

TURNING

DISRUPTING SYSTEMS OF

THE TABLES

EXCLUSION, MARGINALIZATION & PRIVILEGE

ON RACE

WRITTEN BY

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The Raceless Gospel Initiative at Good Faith Media strives to undermine the credibility of the sociopolitical construct of race and its progeny in all Christian communities so that Jesus followers can live more deeply into their baptismal identity as expressed by the Apostle Paul to the community at Galatia: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:27-28, NRSV).

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“One thing about tables, they always turn.”

Author Unknown

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T

Jesus' gospel is not for neat freaks, for folks who believe, "Everything has a place and there's a place for everything."

This is good news for those of us who were led to believe we had to get our lives in order before we could attend a "come-to-Jesus-meeting."

More so, his words make a racket. Even if you read them with music playing softly in the background, Jesus' words still hurt your ears. It's not easy listening. His words don't support the mantra: "The Bible said it and that settles it."

I should know. I had a neatly packaged belief system before I started walking with him.

Jesus walks towards people we've crossed off our list. He crosses lines and makes a mess of categories! He comes in and rearranges things: "The last will be first and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16, NRSV). Jesus upsets the way we do things, though many church leaders clean things up on Sunday mornings.



Pictured counterclockwise are originally works by Starlette Thomas titled "Under the table," "Turntables," and "A seat at the table."

INTRODUCTION

They told the 12-year-old me, “You are a sinner. You don’t want to go to hell, do you? Then, you need to get saved. Just three easy steps and you’ll be delivered. Repeat the ABCs of salvation — accept, believe, confess and you’ll be on your way to heaven. Just say these magic words and your sins will disappear. Presto chango! We’ve got a new member here!”

Confession was followed by baptism, which was no sweat. “Just hold your nose, hold your breath and down you go.” No real labor, I was born again, a new person.

“Now, just read your Bible. Wear this and don’t wear that. Don’t go here, and don’t talk like that. Talk to your pastor and have more faith. Trust God and pray always. Go to church every Sunday. Attend Bible study on Wednesdays, give your offerings, pay your tithes. If you do these things, everything will turn out right.”

It was all so practical, so matter of fact, which should have been a red flag.

I had given my life to Jesus and became a believer. I thought this was the extent of my participation, but later learned the meaning of working out your salvation.

My racialized identity and the white supremacist belief system that comes along with it began to call into question the efficacy of my Christian identity. Who am I as a member of Christ’s body?

I read the entire Bible and then the books started to read me. Jesus’ red words started to highlight discrepancies — not just in my own life but in American Christianity. The tables were turning on me.

Jesus’ words started to make a fuss. The closer I followed him, the more I saw that he was kicking up dust. Nothing was settled. There was so much work to be done. For me, this was most evident in terms of the sociopolitical construct of race and its progeny.

It had literally divided the church in North America into unequal parts. Pastor and civil rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. called it “our most segregated hour.” At 11 a.m. sharp on Sunday mornings, Christians faithfully towed what W.E.B. DuBois called “the color line.”

More so, we have gone so far as to color in the face of God, to racialize Jesus' gospel and to believe that the Holy Spirit inspires it all. This includes our racialized divisions despite Paul's calling and ministry to the gentiles¹ and this explicit statement in his letter to the Galatians: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:27-28, NRSV).

But Paul's travelogue and his letters seemingly make no difference to many of us now. Despite repeatedly being put on trial, he never stopped defending the gentiles. After sharing of his conversion, Paul says something that until now was unheard of, not included in any of his other testimonies:

"After I had returned to Jerusalem and while I was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw Jesus saying to me, 'Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And while the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him.' Then he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the gentiles'" (22:17-21, NRSV).

Paul had literally crossed the line when he brought the gentiles into the synagogue with him.² He represented a bridge too far for them.

There was a court for them, the Court of the Gentiles. It was the only place in the Temple where the Gentiles were allowed. There were literal "keep out" signs. "The most complete of the two, discovered on the Temple Mount in 1871, reads: 'No alien may enter within the balustrade

¹ In Paul's day, you were either a Jew or a non- Jew, that is a gentile. The equivalent of an unbeliever, you were excluded from the Temple, permitted only to gather at the Court of the Gentiles. There was literal "keep out" signs and thus, Paul was an integrationist as is thoroughly documented in the book of Acts.

² Acts 20:19-30

around the sanctuary and the enclosure. Whoever is caught, on himself shall he put blame for the death which will ensue.'"³

"Keep out or otherwise, it will be your fault that we killed you. Don't blame us. Paul, if we kill you, you brought this on yourself."

Despite Paul's work and witness, we, Christians, created separate theologies,⁴ churches⁵ and denominations⁶ in support of our divisions. Historically, Christians have provided religious reasons for exempting entire nationalities from social and civic participation in American life. These disciples of Jesus wrote them off as "heathens" and in so doing, defined the American way of life.

Race. It is America's religion, though part superstition⁷ and part of the legal system,⁸ converting European immigrants to white people⁹ and the rest to a generic grouping, that is people of color.

Race, nothing more than a color-coded caste system,¹⁰ claims to sort the good and bad people. The righteous and the unrighteous are determined

³ Lauren Montieth, "Keep Out, for the Sake of All that is Holy! (A Temple Warning Inscription)," https://library.brown.edu/iip/stories/temple_warning/, August 3, 2017.

⁴ Begin with books to include *Black Theology and Black Power* by James Cone and *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* by James W. Perkinson, which discuss the context for both racialized frameworks.

⁵ Henry Mitchell's *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* details the conditions that led to the creation of a separate religious experience for African Americans.

⁶ The Southern Baptist Convention and the Northern Baptist Convention, later American Baptist Churches USA were both formed in response to American slavery, which was established and maintained based on race and its categories.

⁷ Jacques Barzun, *Race: A Study in Superstition*, (New York, NY: Harper Torch Books, 1937, 1965).

⁸ "The prerequisite laws determined the types of faces and features present in the United States, and thus, who could marry and bear children here."

Ian Haney Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Whiteness*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 11.

⁹ To understand more about whiteness at the intersection of capitalism consider *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* by David Roediger.

¹⁰ "Caste is the infrastructure of our divisions. It is the architecture of human hierarchy, the subconscious code of instructions for maintaining, in our case, a four-hundred-year-old social order."

Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, (New York, NY: Random House, 2020), 17.

by the meanings we ascribe to physical appearance: social coloring¹¹ of skin, texture of hair, size of nose, and shape of eyes though race is without biological basis.

It is an aesthetic righteousness; you just must look a certain way. But wait! I thought Jesus looked at our hearts and was responsible for salvation? Race, then, is another gospel and Christians would do well to treat it this way.

Whiteness is a currency that many European Americans trade in, a benefit used in exchange for better treatment. "For societies in which racism is an operating system, whiteness is a form of currency with a significantly high exchange rate," writes Emily M. Drew.¹² American scholar George Lipsitz has also documented the unjust gains of whiteness in his book *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*.

But this is not the Jesus way, which would explain my desire to turn the tables on race. How else would we all be able to sit down together as this "table of brotherhood" that Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of?

We must disrupt this social arrangement.¹³ We have got to clear the church of race and its progeny. I've got a few cords and a few ideas that need a whipping, driven out of Christian thought and its embodiment in community.

I am inspired by Jesus' cleansing of the Temple as told in all four of the gospels: Matthew 21:12-17, Mark 11:15-19, Luke 19:45-48, and John 2:13-16. After whipping up the crowd of animals and people and working up a sweat, "He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!'"¹⁴

¹¹ Social coloring is a neologism I coined to note that human beings are not physically colored beige, that is to represent the "mixed race," black, brown, red, yellow, and white. Instead, we agree to see each other this way.

¹² Emily M. Drew, *Whiteness as Currency: Rethinking the Exchange Rate*. In: Scapp, R., Seitz, B. (eds) *Living with Class*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137326799_11,

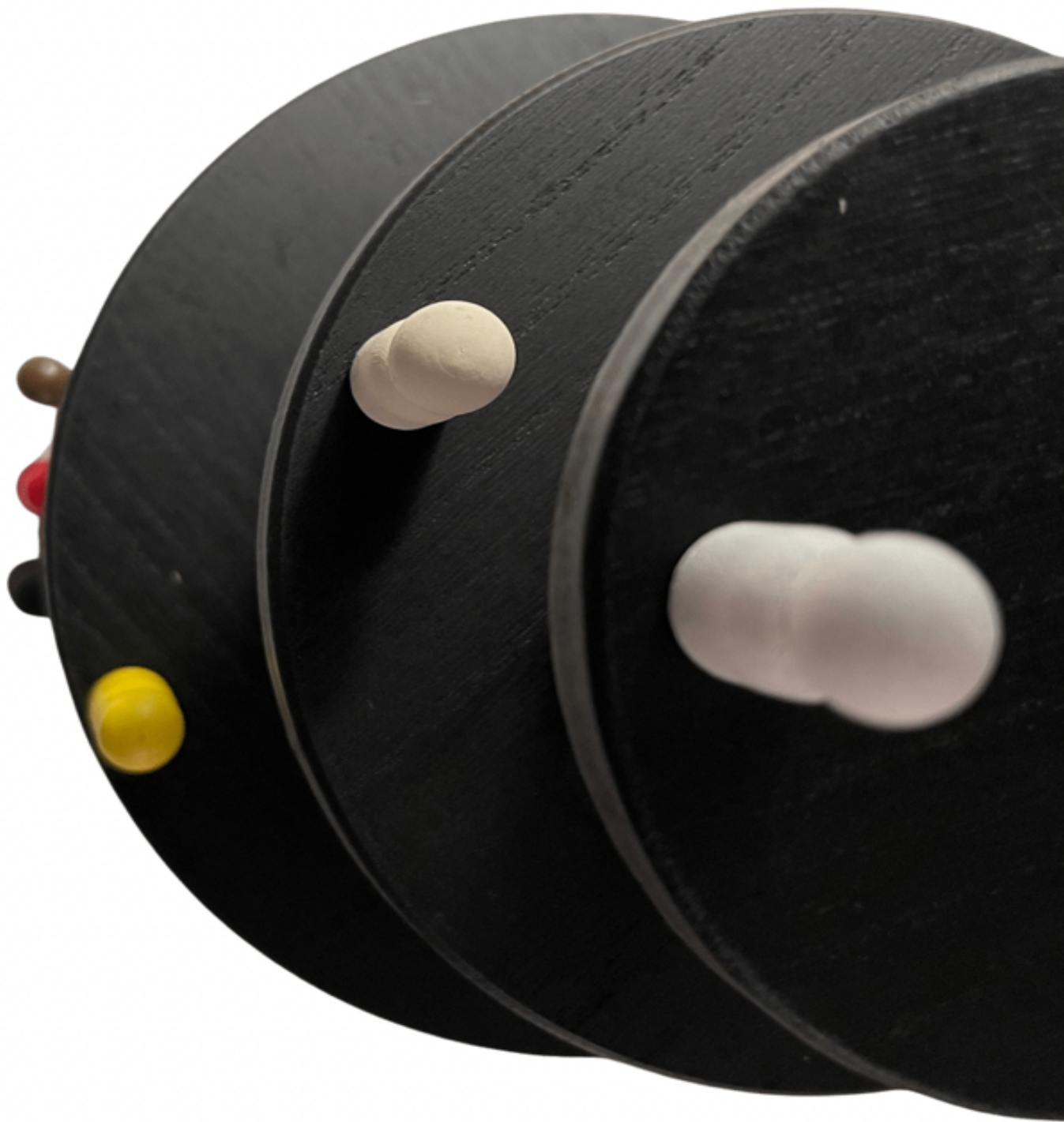
Consider also Meizhu Liu, "Climbing the Up Escalator: White Advantages in Wealth Accumulation," in *The Color of Wealth*, eds Meizhu Liu, et al. (New York, NY: The New Press, 2005), 225–266 and Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993): 1714.

¹³ Charles W. Mills calls it "the racial contract" in his book of the same name.

¹⁴ John 2:16, NRSV

Jesus destroyed Temple property, challenged status quo leadership and the people's expectation of God. I think Jesus is still cleaning house. My fresh disgust with race and the unequal demands it makes of us is proof enough that it is time to start rearranging things.

If you are still reading, then you are likely interested in this redecorating project and the disruptive questions that follow. More than an answer key, the responses to race will come from you — not me. Just wait until you see what Christians have done to the church to accommodate race. It might make you want to turn over a table or two.



“Under the table” is a visual demonstration of race both as a tabled conversation and a hierarchal system of oppression. But if we tackle the subject, then we could topple the sociopolitical construct. In addition to the sections labeled Table Talk, you are encouraged to interact with the artwork.

OFF THE **TABLE**

“Wait! Jesus, stop! Let’s talk about it! Let me explain! The table! Put that chair down! Now, Jesus don’t be mad.”

But no one could stop him, and this was not the time to “have a little talk with Jesus.” The Word made flesh was so angry that he started throwing things.

Tables, turtledoves and Tyrian shekels or *tetradrachms* for the Greeks, the method of payment accepted in the Jerusalem Temple and thought to be the form of payment Judas Iscariot received, were all in the air. The money changers exchanged these shekels for Roman currency. They were just trying to keep everything running smoothly, or so they thought.

Everything was up in the air, and Jesus is literally ruffling feathers. Can you hear the money falling to the ground? Can you see mouths covered to prevent audible gasps from escaping? Do you see people up and looking around?

Perhaps, persons are wondering, “How are we going to explain this? How are we going to clean this up?” Not just the mess Jesus made but the message he is sending. Spoiler alert: They pin all their problems on him and then they kill him.

Jesus gave a visual demonstration of his disappointment. Whip in hand, he taught them as he drove them out of the Temple. “He said to them,

‘It is written,

‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’;
but you are making it a den of robbers” (Matthew 21:17-18, NRSV).

When persons enter the Temple, they are invited to put their hands together in prayer and to lift them in praise — not reach into their pockets.

In Jesus’ day, merchants had set up shop, created a marketplace for people to exchange their currency and to buy animals for sacrifice. But

some would argue that the arrangement could be explained. It's quite simple.

People were often traveling great distances and carrying a sacrifice with them could be difficult. So, the Temple sold thoroughly inspected, pre-approved cattle, sheep, and doves in their Perfect Sacrifice giftshop. But forgiveness and salvation were never meant to be a capitalist transaction.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' words are heard in the form of a question. It's a pop quiz. Jesus asked them,

"Is it not written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'?
But you have made it a den of robbers" (11:17, NRSV).

Either way, Jesus is saying, "You should know better. And if you have forgotten, let me ensure that you never again forget."

Jesus is clearly not afraid of confrontation and has no problem clearing a room. The moneychangers and those who sold animals for sacrifice had a good thing going. Their forgiveness business was running smoothly. Jesus entered the Temple and made a mess of things.

Turtledoves! Come get your turtledoves!

We had a system, a tradition, an understanding until he showed up.

In Matthew's gospel, what has been labeled the cleansing of the Temple is just after Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem. One minute, the people get it and the next minute, they don't. In Mark's account, after the triumphal entry, Jesus curses a fig tree and then cleanses the Temple. Either way and no matter the order, Jesus is on a roll.

He is in no mood for things not producing, not serving their purpose. There are some things that are non-negotiable and simply off the table.

TABLE TALK

1. Often portrayed as sweet baby Jesus or like “a lamb led to slaughter,” what do you make of this Jesus, who is not only expressing his anger and disgust with this pay-to-say-you-are-righteous system but providing a visual demonstration? What is Jesus so angry about?
2. A house of prayer or a hideout for thieves, what is Jesus accusing them of robbing the people of?
3. Robbers, it's the same name for those that Jesus is crucified next to. Are there connections to be made here? If so, what are they? Why are they being made here?
4. There is a Temple tax, used to maintain the building, which has been a long-standing agreement (Exodus 30:11-16). But then there is corruption. Materialism is now a part of the worship service. Why is this addition disruptive to the spiritual life?
5. Not afraid of conflict and though there are local and imperial offices within the Temple, Jesus addresses the Temple officials directly. What would you say is his conflict style? What is the conflict style of his disciples, past and present?
6. They have made God's house a part of a strip mall. Jesus turns over the tables and cleans them off for a fresh start. What should the tables be used for?
7. Children of God or people of color? Please note: White is a color too, better yet a shade if we are being scientific and more specific. If Christians believe that all human beings are made in the image of God, then why is race not off the table?
8. What do we need to turn over in our faith houses? What prevents an all-inclusive, multinational worship service?



“A seat at the table” is a depiction of a hierarchical system left in place when persons are simply invited to pull up a chair. The furniture is merely rearranged, but the social positioning of bodies remains unchanged. It is not enough to turn over the tables in protest or as act of defiance. This is not an invitation to merely make a mess but to redistribute power equally.

COME TO THE **TABLE**

Did you hear what Jesus did at the Temple? He went into the synagogue and made a mess of things. Forget our neatly organized services and the way that we do things.

Make no mention of protocol, Robert's Rules of Order, or a church business meeting. Jesus didn't make a motion or call for a vote. Jesus didn't want to start a committee; instead, he started a commotion.

The Gospel writer Mark says that Jesus was teaching them a lesson while picking up tables and flipping them. Jesus wanted things to change immediately. It would not be synagogue business as usual.

I feel the same way about race and Sunday morning. Jesus didn't want us to eat at segregated fellowship tables. Worse still, on too many Sunday mornings, we have made his church a haven for hate. We maintain leadership styles and systems that keep in place the privileged, which ensures that the marginalized don't take up too much space.

I could talk until I am blue in the face about race and all the harm it has done to Jesus' gospel. Do you know how race got its start in the first place? What the word means when we get past the physical characteristics and the social coloring¹⁵ of skin? Michael Omi and Howard Winant in their pivotal work *Racial Formation in the United States* describe race "as an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle."¹⁶

Race supports classism. In fact, it is a color-coded caste system¹⁷ and upholds self-serving prejudices and the privileges we believe only belong to a select few. This is not about the "survival of the fittest." People survive because we want them to. They survive because we have agreed that they should.

¹⁵ Social coloring is a neologism, a word I coined to describe the social agreement to see each other socially as colored: beige, that is mixed race, black, brown, red, yellow, and white.

¹⁶ Michael Omi & Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 55.

¹⁷ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, (New York, NY: Random House, 2020).

Race is a contract as brilliantly outlined by Charles W. Mills in his book, *The Racial Contract*, where he writes, "But the peculiar contract to which I am referring, though based on the social contract tradition that has been central to Western political theory, is not a contract between everybody ('we the people'), but between just the people who count, the people who really are people ('we the white people'). So, it is a Racial Contract."¹⁸

Race is a word we use to define how we want to see each other, who will make it home after a traffic stop and who gets to feel at home in their body. Race determines whose labor will go smoothly,¹⁹ who can live in this community,²⁰ who can attend this college or university,²¹ who can apply for this job,²² who can sit at this table.

We have made everything about race and now nothing has meaning apart from it.

Still, race has no biological basis, as determined by the American Anthropological Association, which released a statement that reads in part, "Throughout history, whenever different groups have come into contact, they have interbred. The continued sharing of genetic materials has maintained all of humankind as a single species."²³ The social studies conducted were biased and flawed at the outset, claiming inherent strength and weakness based on one's physical appearance.

Race is also without a theological foundation. Biblical scholar, Cain Hope Felder wrote,

¹⁸ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 3.

¹⁹ The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that African American women, those racialized as black, experience maternal mortality two to three times higher than that of socially colored white women.

Donna L. Hoyert, Ph.D., "Maternal Mortality Rates in the United States, 2020,"

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/maternal-mortality/2020/maternal-mortality-rates-2020.htm>

²⁰ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Company, 2017).

²¹ Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

²² Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth Century America*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005).

²³ American Anthropological Association Statement on Race, <https://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2583>, May 17, 1998.

“In antiquity, we do not have any elaborate definitions of or theories about race. ... Ancient authors of biblical texts did not have a color consciousness (awareness of certain physiological differences). ... In fact, the Bible contains no narratives in which the original intent was to negate the full humanity of (African) people or view (African) people in an unfavorable way. Such negative attitudes about (African people) and persons of direct African descent are entirely post-biblical.”²⁴

Stripped of scientific racism²⁵ and its pseudo-theological framing, the social system is held up by our tongues. It could all come crashing down if we changed the way that we talked about race.

Because race does not define us as human beings. Instead, it confines certain populations and color-codes their bodies to maintain a social hierarchy that maintains white supremacy.²⁶ White as an identity is a modern concept, not existing before or apart from American slavery. White as a form of self-identification made its first appearance after about 1680.²⁷

Before Europe’s so-called “Age of Enlightenment” (1685-1815), the Bible was used to justify the enslavement of African and Indigenous people. There was the curse of Ham in Genesis 9 which was wrongly applied to Africans and claimed they were cursed to live a life of perpetual servitude. Add to this a watered-down meaning of baptism which maintained that new converts to the Christian faith could be enslaved²⁸

²⁴ Cain Hope Felder, *Race, Racism and the Biblical Narrative*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 2002), 1-2.

²⁵ A science devoted to proving the biological supremacy of Europeans who later become socially colored white people and justifying the enslavement of African people in America.

²⁶ Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, editor, *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley- Blackwell, 1997).

²⁷ Winthrop Jordan, *The White Man’s Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States*, (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1974), 52.

²⁸ “While this 1667 law is critical to understanding the legal development of slavery, baptism also played a singular role in defining the English understanding of human difference.”

The Virginia legislature passed a law in 1667 which declared that baptism did not mean that the African converts were free from slavery. They could, in fact, be a slave and Christian.

Rebecca Anne Goetz, *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 2012), 86.

and a bible trimmed of any verses that would call into question their condition or incite rebellion.²⁹ This is how you make “slaves for life.”

Colonial settlers³⁰ were instructed to conquer “heathen”³¹ lands for the sake of the gospel.

This aim was a part of Sunday School lessons like Aunt Margaret’s Twelve Stories, published by the American Sunday School Union in 1856³² and voyeuristic mission trips. Race was created to support the goals of conquest and colonization to civilize the world. It would be accomplished through brutal violence and forced cultural assimilation.

Race said human beings fit neatly into a box. Today, race remains a set of boxes, one of six categories for human beings that we fall into: beige, that is mixed race, black, brown, red, yellow, and white. Race does not identify us; instead, it uses our bodies to maintain a social hierarchy.

Included are several pieces of my artwork, visual aids to help us get the picture. I use wood and words like raceless to cast doubt on race and to shake its foundation. Let’s get to the bottom of this. Question what race means for our bodies and the future of Christian fellowship.

How else will we get everyone to the table? I need your help waiting on all these tables.³³ Will you pass this message along? We could turn over more tables if you do.

²⁹ Michel Martin, “Slave Bible From The 1800s Omitted Key Passages That Could Incite Rebellion,” <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/09/674995075/slave-bible-from-the-1800s-omitted-key-passages-that-could-incite-rebellion>, December 9, 2018.

³⁰ Settler colonialism is rooted in the replacement of indigenous cultures with a settler society, which creates another identity that supports its sovereignty.

³¹ Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2022).

³² It is one of the books in the Children’s Heritage Series. An illustration titled “The Heathen” is a part of one of the stories shared.

³³ “And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables” (Acts 6:2, NRSV).

TABLE TALK

1. How were you introduced to race? Who made the connection for you, to your body and in relationships?
2. What are the definitions for race that were given to you? What examples, if any, were offered to explain it? Did it make sense to you? Why or why not?
3. Today, what does race mean to you? What definition does it give American society?
4. What does the North American church need to come to terms with regarding race? What are we not saying? Say the quiet part out loud.
5. What does race say about where we go to worship? The way we worship? How we worship? How long we worship?
6. What does race say about who God loves and accepts and conversely hates and rejects? What does race say about Jesus' appearance and who he will appear with?
7. Conversion to the Christian faith and cultural assimilation do not go hand in hand. What is the work ahead to remove this connection?
8. How should we respond to race's role in North American Christianity?
9. What does race make you question about your faith?

ON THE **TABLE**

Let's all put our cards on the table. Let's admit that whiteness pays some of us under the table. The continued use of race and racialized identities is of social detriment to some and of unspoken benefit to those who choose to identify as socially colored white.

We all know it. All together now, let's say it. People are not the problem; our need for godlike power over bodies is.

The problems of race will not be solved by adding more chairs or extending the table. The status quo conversations will never say much about equality or justice for all. And they won't until we turn over the tables.

Say what you mean; don't kick anyone under the table. It's time to come clean.

Yes, we will need new furniture, a new floor plan and a decorator. But before we place an order or call a friend for a favor, let's be honest about how we got here.

The first system we will need to disrupt is our family. This is not a matter of birth order or your parents' favorite child. No, this is about unspoken agreements and family secrets.

We'll need to turn over a kitchen table, a coffee table and a bedside table or two before this structural work begins. There are questions at the end of each chapter because these systems need to be interrogated but so do our family members.

There is no ominous "they"; there is just me and you.

Raise your hand. We have all gone along with it. How else can we explain our family reunions and our segregated churches? They go hand in hand.

It's time we confess it. We cannot write a check large enough to address it. In our walk with Jesus, the tables are bound to turn.

So, we let Jesus into our heart but not into our home. Why? Because we know Jesus will likely interrupt and question the way we do things.

Because if Christianity does not have the power to deliver us from racialized discrimination and injustice, then what kind of salvation are we talking about? If the church in North America cannot unify as the body of Christ due to race, then what are we saying about Jesus' gospel? If walking with Jesus does not lead us to give up unearned social benefits, then where are we going with this anyway? And if our families can profess the faith in public while holding private prejudices, then why are we surprised when Jesus turns over tables?

It is safe to talk about race as a historical reality. It allows us to put distance between us and them, to keep the problem and the solution in the past. But race is not an old problem, which strips us of the excuse that it will always be with us.

Race has been used to distort our image of family. But as children of God, we must see ourselves differently. We have forgotten that we are members of each other as Christ's body.

Stephen J. Patterson writes about "the forgotten creed," which reads:

"For you are all children (sons) of God in the Spirit.
There is no Jew or Greek,
there is no slave or free,
there is no male and female;
For you are all one in the Spirit."³⁴

These dyads representing power in relationship are submerged in the water of baptism. The creed is in opposition to an ancient cliché that said something along the lines of: "I thank God every day that I was born a native, not a foreigner; free and not a slave; a man and not a woman."³⁵ The creed goes against who the society supported and endorsed as worthy of belonging. No one excluded or pushed to the side.

Read the creed again and then get up and help me move these tables.

³⁴ Stephen J. Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity's Original Struggle against Bigotry, Slavery & Sexism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 29.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 6

TABLE TALK

1. What conversations has race tabled about yourself? Your family?
2. What do you need to put on the table because of your relationship with Jesus? And what does this mean?
3. What understandings might you be missing due to who is not at the table?
4. In addition to the raceless gospel, what other words do we need to say to turn the tables on race and ensure that everyone is welcome?



“Turntables” invites you to imagine a time and place where the system is disrupted, to consider the words and relationships that would shake things up. See these overturned tables and the circles they create as a labyrinth. Take a walk and consider what this work will require of you.

THE TABLES ARE TURNING

The beginning of the Raceless Gospel was an internal stirring. Presented with a faith all figured out, race called it all into question. Race made a mess of my deepest convictions about the *imago dei* and this neighborly love that Jesus embodied.

The tables were turning on me. The North American church's acceptance of social policies and practices of exclusion, marginalization and privilege began to deeply trouble me. Paul's letter to the Galatians and specifically chapter 3 and verses 27 and 28 got my wheels turning:

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Without speaking the truth about this divisive, capitalistic, and patriarchal power in relationships, it made me question the church's credibility and the validity of Sunday morning worship.

Was baptism ineffectual? Was the salvific work of Christ unfinished church business? If we would not turn the tables on race and call into question its power base, then why were we going to the church building? Were we the ones selling turtle doves?

The thought of it made me angry. This was not what I signed up for. This is not what I had given my life to Jesus for. I started looking for these tables.

Howard Thurman, my patron saint of inward orientation and guide to the spiritual life's deepest places wrote in *The Luminous Darkness* about segregation,

"As I look upon those days, I never gave to the way of living demanded of me by my environment, the inner sanction of my spirit. I gave it what may be called the sanction of strategy. There was a place in me untouched by these pressures on my life."³⁶

³⁶ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*, (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989), 4.

Yes, there is a place where race does not exist. This racelessness is within the self. I invite you to find it and to cultivate it with relationships not influenced by power dynamics.

Once I turned the tables on race by divesting of my racialized identity and choosing not to relate to people according to the social coloring of skin, stereotypical assumptions went flying out of the window. Fear also had no place. We were left to face each other as individuals — no longer grouped according to prejudice.

Unbeknownst to me, I had taken my power back. The citizen of a country and not a color, I was also decolonizing my identity and undoing a history of cultural assimilation. I was raceless. Wading in the waters of baptism, God had troubled them. Now I had ears to hear of a “kin-dom” coming.

Preparations needed to be made. So, I rolled up my sleeves and commenced to table turning.

The Raceless Gospel proclaims a baptismal identity that can have a rippling effect on American society — beginning with the segregated church. It is not a vision of a color-blind or post-racial society. The vision does not come with rose-colored glasses or the denial of the history and present implications of American slavery, Reconstruction, Jim and Jane Crow segregation or the effects of personal, institutional, and systemic racism.

Instead, it calls into question the justification for the abuses suffered in relationships forced and fixed through our shared citizenship. Because race is not the reason why some are excluded and marginalized in American society. Race is not at the front of the line handing out privilege.

In fact, if it were not race, then we would create something else to segregate us from them. We have agreed to something far more sinister when we choose to reduce human beings to colors — beige, black, brown, red, yellow, and white. We have made a thoughtful arrangement when we tuck social meanings under our epidermis to determine who will benefit from the earth and its resources.

I invite you to turn the tables on race and name what you see.

TABLE TALK

Close your eyes and take a few cleansing breaths. Now confess what race made you believe about yourself and your siblings in the faith.

This mostly blank page will only stare back at you until you write on it.



“Table for...” asks you to name who you would call to the table. Who oversees reservations? Who are the (best/worst) tables reserved for and what are they serving? If you don't like the answers, then turn the tables on race.

RESET THE **TABLE**: A BIBLIOGRAPHY

Not to be confused with books to place on your coffee table, these books will set the table for conversations on subversive hospitality and inclusion.

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