

Race and Reproduction

Evangelical Christianity, Race, and Reproduction

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Many people have called racism “America’s original sin.” In Christianity, original sin is the doctrine that all human beings are tainted from birth with a tendency toward sin. It’s worth paying attention to the reference here—racism is present from the inception of America, and we are innately driven toward it. This inclination toward injustice is cast in the religious language of sin. The theological underpinnings of what we now think of as racial categories are undeniable, as is the connection between race and chattel slavery. Indeed, scholars generally agree that “race was a product rather than the cause of American slaveholding.”¹ As noted in the chapter by Lisa Ikemoto, race-based slavery gave rise to particular ideas about moral and religious capacity based upon physical characteristics that became reified in race science. The formation of these racial categories, however, was not a steady and clear path away from religion² and toward a secular and scientific notion of biological race.³ Rather, ideas about race over the last four centuries (and, indeed, before that as well) are part of a complex set of ongoing interactions that result in sometimes fragmented, sometimes congruent, and more often contingent and inconsistent ideas of what race is and what race does.

The concept of race is itself both a “product” of its social context and “productive,” in the sense that it continues to organize personal experiences, scientific knowledge, and political action.⁴ In practice, the United States is a profoundly racialized country, meaning that people are always, in one way or another, assigned a racial identity and that identity structures the relationships, opportunities, and experiences available to people.⁵ My argument centers on white Evangelicals for two reasons. First, when it comes to issues of race, white Evangelicals have very different beliefs and experiences from non-white Evangelicals; and, second,

they have a great deal of political power to enforce those beliefs.⁶ For example, Republican political positions have become nearly indistinguishable from Evangelical belief. It is not just that white Evangelicals are overwhelmingly Republican: white Evangelicalism's ideas about race and racism, gender norms, anti-statism, and insistence on the goodness of America have proved to be a major draw for people whose politics align with these beliefs. To illustrate, a recent study showed that people who voted for Trump and were not Evangelical in 2016 were more likely to identify as Evangelical in 2020.⁷ In this case, as in others, political motivations are inseparable from social, intellectual, and religious ones. Put simply, understanding the complex ways religion affects and is affected by social and political goals is crucial to gaining insight into how a large subset of Americans make sense of DNA, race, and reproduction and how they make and defend political choices about these issues.

Many assume that white Evangelicals are opposed to the science of genetics and hold conservative views on racial equity. This oppositional take is partially right but misses much of the nuance. Some recent studies illustrate the complicated ways contemporary white American Evangelicals think about race, genetics, and the biological sciences. For example, although white Evangelicals are generally opposed to evolution, they do accept that genetic tests reveal where a person's ancestors may have lived.⁸ Some conservative Evangelicals—while accepting direct-to-consumer genetic testing as legitimate—argue that we are all descended from Adam and Eve and even go so far as to use Punnett squares (a diagram that predicts genotypes in breeding experiments)⁹ to present human genomes as evidence of the truth of biblical narratives.¹⁰ These sources argue that all possible human genetic diversity was present in Adam and Eve (a belief that the geneticist Joseph L. Graves Jr. has described as “scientifically impossible”¹¹) and that phenotypic differences can be traced to the biblical dispersions of people. Recent surveys also reveal interesting juxtapositions of acceptance of certain kinds of scientific expertise but not others. For example, Evangelical Christians are less likely to be suspicious of genetically modified foods than members of other faith traditions¹² but more likely to believe that scientists are overstating harms when it comes to climate change.¹³ When it comes to gender and sex, white Evangelicals are the group most likely to believe that gender is set by the sex assigned at birth,¹⁴ but, interestingly, a large proportion (46 percent) of those who believe sex at birth determines gender say they learned this from “science.”¹⁵ This is in line with popular white Evangelical views that emphasize the importance of biological or chromosomal sex as part of the theological idea of complementarity—that God created men and women for different but complementary responsibilities and roles and that this is reflected not just in social expectations but in bodies themselves.

White Evangelicals are committed to the idea that biological sex is fixed and absolutely essential to a virtuous life and a moral world. Race is understood as primarily biological, but, in contrast to sex, it is a source of division, not the basis for

a moral order. Prejudice against people because of their skin color is considered a sin. Additionally, Evangelicals believe that seeing people as different because they belong to different racial groups undermines the idea that we are all made in the image of God. In this worldview, racism is mainly an individual problem, not an institutional or a systemic one. Recognizing race is also suspect in that it draws attention to divisions between people rather than seeing all people as the children of God. Thus, in many Evangelical communities, racism is talked about as a “sin problem, not a skin problem.” This formulation does three things: it makes racism ancillary to the problem of sin; it reduces race to a merely phenotypic difference; and it frames racism as an individual moral failing rather than a systemic problem.¹⁶ Treating race as a merely cosmetic—“skin-deep”—difference minimizes the harms done and the power encoded in such classifications. This decoupling of racism from larger forces allows it to be transported to the realm of individual sin.¹⁷ The remedy, then, is for individual people to recognize and repent for their wrongdoing, not advocate for systemic change. This erasure of racialized systems has the added effect of not simply dismissing the experience of racial inequality but actually assigning blame to people who suffer in racist systems. For example, white Evangelicals tend to blame poverty on Black people choosing not to value marriage and raising children,¹⁸ rather than seeing the breakup of families as the result of mass incarceration and the foster care system’s systematic targeting of Black families.¹⁹ As I show later in this chapter, for white Evangelicals, these beliefs are justified through a mode of understanding based on interpreting scripture’s relationship to the material world and a particular theology of sin and responsibility. They are also inextricably linked to ideas about race.

The history of race in the United States is inseparable from the history of American Christianity, particularly Protestant sects. Protestant Christianity dominated the colonies and the early republic. This continued into the nineteenth century: the 1860 US Census found that 95 percent of places of worship in the United States were Protestant. Within Protestantism, Evangelical Christianity is and has been a particularly strong force in the development of ideas about race and racism in the United States. Historically, American Evangelicalism emerged as a dominant sect in the early nineteenth century, following the First and Second Great Awakenings.²⁰ These two religious movements were characterized by emotionalism; direct, personal engagement with the Bible; and a strong emphasis on the supernatural; and believers were deeply engaged in personal, spiritual transformation.²¹ These practices and beliefs are still central to white Evangelicalism, and they form much of conservative political thinking on the topic of race and reproduction.

Looking at any one of these topics in isolation without considering the theological substrate and historical contexts would result in partial and seemingly incoherent positions. Contemporary Evangelical Christian ideas about race are not, however, evidence of an attachment to unwavering historical precedent. Neither are they strictly contemporary. This attachment to the past while engaging

with scientific research and contemporary political issues is part of the tendency of religions to repeat and reconfigure traditions and practices while maintaining a semblance of constancy. In other words, for many faith communities, religion is understood to be unchanging yet always present and engaged. As Kathryn Lofton observes, religious people, institutions, and communities are engaged in “reiteration and repetition (and, yes, revision)” as they connect past practices, texts, and beliefs to their “lived religious present.”²² Essentially, contemporary white Evangelical Christians, like many other religious communities, are engaged in a constant process of adapting, accommodating, or rejecting systems of knowledge as they apply their beliefs and traditions to current issues. While much of the analysis in this chapter engages with theological arguments, such arguments never exist outside of or prior to social and political contexts: “religion is part and parcel of racial, ethnic, class, and gender inequality.”²³ Theological arguments are themselves tools and products of racialization.

RELIGIOUS AND RACIAL CATEGORIES

In 2010 Franklin Graham—the son of the famous Evangelical preacher Billy Graham—said of Barack Obama, “I think the president’s problem is that he was a Muslim, his father was a Muslim. The seed of Islam is passed through the father like the seed of Judaism is passed through the mother.”²⁴ In actuality, Obama is a Christian, but it is not accidental that the United States’ first black president was identified as a religious “other”: studies have shown the racist undertones and motivations for characterizing Obama in this way.²⁵ Just as racial and religious othering here are not new, the relationship of religious inheritance to racial categorization also has deep connections to the past.

The notion of a kind of “hereditary heathenism” helps explain how non-white people were initially relegated to the fixed and heritable category of heathen and, in the mid-seventeenth century, how it also “invented an entirely new concept—what it meant to be ‘white.’”²⁶ In this period, racial categories had not been cemented in the way they are now, but religious categories were well established. Early colonists used the categories of heathen and Christian to mark differences and enforce legal separation between the English colonists and Native Americans and enslaved Africans. These conditions were understood to be heritable, with one preacher remarking that the children of such heathens were neither “baptizable nor pardoned” and therefore could not claim the privileges afforded white colonists even if they were to convert.²⁷ This declaration was, in part, a reaction to the practice of freeing enslaved people who converted to Christianity.²⁸ This “loophole” was legally done away with by the Virginia colonists in 1667 when they declared that baptism did not automatically confer freedom for enslaved people.²⁹ The weakening of the association between being a Christian and being white, however, necessitated new legal categories. For example, a 1705 Virginia law forbade

the “whipping of a ‘christian white servant naked.’”³⁰ In this example, it was not sufficient to identify someone as Christian to signify white.³¹ In the same year, Virginia colonists also declared that “negroes, mulattoes, and Indian servants” could not serve as witnesses in court. Previous versions of this law simply declared that non-Christians (this category included Catholics) were forbidden from testifying; the new version kept the explicit prohibition on Catholics but found it necessary to add racial classifications as well. The passing of this law was part of the process through which colonists enshrined racial ideology.³² More generally in this period, religious categories formed the basis for racial ones, and other colonies, such as Puritan New England and the West Indies, showed a similar tendency to merge religious categories with race-based ones.³³

These race-based categories were not shorn of their religious significance. Quite the opposite: racial classification was always caught up with religious concerns and epistemologies, and the older conceptions did not disappear—they were simply reconfigured. For example, the category of heathen was still used for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a means of differentiating white people from non-white people. It remains useful for “racial clumping,” meaning the grouping of culturally different people together in the category of non-white, a practice that served as means of asserting the spiritual and racial superiority of white Protestants in the contemporary United States.³⁴

RACE AND SLAVERY

The creation of racialized religious legal categories was certainly not the only religious means of constructing and maintaining whiteness. Biblical explanations of the dispersion of peoples accompanied these legal categorizations and, as mentioned above, still feature prominently in the contemporary Evangelical narratives explaining human difference. These differences are attributed variously to people being the descendants of Cain (one of the sons of Adam and Eve) or of the sons of Noah, or God’s destruction of the Tower of Babel. Each of these explanations comes with negative connotations. Cain killed his brother, Abel, and attempted to lie to God about it. God then cursed Cain and condemned him to wander as a fugitive and “marked” him.³⁵ This “mark” was interpreted by some to be dark skin. Ham, a son of Noah, saw his father drunk and naked and did not cover him as his brothers, Shem and Japheth, did.³⁶ Noah cursed Ham, saying that for his transgression, Ham’s sons would be the slaves of his brothers.³⁷ Following this passage, there is a genealogy of Noah’s sons, describing their dispersal and the civilizations they founded. Historically and in the present, many Christians have explained human diversity through the different lineages of Noah’s sons. For example, some argued that Europeans are the descendants of Japheth, Asians are the descendants of Shem, and Africans are from the lineage of Ham.³⁸ Other biblical stories were also used to explain differences among human groups. Both historically and in

contemporary Evangelical discourse, differences among people are traced to the destruction of the Tower of Babel.³⁹ In this story, the peoples of the world all speak the same language, and they come together to build a tower to the “heavens” that they might rival the power of God. God sees this and causes their language to become different and unintelligible so that they can no longer cooperate in building the tower, and he then disperses the people throughout the world.⁴⁰ Historically, Evangelical Christians used the stories of Cain and Ham to justify enslavement and the Tower of Babel to support segregation. Present-day accounts tend to downplay the idea that the descendants of Ham or Cain⁴¹ carry a hereditary curse, but the wrongdoing of these figures and the notion of generational inheritance of the physical marks of sin are never far away, especially for those familiar with biblical texts.

While the stories of Cain, Ham, and the Tower of Babel presuppose that all human beings are descended from Adam and Eve (a theory known as monogenism), another explanation circulated during this period: polygenism, the idea that different human groups had different origins, also described in the chapter by Lisa Ikemoto. This theory, although seemingly at odds with biblical accounts of human origins, was deeply rooted in religious belief and biblical interpretation. Indeed, the first comprehensive account of polygenism was written in Latin by Isaac de La Peyrère in 1655. This work was, in part, an attempt to explain, if Adam and Eve had only sons, whom Cain married and had children with.⁴² La Peyrère’s explanation was that there must have been people already in existence before the creation of Adam and Eve. His work was condemned by both Catholic and Protestant authorities as heretical, but it enjoyed broad popularity, with four reprints issued and Dutch and English translations.⁴³ Over the next two centuries, La Peyrère’s ideas were more attacked than supported.⁴⁴ In the colonies of Virginia and Barbados, however, slaveholders used this argument to religiously justify enslavement on the grounds that people of African descent were not truly human and therefore incapable of becoming Christian.⁴⁵

In the nineteenth-century United States, these ideas were resurrected and combined with scientific ideas about racial difference.⁴⁶ American polygenists used measurements of physical characteristics to reinforce existing ideas about the different “races.”⁴⁷ Using these observations, Samuel Morton, a Philadelphia physician who authored a central text on the topic, concluded that it was “highly unlikely”⁴⁸ that human beings shared a common ancestor. Morton’s ideas were taken up and expanded upon by Josiah Nott, one of the preeminent physicians of the nineteenth-century American South.⁴⁹ Nott drew on Morton’s empirical observations to conclude that non-Europeans were biologically inferior. He developed this argument further, reasoning that, given these differences, it was undeniable that Europeans were the only descendants of Noah. Nott rejected the idea that people of African descent were the sons of Ham, and, although he seems to have been silent on the question of Cain, he explicitly rejected the idea of a “universal

Adam” that all human beings descended from.⁵⁰ Samuel Cartwright, a southern physician in favor of a scientific approach to the question of race, took the project of reconciling polygenism with scientific racism further, using the story of Eve and the forbidden fruit to argue for a separate creation of different groups of people. In the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve live in paradise (the Garden of Eden), and they are free to do whatever they like (there is no sin in this world) except eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. A serpent persuades Eve to go against God’s wishes and eat the fruit. She not only eats the fruit, she persuades Adam to eat it as well, and God punishes them by casting them out of the Garden of Eden. This “Fall” is understood as the moment when death, suffering, and sin enter the world. According to Cartwright, the tempter in Eden was not a serpent but, as he puts it, a “negro gardener” who, unlike the other beasts, has the ability to speak.⁵¹ Cartwright attached scientific ideas about racial difference to this supposed second race, which he described as human but “more like the monkey” than other kinds of humans.⁵²

Ideas like Nott’s and Cartwright’s grew in popularity during the 1850s as a means of justifying enslavement. There was, however, significant pushback by other proslavery Southern Christians, who dismissed polygenism as not only heretical but also potentially damaging to the institution of slavery.⁵³ For these proslavery figures, monogenism was entirely compatible with enslavement and even mandated by it. In their version of monogenism, all human beings were descended from Adam and Eve, but God had different plans for different peoples. In this view, the story of Ham is not simply an explanation of why some people were enslaved, but also carries the implication that to enslave people is to enact God’s plan.⁵⁴ They also looked to the Hebrew Bible patriarchs who had extended households that included enslaved people⁵⁵ for a religiously sanctioned model of slavery.⁵⁶ They argued for slavery as a “divine institution” instantiated in an “ideal of the master-slave relationship,” which held that the paternalistic regard slaveholders had for enslaved people was morally superior to the impersonal “wage slavery” of the North.⁵⁷ Not only was the institution of slavery held up as part of God’s plan, it was individually good for enslaved people because it allowed Christianity to save their souls.⁵⁸

EMANCIPATION AND SEGREGATION

Once slavery was abolished, there was great concern about how a society with free Black people would function. In the Reconstruction era and after, extrajudicial actions such as lynching were part of a broad campaign of terror designed to keep Black people from claiming their rights. On the legal side, while initially restrained by federal control during Reconstruction, Southerners soon enacted Jim Crow laws that legally segregated Black and white Americans. These legal and illegal efforts were designed to maintain white power and, as Lisa Ikemoto’s chapter

has discussed, white purity. Fears about interracial sex and marriage were common tropes. The “Black Codes” that were enacted after the end of Reconstruction made intermarriage illegal in all Southern states, and public justifications for lynching often featured accusations of sexual violence by Black men against white women. These ideas were justified religiously. For example, in 1867 Buckner Payne, a Southern clergyman, took up Cartwright’s assertion of a separate pre-Adamite race.⁵⁹ Payne argued that this other race was complicit in much of the other wrongdoing described in scripture, such as the construction of the Tower of Babel.⁶⁰ Moreover, Payne claimed that the near total destruction of humanity by flood was God’s punishment for miscegenation. In the story of the flood, God sees that the earth is “corrupt” and filled with “violence” and decides that he will destroy the earth and all the people except for Noah and his family, who are instructed to build an ark so that they may survive the flood.⁶¹ According to Payne, what God really objected to were the offspring of Adam and the other created race, and these were the people he chose to destroy. Payne also posits that the ark contained the pure white individuals of Noah’s family as well as members of the “black race,” whom Payne claims were also on the ark but as “beasts” rather than persons. Thus, Payne argued, allowing marriage between white and Black people invited biblical retribution. Over the next 30 years, Payne’s arguments were repeated, adapted, and added to in order to maintain the idea of a separate creation for white and non-white people and to justify segregation and, more particularly, to condemn miscegenation.⁶²

Objections to miscegenation and the belief that white people were physically different from and superior to non-white people were not limited to proponents of polygenism. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Southern Christians embraced different versions of a kind of monogenic polygenism. Prior to emancipation, one of the more prevalent proslavery arguments explained that the sons of Ham (meaning people of African descent) had fallen into a kind of physical and moral degeneracy and were thus in need of the “benign stewardship” of chattel slavery.⁶³ In this version, physical differences were interpreted as heritable deformities that had arisen after the descendants of Noah had settled in various parts of the world. Thus, all human beings are descended from Adam and Eve, but some groups of people have undergone biological changes along with moral degradation. These explanations were not abandoned with slavery; they were adapted to argue against miscegenation.

In the late nineteenth century, Protestants in the South did not just rely on scripture for justifications; they also drew on the race science of the day to defend their positions. The idea that people of African descent had undergone some process of degeneration resurfaced with the new science of eugenics—described in the chapters by Mark Fedyk, Lisa Ikemoto, and Emily Klancher Merchant—used as the primary justification. One instructive example of this is the Southern Baptist adoption of race science. The Southern Baptist Convention is not just the largest

Evangelical denomination; it is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States and has one of the more fraught and visible histories with slavery and racial discrimination. It was explicitly founded on the basis of support for slavery, and the arguments marshalled by the Southern Baptists in favor of enslavement and, later, segregation are an amalgam of biblical, Evangelical (in the sense of conversion), and scientific ones.

Proslavery Baptists had argued variously that slavery was part of God's plan to bring Christianity to Africans, that it was blessed by the apostle Paul,⁶⁴ that people of African descent carried the "mark of Cain," or that they were the children of Ham. They soundly rejected polygenism as heretical. For Southern Baptists, and Southern Protestants more generally, religious arguments in favor of the nature of and role for people of African descent predominated.⁶⁵ By the 1890s, however, the faculty of the Southern Baptist Seminary firmly grounded their arguments about black inferiority in race science.⁶⁶ Some, such as John Broadus, the second president of the Southern Baptist Seminary, argued for a kind of Lamarckian inheritance of moral capacity, intelligence, and industry, arguing that the parts of Africa from which most enslaved people were captured lacked all civilization and that centuries of barbarianism had cemented negative characteristics that were both biological and heritable.⁶⁷ Others, such as Charles Gardner, a professor of sociology and homiletics, were more specific, stating that intellectual and moral capacities were transmitted "physiologically." Gardner went on, explaining that manifestations of social progress in people of African descent were the result of "receiving the blood of higher races into [their] veins" and that by a process of "natural selection . . . in proportion as the negro race ceases to be negro we may expect its capacity for progress proportionately to increase."⁶⁸ In this quote, we see one side of miscegenation: white men fathering children with Black women "improved" the Black "race." What goes unsaid is the corollary, that white women having children with Black men would degrade the white "race." While the racism baked into these statements should be familiar, the broad embrace of the principles of eugenics—the idea that some human beings are superior to others, and the superior ones ought to be encouraged to breed more and the inferior types should be discouraged from breeding—may seem surprising to contemporary readers who might associate white Evangelicals with hostility to ideas of evolution. These religious positions, however, were not unusual in this period.

In actuality, what is perhaps most surprising about religion and eugenics in the United States is not that there was religious opposition to it but rather the remarkable alacrity with which the Protestant establishment embraced the eugenics movement, almost from its inception. As Christine Rosen shows in her history of the role American religious leaders played in the eugenics movement, not only did Protestant clergy support the means and ends of eugenics, the scientific eugenics movement also enthusiastically engaged with clergy.⁶⁹ The American Eugenics Society (AES) had a Committee on Cooperation with Clergymen whose members

included many of the most prominent religious figures of the era.⁷⁰ Starting in 1926, the AES sponsored a sermon contest that awarded \$500 for first prize, \$200 for second, and \$100 for third, significant amounts in the 1920s.⁷¹ Part of the motivation for recruiting religious leaders was their influence on public discourse, but another major goal was to encourage people of “the better classes”⁷² to reproduce more. These people were referred to as “builders,” and eugenicists had determined that a large proportion of church members were in this category.⁷³

While the majority of the clergy involved with the AES were recruited from mainline Protestant churches, it’s important to note that support for eugenics was not limited to Protestant clergy: some Reform Jewish rabbis also supported the eugenics movement. Catholic officials were also involved. John A. Ryan, a Catholic priest and the onetime head of the National Catholic Welfare Conference’s Social Action Department, served on the AES’s Committee on Cooperation with Clergymen alongside another Catholic priest, John M. Cooper.⁷⁴ These Catholic members, however, were more reticent about the means used to accomplish eugenic goals, and they resigned in 1930 after Pius XI issued a formal condemnation of sterilization in his encyclical on marriage, *Casti Connubii*.⁷⁵

Many Protestant proponents framed their support for eugenics as part of the “Social Gospel,” a belief that it was the duty of humanity to prepare the world for the second coming of Christ. This meant that active social reform—including “health” interventions such as eugenics—was the means through which the salvation of the world could be achieved.⁷⁶ Other, more conservative, Protestants came to see social reform as a dangerous diversion from the spiritual mandate to save souls and even as a heresy in that it imagined that human effort could transform the world.⁷⁷ Evangelical Protestants initially accepted eugenics as an explanation of the social hierarchies and a means of social progress, but their interest in eugenics soon dissipated, and between 1900 and 1930, many conservative Evangelicals, particularly Fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and fervent Evangelicals, came to outright reject eugenics.⁷⁸

Just as the issue of slavery split the Baptist Church into the American Baptist Church in the North and the Southern Baptist Church, these responses were shaped as much or more by geography and social context as by theology. For example, Northern Baptists were much more supportive of the efforts of eugenicists and expressed deep concern about “race suicide,” while Southern Baptists were less enthusiastic.⁷⁹ Southern Baptists believed in a hierarchy of races and the value of “Anglo-Saxon” stock but rejected efforts to regulate marriage for eugenic purposes. This was in part because there was less immigration in the South and because segregation was quite effective at separating races already.⁸⁰ Another factor in Southern resistance to eugenics was that eugenicists identified the embrace of “primitive religion” as a marker of Anglo-Saxon degeneration. By “primitive religion,” they meant Pentecostal practices such as speaking in tongues and Evangelical “ecstatic religious revivals,” both of which were very popular among

Southern whites.⁸¹ Finally, rural whites, especially poor ones, were often the targets of eugenicist efforts to “improve” the Anglo-Saxon race, and, therefore, poor religious white people were deeply suspicious of such efforts.

INTEGRATION

When it came to desegregation, a similar amalgam of religious argument and race science resurfaces. After the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling, which declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional, there was a backlash by Southern Christians.⁸² Prior to the ruling, there had been some tentative support for desegregation among Southern Methodists and Southern Baptists, but when desegregation became reality, Southern Evangelicals rejected racial moderation.⁸³ Initial arguments within the denominations centered on scriptural and religious arguments. They cited verses such as Deuteronomy 7:3–4, which cautions the Israelites not to intermarry with neighboring groups. One Southern Baptist leader expressed his fears that desegregation would lead to interracial marriage, declaring, “Negroes are descendants of Ham [and] we whites must keep our blood pure.”⁸⁴ More general arguments that God had created different races and separated them by continents also featured prominently. A Baptist church in South Carolina issued this statement: “God meant for people of different races to maintain their race purity and racial indentity [*sic*] . . . God has determined the ‘bounds of their habitation’ [Acts 17:26].”⁸⁵ Others brought up the “mark” of Cain and the Tower of Babel as justifications. None of these ideas are new; indeed, we have seen them from the very beginning of the American colonies.

These religious arguments share a common fear of miscegenation. When Little Rock High School was forcibly integrated in 1957, much of the anti-integration rhetoric centered on sexual threats to white girls.⁸⁶ This fear permeated discussions of desegregation and were viewed by many, even outside the South, as reasonable. For example, President Eisenhower, who later sent federal troops to Little Rock High School to enforce desegregation, reportedly said to Chief Justice Earl Warren while *Brown v. Board of Education* was being decided, “these [people opposed to desegregation] are not bad people. All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in school alongside some big overgrown Negroes.”⁸⁷ While many of the arguments were presented as rooted in long tradition and the deep scriptural precedent, the fears that motivated them were very much in the present.

These religious arguments were part of primarily a moral justification for fellow believers. When it came to legal challenges to *Brown v. Board of Education* and the 1964 Civil Rights Act’s ban on racial discrimination in public accommodation, other arguments were brought to bear. They included race science claims about brain differences between African Americans and European Americans⁸⁸ (which are now discredited) and claims that public accommodation laws for restaurants

violated the Constitution's freedom of religion cause.⁸⁹ Arguments against public accommodation and public school integration that relied on religious freedom and pseudoscientific racism were dismissed by the Supreme Court. In response to the failure of these legal efforts, Southern segregationists employed a number of strategies designed to defund public schools and transfer those resources to private, white-only schools, known as "segregation academies."⁹⁰ These schools were not all officially religiously affiliated, but, by their own admission, "religion [was] an integral part of the [private] school movement."⁹¹ In 1976 such schools were declared in violation of civil rights statutes,⁹² and in 1983 the Supreme Court ruled that religious schools that had segregationist policies were no longer entitled to tax-exempt status.⁹³ In spite of this loss, some schools still maintained segregationist policies. Indeed, it wasn't until 2000 that Bob Jones University, a private Evangelical university in South Carolina and the main petitioner in the 1983 case, revoked its ban on interracial dating. While these attitudes and positions have significant staying power, the pseudoscientific and biblically justified racist arguments fell out of favor. As a result, in the decades following the 1964 Civil Rights Act, public arguments against integration became more covert.

In the period following the civil rights movement, many white Southern Baptists as well as other Evangelicals and mainline Protestants adopted a message that love modeled on Jesus's love for all humanity would solve the problem of racism.⁹⁴ This message called for individuals to change their hearts and be open to loving all people equally. The emphasis on interior, sincere change carried with it opposition to change forced from the outside. Love must be freely given and freely chosen. Loving all human beings equally meant seeing each of them as a child of God rather than a member of a particular race. The emphasis on interior transformation centered redemption as the overriding message. This focus on the "ritual of self-redemption"⁹⁵ made the experience of white people repenting in private the defining one in the problem of racism. There is an additional dimension, however, that further displaces the experiences of people of color. For white Evangelicals (and others as well), racism is prejudice and, as such, can be experienced by anyone who feels they have been treated badly because of their skin color. In the words of a white Pentecostal woman, racism isn't just "whites against blacks. Blacks do not like white people."⁹⁶ In this quote, racism is about people not liking one another. Placing racism in the realm of the personal also, not infrequently, included framing it as a mutual problem that could be solved through interpersonal interactions.⁹⁷

The rapid shift in the Southern Baptist Convention from an avowed pro-segregation position to this seemingly radical acceptance would be remarkable if it had, in fact, desegregated congregations. In practice, most Southern churches—and American churches more generally—remained and remain highly segregated. This resistance to integration within churches was, in many ways, built into the model of individual spiritual transformation. First, because interior transformation is, by its

nature, a solitary activity, interacting with people of different racial backgrounds is somewhat ancillary. It may change the nature of those interactions, but it is not the starting point of change. There is also something of a sleight of hand working in the view that, because we are all children of God, our individual differences are a hindrance to achieving the love that Jesus intended. This view means that mentioning race becomes a way of reinforcing difference and undermining love for all. In other words, if only we stopped talking about race, racism could be eliminated.

What this stance translates into politically is that if, for instance, a Black person were to say, “this is an issue that affects Black people as a group,” then the implication is that the person is actually reinforcing racism because they are insisting that people’s group identity is somehow more important than their individual worth. In other words, pointing out the general experience of Black people is a way of only seeing people’s color instead of treating each person as an individual, worthy of respect. Making recognition of the social reality of racism the problem expands the possibilities for pursuing political goals that disproportionately harm minoritized people. For example, in a 1981 interview, Lee Atwater, one of the most prominent Republican strategists of the 1980s, explained how racially coded tactics worked, saying that in 1954, you could just say “N—, N—, N—” and in 1964, you had to switch to saying “forced busing, states’ rights” and in the 1980s, you had to talk about economic policies in which “blacks get hurt worse than whites” but as long as you didn’t mention race, these policies could be glossed as color-blind.⁹⁸ Thus, arguments in favor of family values, such as an emphasis on parental rights in education—which in the 1970s meant the right to attend private, segregation academies⁹⁹—could be framed as simply moral choices rather than actions inseparable from racial politics.

CONTEMPORARY IDEAS ON RACE AND RACISM

Contemporary white Evangelical discourse about race and human diversity contains some now familiar topics—the creation of Adam and Eve, the Tower of Babel, Noah and his sons—but they have been grafted onto a more expansive, racialized, and biologized theological stance. This stance allows for a more thoroughly worked-out theology that makes talking about race the source of racism rather than a means of addressing it. It also integrates old ideas of human difference with genetic science into a system of belief that centers the patriarchal nuclear family as the site and source of moral action. The use of “family values” as a rallying cry allows for coded racism, but it also expands political possibilities by using the “inviolability” of the family as a means of reinforcing gender norms and shaping reproductive policies. In what follows, I trace these ideas through contemporary texts by prominent conservative white Evangelicals.

In 2001 John MacArthur, the pastor of a Southern California megachurch and the host of *Grace to You*, a national Evangelical television and radio program,

preached a sermon titled “The Sins of Noah.” The sermon brings up polygenism in order to condemn it but goes on to resurrect the monogenist idea of degeneration of the lineage of Ham, Noah’s son. MacArthur states that those who claim that there were humanlike creatures before the creation of Adam and Eve are unequivocally wrong: we have all descended from Adam through Noah and his sons. He argues that when “evolutionists” tell us that some groups of humans diverged from other populations between 40,000 and 60,000 years ago,¹⁰⁰ what they are saying is that aboriginal Australians and Native Americans are “spiritless, soulless hominids” because Adam was the first creature with a soul and he (as well as the earth) was created 6,168 years ago.¹⁰¹ This amalgamation of science and scripture continues with MacArthur arguing that the differences between people come from “culture and adaption.” What he means by this is that, when people were dispersed after the destruction of the Tower of Babel, small groups became isolated, and, over time, certain genetic features became fixed in these populations. He claims that some of these changes were adaptive, such as the change from darker to lighter skin in order to absorb vitamin D, and some were the result of genetic drift, but all went according to God’s plan. As MacArthur puts it, God “sorted the gene pool out exactly the way that He wanted to sort it.” What MacArthur describes here is a morally neutral process of adaptation and change. When it comes to culture, however, MacArthur has a version of the older idea of the degeneracy of Ham.

MacArthur attributes the degeneracy of all humanity to our propensity to sin. It is sin that causes defective genes and sin that causes human degradation. MacArthur is clear that all human beings are sinners and, to some degree or other, degraded. All of his examples, however, are of non-European people. He lists “pygmies in Africa,” “Hottentots in South Africa,” people from Papua New Guinea, and “aboriginal people in Australia” as examples of “degeneration” and characterizes them as people “so far gone” that it is nearly impossible to “preach the Gospel” to them. This degeneracy threatens to overtake Western civilization, which was once becoming better but now is headed in the wrong direction, and soon, he predicts, “we’re going to be stark naked, running around with a spear, stabbing people.” The message here is clear: although all human sin and the state of current civilizations are the result of God’s plan, the cultures of darker-skinned people have degraded further and their degradation threatens European ascendancy. MacArthur brings in new scientific insights—and, not incidentally, accuses evolutionary scientists of considering some people as less than human—to explain human difference, but the overall story is not a new one.

Although this sermon is still available in both video and text on the *Grace to You* website, this kind of transparently racist discourse is far less common in current conservative white Evangelical discourse. Mainstream contemporary white Evangelicals condemn the idea that the story of Ham means that white people are racially superior. John Piper, an influential conservative white Evangelical minister,¹⁰² refutes this straw man argument, not by addressing the question of

subservience or enslavement but, instead, by explaining that Ham is not the father of Africans. Other are more straightforward in their condemnation of the “curse of Ham.” Albert Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, goes further, declaring that interpreting the “curse of Ham” as a biblical endorsement of racial superiority “reflects such ignorance of Scripture and such shameful exegesis” that it constitutes heresy, meaning that it is in opposition to essential Christian beliefs.

These leaders may reject the older, explicitly white supremacist arguments based on the “curse of Ham,” but they still attribute human difference to degeneracy and sin, albeit in somewhat less offensive ways than MacArthur’s sermon. In addressing a church member’s question about whether the Tower of Babel was the beginning of racial differentiation, Piper takes the question quite literally and unequivocally states that the rebellion of the builders of the Tower of Babel was the “immediate cause” of the geographic and linguistic diversity we see in the world.¹⁰³ According to Piper, human differentiation is punishment. There is, however, more to this story. Piper goes on to say that this differentiation was part of God’s plan for redemption; the “evil in the world” that results in different ethnicities is present so that Jesus could bring them together. In this version, Christians must proselytize to all nations to bring them together in faith. In other words, conversion erases the differences between human beings. United in love of God, people of all backgrounds become “brothers and sisters.”¹⁰⁴

Nearly all conservative white Evangelical leaders attribute human diversity to the effects of human sin in the Garden of Eden, the “wickedness” and “violence”¹⁰⁵ that prompted God to destroy all humanity except for Noah and his family, and the defiance in building the Tower of Babel. What is interesting is that, like MacArthur above, they also accept that these differences are genetic. Leaders like Mohler accept the science behind identifying genetic mutations, observing that “in every individual human genome, there are genetic errors.”¹⁰⁶ The proximate cause of these mutations may be attributed to biological processes, but the ultimate cause is humanity’s fall in the Garden of Eden. As Mohler explains, “in Eden, in the perfection of creation, there would have been nothing wrong with a single human genome.”¹⁰⁷ Once sin came into the world, all was corrupted, and when mutations occur in the human genome, it is because “human genetic structure . . . [is] affected by and corrupted by sin.”¹⁰⁸ For conservative Evangelicals, the “fact of sin” is not only the cause of the material structure of genomes, it is also the reason for human behavior. Scientists are in error when they try to attribute human behavior to “genes and chromosomes” because, according to Billy Graham Ministries, they have “fail[ed] to give a proper place to the inborn twist toward selfishness, viciousness, and indifference to God, making many of their conclusions only pseudoscientific.”¹⁰⁹ Interestingly, in this passage, scientific facts are made to fit a theological conception, but they are also used as a reason to invalidate science on its own terms—science that doesn’t consider sin is “pseudoscientific.”

Part of the concern over attributing sinful behavior to genetics is because of the “born this way” argument used by many LGBTQ activists. Many conservative Evangelicals deny that there is any genetic basis for nonheterosexual orientations.¹¹⁰ Others are agnostic on the question but reiterate that, even if it were genetic, that doesn’t matter; people must still abstain from sinful behavior. A common trope in this line of reasoning is the same one just mentioned: genetic disease and mutation are a result of the Fall, and simply because something is found in nature, it does not constitute a moral explanation because creation itself has been “corrupted and distorted by sin.”¹¹¹ More generally, these leaders accept the mechanics of genetics but refuse to imbue it with any specific moral significance. In this scenario, LGBTQ sexuality and gender identity are signs of fallenness, whether they have origins in biological difference or not. Race, however, is treated as unquestionably biological and primarily about skin color. The biology of race is the result of God’s punishment, either in the dispersal of people after the destruction of the Tower of Babel or simply a result of being cast out of the Garden of Eden.

The biblical explanations of human diversity and genetic mutation we see here are deeply rooted in the concept of the Fall and human sin. Human differences in terms of sex and gender, however, are categorically different. Conservative Evangelicals’ discussions about the proper social roles for men and women begin with Genesis 1:27: “And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female he created them.”¹¹² This verse is the foundation for believing in separate and different roles for men and women. The key theological difference here is that this differentiation occurred before Adam and Eve disobeyed God and were expelled from the Garden of Eden. The garden was a world and a place without sin, and creation before the Fall was exactly as God intended it. Thus, deviation from both social roles or rigidly defined biological sex is sinful.

When it comes to differences in sex, conservative Evangelicals wholeheartedly embrace biological determinism. While much of the discussion centers on social roles with men as leaders and women as nurturers, much recent discussion has centered on physical differences in male and female bodies, especially in light of the recent opposition to gender-affirming care and transgender rights. For example, in a recent guest post on John Piper’s site, Stephen Wedgeworth argues that “biblical manhood and womanhood” is inscribed on a molecular and cellular level and that God-given sexual differences are manifest on a genetic and hormonal level.¹¹³ The Nashville Statement—an Evangelical declaration on gender roles, sex, and marriage and their sanctity and signed by Mohler, Piper, and MacArthur—is even more biologically focused, stating that “the differences between male and female reproductive structures are integral to God’s design for self-conception as male or female.”¹¹⁴ The differences between men and women exist in order to fulfill God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply”: as Mohler explains, “reproductive success and the obedience to the reproductive command that God gives us, depends upon men being men and women being women.”¹¹⁵ In this system

of understanding, sexual dimorphism exists because God has ordained it, and biblical accounts are given as the reason scientific evidence is the way it is.

The apotheosis of this differentiation is “biblical” marriage and reproduction. It is also in the Evangelical theology of marriage that we see the theological justification for treating effects of racial discrimination as the fault of the victims of it. Evangelical ideas about marriage are tied to particular ideas about how faith and morality are formed. White Evangelical biblical marriage is based on the theological concept of “relationality.” Relationality is the central tenet of American white Evangelicalism and holds that salvation can come only through a personal relationship with Jesus.¹¹⁶ This divine/human relationship is then “transposed”¹¹⁷ onto interpersonal relationships as “love and respect [for Jesus] overflows into our love and respect for our neighbors.”¹¹⁸ Marriage holds a special place in this configuration. It is a reflection of divine wholeness¹¹⁹ and is patterned on love for Jesus, and it is the source of moral decision-making. It follows, then, that immoral decisions are made by people in the wrong sort of relationships (i.e., those not shaped by love of Jesus and structured by opposite-sex marriage). This results in a worldview in which problems such as poverty stem from failed relationships, and the solution is thought to be personal rather than systemic change. The “family values” embedded in the idea of biblical marriage are inseparable from conservative historical opposition to the civil rights movement and to contemporary positions on police violence and racism.¹²⁰

Focusing on personal relationships while avoiding discussion of structural racism is consonant with the underlying structure of what the sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has called “racism without racists,” a set of explanations and justifications created by white Americans that resolve “the apparent contradiction between [white people’s] professed colorblindness and the United States’ color-coded inequality.”¹²¹ Scholars of American Evangelicalism have noted this phenomenon in the resurgence of racism under the cover of sexual morality, remarking that, while white supremacy in its older forms has been delegitimized in much of public discourse, religious ideas about gender and sexual morality have been “grafted” onto “patriotic¹²² and racial traditionalism.”¹²³ To put it another way, with the demise of *de jure* segregation, biblical marriage (with the man as the head) provides the organizing principle for a properly ordered traditional society that reinforces *de facto* racial inequality.

From a theological perspective, conservative Evangelical Christian discourse has generally treated racism as an issue of personal responsibility and individual decisions and actions.¹²⁴ In this view, there are political consequences to ideas about racism, but it is essentially a moral and theological issue. This creates a set of circumstances where conservative white Evangelical leaders can condemn racism without recognizing the institutional and systemic processes by which racism is maintained. For example, Albert Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, declares that “white superiority . . . is a heresy.”¹²⁵ Rick

Warren, the head pastor of Saddleback Church, which has a weekly attendance of 23,000, says that racism is “a sin problem, not a skin problem.”¹²⁶ Franklin Graham calls racism “an evil” and states that, to God, “no skin color is more or less important.”¹²⁷ In each of these examples, the speakers focus on skin color: race is framed as a cosmetic difference.

While these Evangelical leaders explicitly address racism, others mention racism but as the starting point for other arguments rather than the main focus. For all of these men, racism is treating people badly because of their skin color; it is not the cause of racial inequality. Like Warren and Mohler, John MacArthur calls racism a sin but quickly pivots to discussing masculinity and fatherhood, stating that the lack of Black fathers present in their children’s lives “is a holocaust” and the only “hope for peace in society is masculine, virtuous men.”¹²⁸ Similarly, a guest article on Piper’s website uses the topic of violence against Black people as an opportunity to talk about abortion, stating that “it’s illegal to murder George Floyd, but it’s legal to murder preborn George Floyds. And it happens over 800,000 times a year in the United States.”¹²⁹ In these examples, racism is the lesser sin. The real sins are abortion and men’s failure to “act like men.”¹³⁰

One theme that emerges in these texts is that the topic of racism serves as a kind of jumping-off point for discussion of other issues the speakers deem important. Part of this may be a symptom of white people’s general discomfort around the topic of race,¹³¹ but there are also particular kinds of theological framing that makes this kind of switch in topics both coherent and logical within a particular understanding of sin. Pivoting from racism to the absence of Black fathers makes a certain kind of sense if one sees biblical marriage as essential to right behavior. Such a framing locates the problem in personal (and sinful) decisions about marriage and fatherhood rather than systemic structures that damage and undermine Black families. Other topics, such as abortion, are also tied into ideas of marriage and reproduction. Abortion perverts the essential role of women as child bearers. More generally, abortion and racism are both sins, and sins—by their very nature—are the actions of individuals, so it is individuals alone who will have to answer before God for their transgressions.¹³² White Evangelicals’ emphasis on individual sin, the paramount importance of the right kind of relationships, the understanding of humanity as irredeemably fallen, and belief that only the saving grace of God can remedy the ills of prejudice all figure in white Evangelicals’ stance on systemic racism in the United States.

For all of the leaders studied, racism is a sin, and each of them calls on Christians to repent and to love one another. Sin is understood as ever-present and human beings as essentially and primarily depraved. As Driscoll puts it, “sin is not just we do, but who we are.”¹³³ Sin permeates human society. Keller explains that when human beings turn away from God, they make idols of other things like race or culture, which results in inequity and injustice.¹³⁴ Along similar lines, Piper states that individual sin always results in “systemic or structural” sin and that all

human institutions are “permeated with sin” and “reflect, embody, preserve, and advance” sin.¹³⁵ Albert Mohler also argues in this same vein, observing that “sin corrupts every single human system in one way or another, because it’s made up of sinful human beings.” Mohler explains that while it is individual sinners who seek out or perform abortions, “human society” is “made up of those sinners influenced by those sinners, legislated by those sinners, bring[ing] the sin into the structures and systems of society.”¹³⁶ He goes on to say that racism is also present in human institutions for the same reasons. Unlike many of the other preachers discussed here, Mohler talks about “systemic racism” but says that if we are to think about structural sin, then we ought to “start with something like the scandal of abortion, the horror of the legal murder of the unborn.”¹³⁷ He argues that “radical abortion rights legislation” has systematically transformed American culture into a “culture of death.” Mohler argues that since abortion has corrupted an entire society, it is hardly surprising that other sins might also affect social institutions.

It is clear that some of these men believe that racism is structural, systemic, and deeply sinful. In their view, however, it is just one kind of sin among many. For example, MacArthur lists “sexual immorality, relentless assault of feminism, overexposure to perversion, complete collapse of homes” as both the cause and the result of evil “abound[ing] absolutely everywhere.”¹³⁸ Treating racism as merely one manifestation of the overwhelming presence of sin and evil allows speakers to quickly pivot to other sins that they see as endemic to a sinful society, such as abortion or the absence of biological fathers in children’s lives.

This classic Protestant pessimism about the depravity of the world works against politically and institutionally oriented solutions to the problem of systemic inequality. Albert Mohler explains most clearly why political and social responses are not only ineffective but also “dangerous.”¹³⁹ The problem is that imagining “improvement is possible in human society” replaces the transcendent good news of salvation with an earthly ambition.¹⁴⁰ Believing in this kind of improvement, Mohler contends, is buying into the “fundamentally false belief” that we can eliminate sin from society.¹⁴¹ In this view, true change must begin with those united with Christ by faith.¹⁴² All of these men call on people to treat those different from themselves with love and respect. These actions, however, must be preceded by repenting to God for your sins, and then, transformed by God’s grace, a person may begin to change the world around them.¹⁴³ Thus, change is grounded in salvation and evangelization. As Franklin Graham puts it, “we are to tell a hurting world that Jesus shed His blood and died for our sins” and that in turning to Christ we will be saved and filled “with the love that conquers racism and hatred.”¹⁴⁴ The emphasis on individual sin also works to preclude the possibility of calling out racism in individuals and institutions.

By emphasizing personal, interior transformation as part of a relationship between an individual and God, there is very little space for criticism from other people. Many of the speakers actively discourage pointing out racist behavior

in other people. For example, Keller criticizes those who call attention to racial injustice, saying that they “resort to shaming and often exhibit a self-righteous manner,” an approach he criticizes as unbiblical.¹⁴⁵ Driscoll goes further, criticizing those who “continually march for justice, demand wrongs be made right, and argue ad nauseum [*sic*] on social media about systemic sin using all the various -isms (racism, sexism, nationalism, classism, ageism, etc.)” as hypocrites.¹⁴⁶ Not only are people discouraged from criticizing others in order to avoid hypocrisy, there is also an underlying belief that to point out differences—including racial discrimination—is counter to Christ’s vision for the Church as the unity of all believers.¹⁴⁷ Warren goes further, saying that the Church is a family; you are “called to belong to the Church,” and to think of yourself as a “visitor” or a “stranger” is to place yourself in opposition to God’s will.¹⁴⁸ This means that bringing up racism means that you are actively resisting God’s plan for unity. This emphasis on the unity of the Church, combined with the discouragement of calling attention to racist actions, works against reform within churches.

To summarize, in these texts, race itself is often presented as simply skin color, racism reduced to discriminating against someone explicitly due to the color of their skin, and racial inequality is due to poor individual decisions. Racism is condemned but often used as a means to pivot to other issues such as abortion. Claims of racism within the Evangelical churches are often viewed as disloyal and destructive to God’s intent for a unified people of God. In a larger sense, Evangelical Christians’ belief in the paramount importance of personal relationships as well as “accountable freewill individualism” (which holds that people are “individually in control of, and responsible for, their own destinies”)¹⁴⁹ leads them to discount larger social forces, such as lack of access to education, employment discrimination, and racial profiling by law enforcement. Thus, white Evangelicals are far more likely to attribute economic disparities between whites and Blacks to poor personal choices.¹⁵⁰ When it comes to government intervention to address racial inequality—or indeed many sorts of social problems—most white Evangelicals see such programs as “naive, wasteful, misguided, sinful, and often counteracting real solutions.”¹⁵¹ Poor personal choices are understood to be rooted in the wrong kind of relationships, so government programs are more likely to actually compound rather than solve these problems.

CONCLUSION: THE TRIUMPH OF FAMILIAL LOVE

Their unwillingness to address problems of racial inequality and injustice does not mean that white Evangelicals do not take action about what they see as the problem of racial division. As mentioned above, preachers call upon their members to cast the sin of racism from their hearts and reach across racial lines to “demonstrate the power of biblical unity.”¹⁵² Inclusion is important to white Evangelical churches, but the framing of inclusion relies on tropes of sameness,

such as we are all the same under the skin.¹⁵³ Most Evangelical churches, however, remain deeply segregated, and although the number of Hispanic members in majority-white Evangelical churches has increased, the number of Black members has remained extremely low.¹⁵⁴ Church leadership has remained segregated, with white people significantly overrepresented as pastors.¹⁵⁵ People of color in majority-white Evangelical spaces often experience racial microaggressions but are discouraged from bringing up issues of racial discrimination and mistreatment. It would seem from these conditions that the project of white Evangelical racial reconciliation has failed. If the goal, however, is to make white people feel as if they are doing something about racism as they understand it, it has succeeded.

One particular practice stands out as unusual in its triumphalism about racial reconciliation: transracial adoption. Transracial adoption moves the experience of race even farther from the realm of institutions and systems. It places it within the family. As a white preacher says about his Black and white sons, “racism isn’t a social issue. It’s a family issue.”¹⁵⁶ He goes on to say that this is “what racial reconciliation and familial love that transcends skin color looks like.”¹⁵⁷ Transracial adoption has been held up as a means to “grow God’s family” and to achieve racial harmony through bringing a non-white child into a white Christian family formed by a biblical marriage.¹⁵⁸ Beginning in the early 2000s, the white Evangelical community has become more and more interested in transracial adoption as an imperative of faith. Transracial adoption is presented as a means of rescuing “orphans” and a way of furthering racial harmony. It does not, however, involve the integration of differing cultural systems—after all, babies don’t have culture—but is rather the wholesale subsuming of a non-white child into white Evangelical culture.¹⁵⁹ Adoption, as Perry and Whitehead pointedly observe, involves “social and legal uniting of racial groups in a situation where one has guardianship over the other”¹⁶⁰ rather than a relationship between equals. Thus, the difference between the adopted child and the adopting family is phenotypic rather than social or cultural.

This same rescue and reconciliation narrative has extended into embryo adoption (when couples “adopt” embryos created during IVF but not used by the couple who created them), which shows more starkly the reduction of race to phenotype. Within this movement, there is a more recent trend among white Evangelicals to request non-white embryos as a means of addressing “racial conflict.”¹⁶¹ In both cases, transracial adoption and the use of donated embryos, there is an underlying belief that racial harmony can be achieved by sidestepping the lived experience of race within racialized cultural systems. What is clear here is that race is understood as genetic and biological, not socially constructed. Children are emblems of difference but acultural ones. Thus, racial harmony is achieved by attaching significance to phenotype without the presence of culture. Race is reproduced as a phenotypic difference within the enveloping world of whiteness: the brokenness of a fallen world is healed by a white biblical family’s love.

For contemporary white Evangelicals, family, marriage, and personal responsibility have become the main framing device for talking about social issues. Such framing allows racism to become less visible to white Christians, and, as Jemar Tisby very generously puts it, this framing “often leads them [white Evangelicals] to unknowingly compromise with racism.”¹⁶² More pointedly, endorsing policies that are not explicitly racist but that disproportionately hurt people of color, white conservatives can “proclaim their racial innocence.”¹⁶³ The commitment to the fantasy of racial innocence takes different forms. Indeed, some have suggested that, contrary to the popular narrative that abortion is what brought white Evangelicals into the political sphere as a cohesive voting bloc, it was the stripping of tax-exempt status from racially discriminatory religious schools (such as Bob Jones University) that actually motivated white Evangelicals.¹⁶⁴ Scholars contend that opposition to abortion and the championing of “family values” has not replaced racism, it has simply camouflaged it.¹⁶⁵

While there is no doubt that many conservative white Evangelicals are sincerely opposed to abortion and would be distressed to be accused of racism, many scholars of American Evangelicalism have long contended that issues of race have structured American religious belief.¹⁶⁶ Some argue that white Christian churches in the United States have been the driving force in maintaining “white supremacy and resist[ing] black equality”¹⁶⁷ and that this is particularly true of white Evangelicalism.¹⁶⁸ While many white Evangelicals would object to being accused of maintaining white supremacy, there is evidence that they view racial discrimination and racialized violence differently than most Americans. The majority of Americans believe that police officers treat Black people differently than white people, but the majority of Evangelicals believe the opposite: that police officers treat Black people no better or no worse than white people.¹⁶⁹ They are also more likely to view police shootings of unarmed Black people as “isolated incidents” rather than as part of a broader pattern.¹⁷⁰ These views have proved remarkably stable, with little change from 2015 to 2020.¹⁷¹ Scholars of Evangelicalism have expressed profound pessimism about the ability of white Evangelicals to meaningfully engage with the problems of racism in United States. They give this bleak assessment, “white evangelicalism does more to perpetuate the racialized society than to reduce it,” because the very structures by which white Evangelicals understand the world make them both incapable of recognizing the existence of systemic racism and unable to take action against it.¹⁷²

Michael S. Hamilton argues that white Evangelical social concerns are “disconnected from their theology.”¹⁷³ His explanation is that, because white, Black, and Hispanic Evangelicals share a belief in the centrality of Christ’s sacrifice, the centrality of scripture, the need for conversion, and activism to promulgate these beliefs, it follows then that the political beliefs of white Evangelicals cannot be theological. Hamilton is right if one adopts a very narrow definition of Evangelicalism and if one thinks of it as aspirational rather than descriptive. In other

words, if we imagine the religious beliefs as something to live up to, to strive for, then, as Hamilton sees it, supporting Donald Trump is difficult to square with the public piety and personal morality that many Evangelicals see as central to their faith. This position also imagines that religious belief can be separated from other concerns. As we have seen, however, theology has never been separate from the desires and goals of the people who promulgate it. Hamilton is, however, right in another sense: white Evangelicals have transformed their theological commitments into political justifications that have affected and will continue to affect public policy on race and reproduction.

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