Healing the wounds of racism

“We labor for a day that we may never see, and always in the face of opposition.”

Josina Guess interviews Jemar Tisby

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Jemar Tisby is the founder of The Witness: A Black Christian Collective, the host of the Pass the Mic podcast, and the author of The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism. I caught up with him on the campus of the University of Mississippi, where he is completing his Ph.D. in history. A statue honoring James Meredith, whose enrollment in 1962 unleashed violent riots,

depicts Meredith walking alone in the grass. Meanwhile, a tall statue of a Confederate soldier stands on guard at the entrance of campus. Those grounds felt like an appropriate place for a conversation about the tension of the already and the not yet when it comes to healing the wounds of racism.

You've been working for many years to name and dismantle racism. What led you to write *The Color of Compromise*?

I wrote this book because I love the church and I hate racism. *The Color of Compromise* names what many Christians have long felt, that there is something deeply wrong in the church when it comes to race. It aims to give people the tools to speak beyond personal frustration or discomfort, to point to a larger narrative.

As a graduate student, I've been outraged by my study of racism in America: example after example, century after century, both in the church and beyond. I've read about the lynching of Mary Turner, who was pregnant when she was killed for speaking out about her husband's murder. I've learned about the pressure people put on Martin Luther King Jr. (and his wife and children) because he was speaking out about the beloved community. Getting into the nitty-gritty details of history has given me a new sense of my responsibility to learn about and fight racism.

A lot of books address racism in the church, but most of them aren't focused on historical data. I use history in this book as a vehicle to convey how drastically the church needs to change. At the same time, change only happens when people first reckon with history. If we commit ourselves to truth-telling, perhaps a faithful remnant will commit ourselves to repair.

You've talked about feeling less at home in the church as your awareness grew. Can you say more about that sense of dis-belonging? How are you finding spiritual community in the midst of that?

I became a Christian and was formed in white evangelical churches. From 2014 to 2016, I became more conscious of the white supremacy embedded in some of these traditions. Like many of people of color who grew up in these environments, I've needed to decolonize my faith and my theology. This has been an ongoing process.

Campbell Robertson wrote an article for the New York Times called "A Quiet Exodus," which is about black people leaving white evangelical churches in response to the 2016 election. I later wrote "A Wilderness Wandering," which describes the in-

between space that occurs for many of us after that exodus.

I find spiritual community in The Witness, a multi-ethnic virtual community of people who feel like the place we thought was home is not home. We're searching for the promised land knowing full well that we won't get to it in this life. I've also found community in the Pass the Mic tour, text messages, and group chats. The people I pray with, laugh with, and cry with are spread all across the country. We're using technology to make a diasporic community.

That great cloud, right?

Yeah, I've had to reconceptualize my concept of church. It's not just a place but a people.

Also, I've learned that when it comes to spiritual health, self-care is really important. We need to know when to unplug from social media. Laughter is important, so if I'm going to watch something these days it's likely to be a comedy.

You've gotten great reviews and made wonderful connections in your antiracism work, but there are also people who openly attack and criticize your work. How do you handle the trolls?

We are dealing with spiritual forces in the heavenly realms. Whiteness is a spiritual stronghold. The people who are the most recalcitrant are those who most need the gospel. They're calling the name of Christ while behaving in a way that is antichrist. If they aren't exhibiting grace, tenderness, humility, or any of the fruits of the Spirit, I remind myself that a tree is known by its fruit. This helps me not to respond with hostility.

There's a tension in your book—and in the Christian life—between how awful things were and are and how beautiful things could be. You contend that racism is never going to go away completely. It will always exist; it just changes its form. How can we use this information to move toward action instead of despair?

We can't eradicate racism any more than we can stop people from doing bad things. But racism can change. I'm not in physical chains, as my ancestors were. That is a positive change. How did it happen? People courageously stood against the status quo, at great risk.

We still need that kind of courage. Racism is embedded in institutions. Here at the University of Mississippi, basketball players in 2019 had to kneel to protest a Confederate rally on campus. We're under the shadow of a state flag that has the Confederate battle emblem emblazoned on it. Those are obvious issues. There are less obvious ones as well, like the racial wealth gap and maternity-related death rates for black women. What choice do we have other than to continue to labor for change?

I also believe that we have an obligation to our ancestors. Fannie Lou Hamer, who was born in 1917, lost her home and job as a sharecropper just for registering to vote. She was a woman of strong Christian faith who critiqued churches, including black churches, for their apathy and cowardice. I need to honor people like her, those who were compelled by faith to make my possibilities possible.

You grew up in a suburb of Chicago and now you are situated in the rural south. How does your personal geography impact your understanding of racism and your sense of vocation?

As a black male, I've experienced racial profiling all across the United States. Growing up, I was aware of what anti-black racism felt like on a personal level. But I didn't have a black teacher until college. And it was only after seminary, when I started to take graduate courses in history, that I really began to learn about centuries of racism in this country and in the church.

I got an experiential education when I moved to the Arkansas side of the Mississippi Delta to volunteer with Teach for America. I now live in the fourth poorest county in the nation. Systemic poverty and racial injustice are deeply embedded here. Maybe you've heard about the 1919 Elaine massacre of men, women, and children. It happened 30 minutes from where I live.

This is ground zero for racism in a lot of ways. The University of Mississippi, which bills itself as the flagship public university of the state, has been a haven for generations of white elites. There is no better place to study race, religion, and social movements. I'm not just studying these things, I'm living them.

You argue that race is a social construct. Why is it important to know that?

My book challenges the false idea that a society constructed along racial lines was inevitable. Knowing that people in the past made intentional decisions to construct a

racial hierarchy can be a source of hope. It means that we can make intentional decisions to deconstruct racial hierarchies. That kind of awareness is empowering.

How has your book been received among white evangelicals?

There's a generation of white evangelicals who grew up with the culture war talking points, and I'm pleasantly surprised by their response to the book. Many of them can see that I'm not attacking their faith, but I am pointing out some deep historical and theological flaws.

The biggest struggle for many evangelicals is with my examination of the 1960's onward. Up through the civil rights era, there's a chronological distance that allows readers to stay detached from their own responsibility. When I start describing the rise of the religious right, the shortcomings of Billy Graham, and the Reagan era, a lot of people get uncomfortable.

I hope people will sit with that discomfort and let it fuel them to take the kind of action that changes institutions. But many of them are struggling with deeply held beliefs that have become an idol. It will take work.

How do you hope your book will impact people and institutions?

In the book I ask some deep questions about what is owed in terms of justice. There are costs involved in responding to these questions. Moving toward justice is easy to agree with in theory, but in practice it might mean shutting down or radically transforming a white flight private school. It might mean diverting money or changing leadership.

I hope my book helps the church rethink who we regard as theological leaders. In seminary, I was taught to see Jonathan Edwards as one of America's greatest theologians. Yet, he owned human beings. How could someone who was so erudite in theology participate in the brutal institution of chattel slavery? This isn't just a question of praxis; it gets at the heart of Edwards's doctrine of the image of God and his biblical hermeneutic.

I hope people will be inspired to examine theological leaders in the black Christian tradition for whom faith is expressed through activism. Ida B. Wells was not a pastor, but her faith was transformative. Frederick Douglass was not a pastor, but he had a prophetic and oratorical gift. I hope we will start looking beyond the canon of

treatises and sermons written by slaveholding men and toward non-traditional sources—like op-ed columns in black newspapers and the lives of courageous leaders—to inform our theology.

How do you bear the burden of history and current events without breaking?

I'm sobered by how much suffering is involved in this work. We labor for a day that we may never see, and always in the face of opposition. Often, the most acute and painful opposition comes from people we thought would be our allies, like other Christians. But facing opposition doesn't mean we're doing it wrong.

Writing this book, I learned that my job is to tell the truth. How people receive it is on them.

Listen to the entire interview here. This version has been edited and condensed.