

The Color of Compromise:
The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism

Study and Discussion Guide¹ for
Christian Church In Nebraska Clergy
September 2020

The June 19th Letter to The Churches in Nebraska ended:

And I will continue our work as your Regional Minister in partnering with our Local Churches in seeking ways for all of them, and us, to engage in learning about, dialoguing about, and taking action on race and racism in America. . . . So, I will continue to ask myself, and my family, friends, and colleagues, where I need to stand in this moment. . . . And bear the weight of this time. Will you join me?

“Will you join me?” was at once both rhetorical and authentic. A question that evokes a sense of responsibility and accountability. On September 1st, the clergy serving Disciple churches in Nebraska will embark on a study of the book titled *The Color of Compromise*. What I hope will be a first-step towards our ability to continue to work on the questions that await us; questions to ask one another, and the members of the churches that we each, and all serve, individually and collectively.

That letter penned on Juneteenth briefly touched on the history of racism in our country, including a quick look at the period following Reconstruction (1865-1875) that led to the creation of Jim Crow laws. Much more than that history of our country is included in the book *The Color of Compromise*. The story and history of how The Church also contributed to racism in America is also explored.

On May 25th, George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer. It took me until Juneteenth, June 19th, to finish writing a Letter to the Churches in Nebraska. And here we are, again, in the wake of another young Black body being shot in the person of Jacob Blake in Kenosha WI.

The Christian Church In Nebraska has had an Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation team in previous years, and we have awarded grants to address race and racism through our Reconciliation Ministries. *The Color of Compromise* is a step further down this path; a path that the clergy and I have suggested its purpose is: *To build a sustainable movement in the Christian Church In Nebraska to address (equip people to actively respond to) race and racism in Nebraska in partnership with our Local and General Churches*

A brief comment about the author of *The Color of Compromise*. In Jemar Tisby you will meet someone who has done thorough research of our history as a nation and various expressions of The Church. Tisby focuses on three Protestant denominations, in particular the evangelical communities within the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist expressions of Christianity; simply because that is where he was shaped and formed, and continues to be in ministry. Tisby is a scholar who writes, podcasts, and speaks about race, religion, politics, and culture (see back of book). His writings express a view, to be certain; a well-grounded historical survey of the landscape woven together by stories of real people; that is, Tisby's view is authentic and vulnerable while also being scholarly and engaging.

¹ Chris Morton was inspired by the study guide developed by the Racial Justice and The Church Work Group of First Presbyterian Church of Berkley CA - <https://fpckerkeley.org/firstprescolorofcompromise/> -- to develop the materials in this guide.

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Clergy Discussion Covenant

Listening, learning, reflecting, and developing hearts of greater compassion and justice is part of our missional formation. Thus, we invite you to wade further into "vulnerable and uncomfortable waters" through the reading and discussion of *The Color of Compromise*—that, by God's grace, they may become baptismal waters of repentance, renewal, and reconciliation.²

1. Seek to be *curious* ~~ if you find you want your view to be heard, or that someone else is "wrong," invite your spirit to be still and in the quiet ask yourself, "What might I learn from this part of our conversation?"
2. *Affirm* what others are saying before offering a "rebuttal" or critique;
3. *Participation* is critical to our ministry; if you are someone who listens a lot, please add your voice pro-actively; and if you are someone who talks a lot, please allow for silence (think "three" and then me);
4. *Boundaries* are important, and we want to respect them for all of us which translates to: **not** interrupting others, **not** talking over others, and **not** giving advice;
5. *Sharing Respectfully* means that we will use "I" statements about our own experiences and thoughts, owning what we think and believe;
6. *Ouch* is a way for us to acknowledge that something that someone said was hurtful, and *Oops* is a way to acknowledge our mistake --- *assume positive intentions of others while also acknowledging potential negative impact*;
7. *Seek Understanding* by asking in prayer for Guidance and Wisdom, and exploring our own emotions when we feel triggered by something that someone said; and
8. *Confidentiality* ensures that we are speaking about our own selves, and not sharing about others.
9. *No Wrong Questions*, so it's OK to ask any question.

² *Ibid.*

SESSIONS

Session 1: September 1st and 15th

Pages 4-6

Read Chapter 1 (pages 13-24) and The Conclusion (pages 213-215)
Review of Clergy Discussion Covenant
Review and Discuss Questions

Session 1+”: September 29th

Nebraska History on Race Relations and Racism
Chapter 5 (pages 72-73)
Movie to Watch Before: *A Time for Burning* (church in Omaha)
YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujw_KJzTF8k

Session 2: October 20th

Pages 7-

Read Chapters 2, 3, and 4
Review and Discuss Questions

Session 3: November 3rd

Pages

Read Chapters 5 and 6
Review and Discuss Questions

Session 4: November 17th

Pages

Read Chapters 7 and 8
Review and Discuss Questions

Session 5: December 1st

Pages

Read Chapters 9 and 10
Review and Discuss Questions

Session 6: December 15th

Pages

Read Chapter 11
Review and Discuss Questions

SESSION 1: September 1st and 15th

Read Chapter 1 (pages 13-24) and The Conclusion (pages 213-215)

Review of Clergy Discussion Covenant

Review and Discuss Questions

Chapter 1 and Conclusion:

In September of 1963, four girls were killed as a result of the bombing of Sixth Ave Baptist Church.

Charles Morgan spoke at the all-white Young Men's Business Club where he delivered a speech that included, "Who did it? Who threw that bomb? . . . We all did it." We are the white people who are complicit in allowing an environment of hatred and racism. He then went on to say to the group, "It is all the Christians and all their ministers who spoke too late in the anguished cries against violence." Followed by a series of questions to the ministers (page 14) and a poignant statement to us as Christians: "The failure of many Christians in the South and across the nation to decisively oppose the racism in their families, communities, and even in their own churches provided fertile soil for the seeds of hatred to grow."

Question 1: *Do egregious acts of racism, like a church bombing, occur within a context of compromise? If so, where have you seen that borne out in your own lived experiences?*

Walter Scott used the 5-finger exercise of faith, repentance, baptism, remission of sins, and gift of the Holy Spirit to instruct children who he encouraged to go home and teach their parents. Tisby doesn't use a mnemonic like Scott's, but did say that Scripture and History teach us that there is a line to be drawn between reconciliation, repentance, confession, and truth.

Question 2: *What has your experience been with Disciples' Reconciliation Ministries? And how has what you have learned from those trainings, or other anti-racism trainings helped you to address racism in The Church, in our communities, and in our nation to move towards reconciliation?*

"Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured." (page 15 – Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Question 3: *What is the truth that Christians and The Church will need to hear? What is the truth that the Euro-centered white Church will need to express for there to be true reconciliation within The Church, in our communities, and in our nation?*

Racism is understood as a system of oppression based on race. Racism can operate through impersonal systems, and not be simply malicious words and actions of individuals. So, another way of understanding racism is *prejudice plus power*. White people have historically had the power to construct a social caste system based on skin color with people of African descent at the bottom of the system. Creating a culture that is experienced as *white supremacy* – white people and white culture as normal and superior – even if they claim people of color as their brothers and sisters.

Question 4: *Has the murder of George Floyd, Ahmad Aubrey, Breonna Taylor and shooting of Jacob Blake caused you to consider racism in new ways? How do you think about race, racism, white privilege, and white supremacy today?*

Things could be different. At several points in history – colonial era, Reconstruction, demise of Jim Crow laws – Christians could have confronted racism instead of compromising. As racism changes its expressions over time, becoming more subtle over our nation’s history, from 1619 to 1919 and 2020, the Euro-centric white church’s compromise with racism has become subtler. History demonstrates that racism never goes away; it just adapts. (page 19)

Question 5: *What have you experienced, or do you understand that The Euro-centric white Church did do to confront racism? And in what ways have you seen it compromise the opportunity to change and chose comfort instead?*

The Church has not always and uniformly been complicit with racism. . . . Whenever there has been racial injustice, there have been Christians who fought against it in the name of Jesus Christ. . . . The Black church, in particular, has always been a bulwark against bigotry. Forged in the fires of racial prejudice, the Black church emerged as the ark of safety for people of African descent. But the overall picture of The Church in America depicted in this book is not positive when it comes to addressing racism in our churches, our communities, and our nation. Christians name a few individuals who stood against the racism of their day and claim them as heroes. They fail to recognize how *rarely* believers made public and persistent commitment to racial equality against the culture of their churches and denominations.

Question 6: *Have you seen, heard, or experienced church leaders avoid the difficulty of speaking the truth in the face of racism in your church or communities, or our nation? When have you avoided the chance to speak into racism in the church you have served, or in communities where you have lived? What have you said about the deaths of Ahmad Aubrey, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and now Jacob Blake?*

The people who reject this book will level several common objections. The same, recycled complaints about such writing appear throughout history: it’s too liberal, it expresses Marxist Communist ideology, it reduces Black people to a state of helplessness and “victim mentality.” They will try to counter the telling of history in this way with counterexamples, and that the historical facts are wrong or been misinterpreted, or that this ‘abandons the gospel,’ replacing it with ‘social justice.’ You may grapple with the notion that this narrative contradicts what you were taught as a child: peoples cast as heroes, systemic injustice, patterns of oppression, political conservatism not being the only Christian way, insights to Black suffering.

Question 7: *Have you found yourself wondering if some of the facts and stories that you’ve read so far are fair, accurate, and/or true? Do you find Tisby’s writing to be too liberal, and/or not ‘gospel?’ How is reading and discussing this book not “complicity Christianity,” but “courageous Christianity?” (see Conclusion)*

While it may not be new to you, it is important to remind us as Tisby does that people throughout history are not a 'single story,' but complex and often contradictory figures.

The book's intent is not to shut you down emotionally and intellectually with defensiveness because it triggers a sense of guilt or shame. The book is not intended to tell people how bad they have been, or are. The facts that are depicted in the book show how white leaders and laity made decisions to maintain the racist status quo. The stories and depiction of history is intended to evoke grief. Because grief can be good. "For Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret." (II Corinthians 7:10) A natural response to others' suffering. Empathy. To weep with those who weep. Which is necessary for healing.

Question 8: *How did you experience the book so far? Did you find yourself feeling defensive about anything said thus far? If so, where did those feelings come from? And what did you do when you had those feelings?*

Revelation 7:9 depicts eternity as a time when skin color will no longer be a source of pain or arrogant pride, but will serve as a multihued reflection of God's image. Which is not a distant reality that we long for, but a revelation of a blueprint and motivation to seek unity right now. The Lord's Prayer that we invoke asks God to bring such a heavenly blueprint to earth, today. (Matthew 6:10) But the Scriptures are clear that reconciliation is not something that humans achieve, but a reality that we must receive (Ephesians 2:14)

Questions 9: *How do you see yourself living in the tension, or what Parker Palmer calls "the tragic gap," between the way things are now, and the way we and/or Scripture envisions them becoming?*

Closing Question: *How do you envision yourself sharing this book with the people at the church where you are serving currently?*

Session 1.5: October 6th

Nebraska History on Race Relations and Racism (See Attached Document)

Chapter 5 (pages 72-73)

Movie to Watch Before: *A Time for Burning* (church in Omaha)

YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujw_KJzTF8k

Chapter 5 is titled *Defending Slavery at the Onset of the Civil War*, and the author quickly re-defines the battle lines not on geography, but theologically. Quoting Abraham Lincoln in his 2nd inaugural address, Tinsby names the theological tension as, “Both [Union and Confederacy] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other . . . The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully.”

Question 1: *Where was God?*

Question 2: *How would you summarize or describe the theological tensions today?*

Question 3: *How will the tensions of today end? Tinsby says that the Civil War brought an end to slavery, but it did not end the tensions. What’s the “end goal,” if there is one?*

Question 4: *Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. s “wrote “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” (Letter from Birmingham Jail) How do those words affect how we see those who are oppressors/oppressed, or “winners/losers?”*

Question 4: *Where did/do we see the schisms in Nebraska’s Disciple churches?*

The *Selected Events in History of Nebraska* names a series of events --- (review)

Question 5: *What events would you add?*

Question 6: *Earlier, Tinsby has repeated that racism has become increasingly more subtle. How have these events in history continued today, but maybe more subtly?*

SESSION 2: November 3rd

Read Chapters 2, 3, and 4

Review and Discuss Questions

Ch 2 opens with the claim that race was constructed. Chapter 3 focused on the Church's history of evangelizing Africans, and how white, Europeans and Africans worshipped together, and then apart. Chapter 4 then explores how Christianity in the 1800s could have become that beacon of hope enabling Africans to resist oppression as slavery expanded and racial boundaries hardened.

Question 1: What evidence did Tinsby provide that made the statement a social construct compelling for you?

Question 2: How do you see "race" as a social construct today?

Question 3: What systems (rules, laws) were put in place in the 17th Century that influence our way of thinking about race today?

Question 4: What do you think was at play in the 1600s that propagated this system of race that led to slavery?

Question 5: What motivated people of European descent in the 1600s to treat Africans as less-than-human?

Question 6: What makes us different/same today from the people of European descent in the 1600s?

Question 7: How does our faith as Christians differ, or is similar/same as the Christians of the 1600s who sought to "convert the heathens?" And how is our current approach to mission in contrast to, and in conversation with Christians whose understanding of mission continues to be guided by "converting heathens?" Are both (and other) approaches to mission built on the same foundations?

Question 8: How does the emphasis on having a personal experience with God of the 1st Great Awakening affect our current thinking about what makes a Christian a Christian today?

Question 9: John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* claimed that when laws of a commonwealth were contrary to the people's interests, then governance shall devolve to the interests of the people. The Patriots fought Britain's efforts to raise taxes, which led to the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution declaring the need for Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. All the while slavery continued to deny such human rights. Are there continued echoes today of Locke's principles?

Question 10: The American Constitution doesn't use the words "slave" or "slavery," yet it very clearly limits the rights of women, indigenous people, and Africans --- through the Slave Clause and Three-Fifths Compromise, and the Fugitive Slave Laws.

Question 11: What are the echoes of the 2nd Great Awakening, including the Cane Ridge Revival of 1801, that we can hear today, and the need to reform society so that there is a period of peace and justice to usher in the millennium/2nd Coming of Christ?

Question 12: The Haitian Revolution of 1781-1804 sparks a specific curiosity – how does this history with Haiti and slavery affect the USAs attitudes, policies, and practices today? (Ch 4)

Question 13: What do you make of Tinsby’s observation of Charles Grandison Finney that “social reform would come through individual conversion, not institutional reform?” (page 69)

SESSION 3: November 3rd
Read Chapters 5 and 6
Review and Discuss Questions

Pages

Race & Racism in Nebraska –

Selected Events in History of Nebraska:³

1854 – Omaha Tribe sells 4 million acres of land to the USA

1854 – Kansas-Nebraska Act (on condition NE remain a free state)

1855 – Christian Church in Brownville was organized

1858 – FCC-Omaha was organized

1859 – FCC-Lincoln was organized

1862 – Two African Americans were lynched in Nebraska City (J Sterliling Morton did not have slaves, but was pro-slavery)

1867 – St. John's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church formed – first African-American Church in Nebraska

1879 – Chief Standing Bear first Native American Indian to testify in court

1894 – First African American fair in the USA was held in Omaha

??? – Third Christian Church in Lincoln was formed (dissolved in the 1950s?)

1909 – Race Riots in Omaha over Greek immigrant community burned to the ground

1918 – Violent strikes break out as Veterans from WW I return to Omaha meat packing plants where African American and Eastern European immigrants now held their jobs -

1919 – Will Brown was lynched in Omaha

1921 – Labor unrest at meat packing plants continue in Omaha

1921 – Malcolm X's father, Earl Little, established Omaha chapter of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association in Omaha

1926 – Earl Little's family forced to leave Omaha by violent threat by the KKK (Malcolm Little was 1)

1952-54 – Omaha Bus Boycott

1958 – Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr preached at Salem Baptist Church in Omaha

1960s – Lunch Counter Sit-Ins

1963 – Citizens Civic Committee for Civil Liberties (4CL) picket and hold stand-ins at city council meetings

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_racial_tension_in_Omaha,_Nebraska
<https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/new-negro-movement-lincoln-nebraska>
<https://northomahahistory.com>

1966 – *A Time for Burning* – documentary of Rev. L William Youngdahl who served Augustana Lutheran Church in Omaha and his efforts to get his all-white church to reach out to the African American churches in the area

1968 – Omaha Race Riots (book titled *Summer of '68*)

2017 – Hastings Religious Leaders Decry Racism following posting of signs promoting white supremacy

2020 – Ballot Initiative to “Remove Slavery as a Punishment for Crime”⁴

⁴ <https://www.endslaveryne.org/>