



How American Christians can break free from ‘slaveholder religion’

By Jonathan Merritt /
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(RNS) — It’s been a century and a half since the American Civil War ended, but according to Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, the slaveholder religion of that era has quietly persisted until today. But to understand this development, a history lesson is in order.

In the mid-19th century, Christian abolitionists used the Bible to make a case for racial equality. Plantation owners could not let this stand, so they paid preachers to use the Bible to argue for white supremacy. This oppressive theology is what Wilson-Hartgrove calls “slaveholder religion.”

“After the South lost the Civil War, slavery was abolished, but slaveholder religion never went away,” he says. “It never repented. And it is with us still.”

Not convinced? Neither was Wilson-Hartgrove until he went back to read the many sermons and books from the mid-19th century, which remain in many American theological libraries until today. He was shocked by how familiar they felt. Slaveholder propaganda was eerily similar to the messages propagated by 21st-century conservative white evangelicals.

In “Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom From Slaveholder Religion,” Wilson-Hartgrove wrestles with the troubling history and theology held by many believers. But more importantly, he explains what must be done to break free from these oppressive views and spark a more just expression of Christianity in America.

Does Donald Trump promote a “slaveholder religion,” in your opinion? If so, how?

The crucial point is that slaveholder religion promotes him. It doesn’t seem that the basic message of Christianity was ever personally appealing to Donald Trump. But candidate Trump discovered the incredible political power of slaveholder religion while attacking America’s first black president.

When researching this book in 2016, I spent a lot of time reading sermons by white Southern preachers during Reconstruction — the brief period when black people had political power after the Civil War. I was struck by how much they sounded like Trump.

The nation was in trouble, Washington was a den of corruption, and somebody needed to rise up and “take our country back.” This was the language of slaveholder religion after abolition. It was all about white supremacy, but it was framed as a moral crusade. Historians call it the “Redemption Movement” because it really was a matter of faith for white Southerners. Just as “Make America Great Again” is a matter of faith for many today.

What about the religious leaders and pastors who have supported and advise Trump? People like Jerry Falwell Jr. and Paula White and Robert Jeffress? Are they promoting a slaveholder religion?

Yes, but they don’t see it. They think they are standing up for righteousness over and against the liberal media. This is where religion is so powerful. It gives people a capacity to believe in spite of the evidence. Which means you’ll never prove to them that they’re wrong. But I don’t know how to explain Trumpvangelicals apart from white Christianity’s long history of justifying and defending white supremacy. How else do you reconcile “America first” with “the last shall be first”?

Still, I don’t want to let the rest of us off too easy. As I talk to folks in churches around the country, most people find Trumpvangelicals to be extreme. Falwell and Jeffress are on TV a lot, but Christianity Today has distanced itself from them. They’re hardly guiding lights for most evangelicals.

But another pattern of slaveholder religion is to separate personal faith from political engagement. If you’re not going to fight for white hegemony, slaveholder religion would like you to stay focused on personal piety and compassion ministries — to not be “too political.” So we also have to face the silence of white moderates as a vestige of slaveholder religion. It’s not just the Trump defenders who got us here. It’s also all the good Christian people who did nothing when a man who was endorsed by the KKK became a candidate for president.

Why is it that a white man is writing a book about a “slaveholder religion” anyway? Shouldn’t we be lifting up minority voices in this conversation rather than speaking on behalf of the marginalized?

Yes. But I’m not speaking for anyone else in [this book](#). I’m confessing my — and my people’s — complicity in slaveholder religion. And I’m trying to share the good news that another way of being Christian is possible. Even for white folks.

Twenty years ago, when I was trying to get a foot into the world of the Christian right, I hit a dead end. I was nauseated by the hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of it all when I saw it up close. And I didn’t know what to do.

I’m still a Christian today because I was invited into the black-led freedom movement and learned the long history of another way of being Christian in America. I showed up like Saul — a blind man who only knew I’d heard the voice of Jesus ask, “Why are you persecuting me?” A lot of this book is about what I learned from the Ananiases who shepherded me into beloved

community. They are the ones who took me by the shoulders, looked me in the eyes, and said, “You have to talk to white people about this. Maybe they’ll be able to hear it from you.”

When writing about your escape from slaveholder religion, you call yourself a “man torn in two.” What does this mean?

That the line between the Christianity of the slaveholder and the Christianity of Christ runs through all of us.

In order to tell the truth about myself, I’ve had to learn to say two things that seem to contradict one another: first, that the people who raised me and taught me to love Jesus gave me an incredible gift, and second, that those same people also passed on to me the habits and assumptions of slaveholder religion.

Until we’re honest about this, we can’t be saved. But as Martin Luther said, only the gospel that kills gives life. Once we stop trying to justify ourselves and deal with the hard truth, the Bible comes to life. Every chapter in this book ends with a rereading of a gospel story. The Bible comes to life when we release it from the bondage of slaveholder religion. I’m a preacher. I want people to hear and believe this good news.

How do church communities — often unaware — promote racial blindness and even racism?

By telling us stories that make us feel righteous about our segregation. One example: I’ve come to see how profoundly it shaped my understanding of the world that I learned rap music was bad music. Evil, even.

I mean, any white guy who grew up in rural North Carolina heard country music on the radio and bluegrass at the family reunion. That’s our culture. But it took religion to teach me that someone else’s culture was sin. I was a minister at the local black church in my neighborhood before one of our youth pulled me aside 15 years ago and said, “You need to listen to Tupac.” It wasn’t just about the music. He was inviting me to understand how he saw the world.

Racial habits are the hundreds of little ways we perpetuate systemic racism every day just by living the way we’ve always lived. Churches aren’t alone in reinforcing these habits, but the fact that the church remains the most segregated institution in America suggests that slaveholder religion still holds more sway that most of us want to believe.

You’re a progressive Christian, and so is Rev. William Barber, who wrote your foreword. What about your conservative brothers and sisters? Do you see them fighting the same battle or are progressives carrying all the weight?

I think most people in the media understand “progressive Christian” as a political label. Folks who believe everyone deserves health care, a living wage and equal protection under the law are

labeled “progressive.” If Christian faith compels you to believe that, you’re a “progressive Christian.”

But Franklin Graham says progressives are atheists. Slaveholder religion makes racial politics a matter of faith. It wasn’t enough to argue that we didn’t have the money to pay for Obama’s policies or that they didn’t stand up to constitutional scrutiny. For Graham and others, efforts to expand democracy and access in America were an assault on God’s order. His 50-state “Decision America” tour in 2016 was really about framing “Make America Great Again” as a 21st-century Redemption movement.

I don’t think most people who send their monthly donation to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association think they are supporting a political movement. They want people to know the love of Jesus. But their religion has been hijacked by extremists. And we’re all going to have to decide which side we’re on. We need a lot more people who think of themselves as moderate or conservative to stand up and say, “What’s happening in our name is extreme, and we’re not going to allow it anymore.”

Last year, conservative blogger Rod Dreher stirred up a lot of conversation about a Benedict Option, which encouraged Christians to basically retreat from popular culture. I know you’ve written on Benedict and the monastic tradition, and your Benedict doesn’t look very much like Dreher’s. Is there another Benedict Option in Reconstructing the Gospel?

Rod grew up in the South like me. We have a lot in common. But he doesn’t want to grapple with racial blindness. I’ve tried to talk with him about this. I invited him to come visit us at Rutba House (a community the author co-founded for the formerly homeless) when he was writing his book. But our interpretation of Benedict didn’t fit his politics.

I love Benedict and have learned much from Benedictines — some of whom have come and walked the streets of our neighborhood in their long black robes. It’s a sight to behold, I’ll tell you! But Benedict, like Jesus and all the prophets, is dangerous when weaponized by slaveholder religion for the culture wars.

In the fifth century, when Roman civilization was crumbling, Benedict discovered the gospel as a way of living a new world in the shell of the old. Rod’s “Benedict Option” is essentially an effort to hold onto white culture as the demographics of American democracy trend blacker and browner. He can’t see that, but the crusade for “religious liberty” that his Benedict Option wants to wage nonviolently is the battle white nationalists are willing to fight in the streets. The clergy in Charlottesville told me that the Klan and Nazis didn’t call them racial slurs when they stood them down in the street; they spewed anti-gay rhetoric.

I’ve read Benedict for the past 15 years in the context of the prophetic black church tradition. So I see Benedict’s way-of-life Christianity as concrete practices for unlearning whiteness and learning beloved community as white supremacy unravels. Yes, this is a very different Benedict Option. But it’s one our world desperately needs right now.

Some people would acknowledge that the problems you address are real, but they might critique your tone. For example, I can imagine some would say that phrases like “slaveholder religion” are extreme and inflammatory and unnecessarily divisive. How would you respond to such criticisms?

It’s hard to speak softly when the house is on fire. When the people you love are in danger, you holler. Of course, a lot of people don’t feel this way because their families aren’t being torn apart by deportations. Their kids aren’t getting shot by the police. But this is my family. These are my kids. I’ve been to too many funerals.

James Baldwin said, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” American Christianity hasn’t faced our legacy of slaveholder religion. Ultimately, I don’t know whether white people, as a group, are willing to change. But I’m going to do everything I can to make sure we face this. I’m doing it because I love white people. But I’m also doing it because, when the house is burning down, there’s no way to just save your room. We’re all in this together, whether we want to be or not.