back home, the family confronts the question of what to do now. In the context of growing calls for reparations for slavery, family members struggle with the question of how to think about and contribute to repairing the damages of racism. In doing so, Browne and her family reach the core of the issue of racism for white people: exaggerated and unwarranted power and privilege. And they come to the realization of the need for healing and transformation not only in the society at large, but inside themselves.³

Our Own Healing through Remembering Church History

The healing that participants in the MAAFA Suite and *Traces of the Trade* received through remembering their painful history of racism and resistance to racism is

possible for us too, and for the congregations and denominations to which we belong. In fact, it is critical that we seek healing through remembering, for, as philosopher George Santayana warns: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”⁴ But before we can add our chapters to the story of confronting racism in the church in the present and in the future, we must become acquainted with the chapters that precede us.

The goal of part 1 is to help us see how the present reality in which we live is a product of our past. All of us suffer from the pain and sickness of racism that happened before we were even born. And all of us are beneficiaries of the healing and reconciliation made possible by the struggles by people who resisted racism in the recent and distant past. We must know this history in order to understand the present and to face up to the changes that need to be made to assure that the future isn’t a repeat of the past. For this reason, the chapters that follow focus on the history of racism and resistance to racism in the church:

2. A Tale of Two Churches
3. Racism in U.S. Church History
4. Anti-Racism in U.S. Church History
5. Racism and Anti-Racism in the Post–Civil Rights Era

The Larger Context of Societal History

Although this book is concerned primarily with the church’s story, it is important to emphasize and underscore that the church’s story is part of the world’s story. Not only do we need to connect the church’s present with its past, but it is just as important that we connect the church’s history to the history of the world outside the church. It is critically important to have a general knowledge of the history of race and racism in society before developing the contextual history of race and racism in the church. Hopefully, readers will bring some awareness of this wider history to the reading of this book. However, it may be helpful to recall some broad strokes of this history before moving forward.

For starters, it is a surprise to many people to learn how recently the idea of race and the practice of racism appeared in the history of the western world. Race and racism, as we understand them today from a western perspective, are relatively new phenomena. Contrary to the beliefs of many, before the fifteenth century A.D., no one thought in terms of “race” as we do today. Humans have always oppressed other humans—tribes fought tribes, nations overwhelmed nations, aristocracy subjugated peasantry, men dominated women—but practices of oppression by one “race” toward another began only about five hundred years ago.

Contemporary racism began with the European creation of the idea of race in the context of global discovery and colonial expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The idea of race, a social/political construct with no basis in reality and without scientific validity, was joined with its equally violent

ideological twin, colonialism, to create a new form of oppression that exceeded all others in cruelty and violence. In the European discovery of the “new world,” the idea of superior and inferior races was used to justify the brutal process of colonial occupation and conquest. The primary purpose of race and racism was to establish the superiority of the Caucasoid (European/white) race and to justify European dominance over all other races, as well as the taking of their land and resources. Over the course of the following centuries, the people of the world were divided into separate races, and the white race declared itself superior and supreme to all others. All history since that time has been (and still is today) devastatingly and destructively affected by colonialism and racism.

Although racism and colonialism’s effects were global in scope, it was in the Western Hemisphere, and particularly in the shaping of our own nation in the eighteenth century, that racism took on the unique form that we know. White supremacy was formally established within United States political, economic, and social structures, under the principle that the land and its resources exist for the white race, and all other races exist to serve white people. In addition to the “superior” white race, five other “inferior” races were legally created, with extensive laws defining and controlling them: Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans/Middle Eastern people. Each of these racialized groups was aggressively and violently oppressed, and each of them has a long history of determined resistance to their oppression.

The dramatic changes brought about in the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s were the result of centuries of resistance by all people of color and also by many white people. At the same time, contrary to popular belief, the civil rights movement did not resolve the issue of racism in the United States. It did, however, result in the end of legalized apartheid and segregation and established a new foothold for the continuing struggle for racial justice that was to follow.

There is not space in this book for a more detailed description of the birth of race, racism, and colonialism in Europe in the sixteenth century and the evolution of these ideas in the American colonies and the nation of the United States. Since I and others have described such history elsewhere, I will refer, when necessary, to particular resources that readers may find helpful.⁵