FOREWORD BY ALISA CHILDERS

WALKING IN UNITY

BIBLICAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON RACE AND RACISM

KRISTA BONTRAGER
& MONIQUE DUSON

"*Walking in Unity* exemplifies how the power of something small, such as a daily walk, can eventually grow into a flourishing friendship that can overcome tremendous racial barriers. This book is a wonderful example of how two very different people can begin to see each other beyond their caricatures for what they always were—children of God."

—Robert "Bob" Woodson Sr., founder
and president, Woodson Center

"Most books addressing racism come across as clanging cymbals; this one is a symphony of truth and grace. And it provides the only real solution!"

—Frank Turek, founder and president, Cross Examined

"There is an amazing amount of clarity in this book—clarity that is desperately needed in the church today. If you read just one book on race and Christianity, make it this one. It will be my go-to recommendation on the subject for a long time to come."

—Natasha Crain, speaker, podcaster, and author of
several books, including *Faithfully Different*

"Race is one of the most contentious topics in the American church today, and sane discussion and thoughtful biblical proposals are in very short supply. This is why this book is so important and helpful. Calm, practical and, above all, Christ-honoring, this is a volume that Christians should read, ponder, discuss, and apply."

—Carl R. Trueman, professor, Grove City College;
fellow, Ethics and Public Policy Center

"*Walking in Unity* is raw, authentic, fair, intelligent, and informative, full of solid ideas and personal experiences, and biblical at its core. I have known Monique and Krista for many years (they call me Uncle Jay!), and I have repeatedly been amazed at their wisdom, their knowledge of the issues, their commitment to

Jesus and His Word, and their willingness to tackle the hard issues with a genuine desire to know the truth. Every administrator at Christian colleges and seminaries should be required to read this book. It tackles the main issues dividing us in a readable way. If you had to pick one book to read on race and related topics, this should be it."

—J.P. Moreland, distinguished professor of philosophy, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University; author of *A Simple Guide to Experience Miracles*

"Monique Duson and Krista Bontrager offer a fresh approach to contentious questions about Christianity and race. This book grows out of their own intense personal conversations, and as a result, their writing is relatable and refreshingly free of trendy buzzwords and sociological jargon. Whether or not you agree with everything they say, you will be drawn in by their common-sense treatment of what the Bible teaches about racial unity."

—Nancy R. Pearcey, professor, Houston Christian University; author of multiple books, including *Love Thy Body* and *The Toxic War on Masculinity*

"Monique and Krista forged this important, deeply biblical, and well-reasoned book through diligent research and hard discussions about the biblical approach to race in our racially divided times. They address the toughest issues with clarity, charity, and conviction. Bravo!"

—Douglas Groothuis, professor of philosophy, Denver Seminary

"Monique and Krista have given us a gracious, biblical, easy-to-read book about what is probably the most volatile and divisive issue in the American church today: race. But this book isn't about guilt, finger-pointing, or anger. It's about unity! The personal testimonies are so real and raw that it left me convicted of my sin, yet full of faith. The cornerstone is that the unity of all believers from every tribe and tongue in the New Man, Christ Jesus—or what the authors call 'the family'—is not something we have yet to accomplish but is already a

spiritual reality. The beauty of that truth shines forth gloriously on every page and encourages us to live accordingly."

—John L. Cooper, lead singer of Christian rock band Skillet, author of *Awake and Alive to Truth*, host of the *Cooper Stuff* podcast

"This insightful book tackles a difficult subject with wisdom, clarity, grace, and truth. Krista and Monique give us a biblical, not humanistic, understanding of race and racism. *Walking in Unity* is crucial for church leaders and everyday Christians to help us understand and combat the lies that our culture bombards us with daily regarding race. I highly recommend it!"

—Becket Cook, author of *A Change of Affection: A Gay Man's Incredible Story of Redemption*, host of *The Becket Cook Show*

"Why aren't Christians, whose God created every 'ethnos' under heaven, leading the national conversation about race? Because they have not yet read *Walking in Unity*. In its pages you will find the biblical, historical, and personal context needed to become the peace-making, reconciling agents for racial unity that God expects His church to be."

—Katy Faust, founder and president, Them Before Us

"The Scriptures tell us that all human beings are created in the image of God. Though we may be of different ethnicities, cultures, and physical appearances, we are of one blood. However, in these times of tremendous chaos, confusion, and conflict, as believers, Jesus Christ must be the cornerstone and source of our identity. As we are forgiven of our sins and reconciled to God, then, and only then, can we walk in true unity with each other. Ethnic groups and skin colors don't reconcile. Hearts do! *Walking in Unity* serves as an excellent and timely reminder of these biblical principles."

—Judge Cheryl Lynn Allen, first black woman elected to the Pennsylvania Superior Court

"Monique Duson and Krista Bontrager have grappled with the contentious issues of race and unity. They have been breathtakingly transparent in their journey to defining a biblical model of unity, founding each principle on Scripture. Every Christian needs to read this book, take it to heart, and implement the biblical principles laid out herein."

—Richard G. Howe, provost, Norman L. Geisler Chair of Christian Apologetics, Southern Evangelical Seminary

"*Walking in Unity* is the guidebook for difficult conversations we need to be having in this moment. Monique and Krista's message and mission are rooted in biblical truth, providing clear, hope-filled, unifying navigation to sensitive and tough issues that is better than anything the world has to offer. They are doing mighty things for God's kingdom!"

—Cissie Graham Lynch, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Samaritan's Purse

"Monique Duson and Krista Bontrager may be two unlikely friends but are perfectly matched to coauthor *Walking in Unity*. Many 'Christian' approaches to racial reconciliation are essentially secular frameworks with a few Bible verses thrown in. *Walking in Unity* is an invaluable and vital resource. I wholeheartedly commend this book as a guide to address biblical unity and the secular concept of race."

—Christopher Yuan, author of *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, producer of the Holy Sexuality Project

"Like so many Christians, Monique Duson and Krista Bontrager were drawn together by faith and friendship yet pulled apart by issues of race and justice. Their personal story frames a book that is both powerful and practical. *Walking in Unity* cuts to the heart of discussions of 'antiracism' and 'racial reconciliation' both inside and outside the church. It exposes the unbiblical assumptions that

even sincere, well-intentioned Christians can embrace and offers an approach to racial unity rooted in the gospel. I highly recommend it."

—Neil Shenvi, author of *Why Believe?: A Reasoned Approach to Christianity* and coauthor of *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology*

"Fellow Christians, I urge you in the strongest possible way: read this book! It is an urgently needed antidote to the toxic practices that are tearing our churches apart. Monique and Krista take on big, powerful, and complex ideas in clear, concise, and deeply biblical prose. Their humility, grace, humor, boldness, and courage shine on every page."

—Scott D. Allen, president, Disciple Nations Alliance, author of *Why Social Justice Is Not Biblical Justice: An Urgent Appeal to Fellow Christians in a Time of Social Crisis*

WALKING IN UNITY

KRISTA BONTRAGER
& MONIQUE DUSON

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FROM MONIQUE

To my mom, Pauline, your wisdom has been a gift.
Thank you for teaching me how to fight.
To my siblings (by birth and by marriage)
and nephews…y'all the bomb-diggity!
To Krista and my Bontrager family, thanks for standing
with me and praying for me in my most difficult seasons.
I am deeply grateful for your love and adoption.

FROM KRISTA

To my mother, Bob, Emily, and Abigail,
thank you for cheering us on.
More than anyone else, you were the eyewitnesses
to the pain and joys of this journey,
You are just as much a part of the story as we are.
To Laura, thank you for being "the one" who
stayed and walked with us through these years.

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FOREWORD

Alisa Childers

Throughout the summer of 2020, I had a knot in the pit of my stomach.

After the death of George Floyd on May 25, my social-media newsfeed was inundated with black squares bearing the hashtags #blackouttuesday and #blacklivesmatter. Some of my white friends posted the black square with captions articulating that they had finally been awakened to the plight of black and brown people. Other white friends expressed sorrow and anger over Floyd's death but refrained from posting the hashtag or square. Still others carried on as if nothing had happened. Some of my black friends became very vocal about their belief that our country is racist and even challenged me privately to speak out against systemic racism. Other black friends shared heartbreaking stories of their personal experiences with racism. The pressure to post that square was intense, and the weight of expectations was heavy as a boulder. I froze. Although I was grieved by the tragedy, something didn't seem right. I wanted to comment on current events from a biblical perspective but felt a bit unmoored within the conversation.

Then my friend Krista Bontrager suggested I interview her friend Monique Duson on my podcast to talk about it. To put it lightly, I

was nervous. I wanted to bring light and clarity to a divisive issue, but I didn't want to say the wrong thing. Culture was screaming that, as a white woman, all I could do was shut up, listen, and not offer an opinion. Yet the Bible says that what God says about human beings is true no matter what our sex or skin color. But given the social unrest, interviewing a black woman I had never met was intimidating. We recorded a full hour, and Krista, who was watching from the sidelines, popped in and said, "Well. That was the polite version. Why don't you try a prophetic version?"

Something clicked, and I thought, *Okay, let's do this*.

After a quick burger break, I scrapped the first conversation, and we recorded the episode that is now published on my podcast. The Center for Biblical Unity soon became one of the most trusted sources to help Christians navigate the chaos of 2020. But other voices were offering very different solutions.

The church is divided. The twin frameworks of black liberation theology and critical race theory have infiltrated even the most theologically conservative churches. Even congregations that would eschew progressive Christianity as a false gospel, shun the prosperity gospel as heresy, and reject deconstruction as a destructive path have been influenced by these frameworks in their discussions about race. Many well-meaning churches desperately want to recognize the sins of the past, root out racism, and engage in racial reconciliation. But as of now, there is one dominant model for achieving those goals—and sadly, it only leads to more confusion, division, and suspicion.

In *Walking in Unity*, Duson and Bontrager propose a new model—a biblical solution that defines terms, wrestles with difficult questions surrounding ethnicity, acknowledges the turbulent history of racism in our nation, and ultimately, helps Christians live out the reconciliation Jesus accomplished on the cross. It is my great hope that every church will read this book as a congregation and use it as a guide to

have better discussions on race that are informed by the Scriptures and lived out with honesty and authenticity.

There's no shortage of books on race. There's no shortage of books on critical race theory or wokeness. But there's no other book like this one.

Duson and Bontrager have risen above the noise to provide the body of Christ with a practical resource that doesn't just teach ideas and concepts. It lifts the lid off their own personal journey of friendship and invites the reader to join them as they wrestle through inflammatory topics like racial reconciliation, systemic injustice, the multiethnic church, corporate repentance, and reparations. Their story serves as a beautiful example of two sisters in Christ realizing that this identity is more important than any other. They practice what they preach and truly live out what they write about. I know this because they have adopted my family as their own.

—**Alisa Childers,** host of
The Alisa Childers Podcast,
a.k.a. "The Aunty"

INTRODUCTION

FINDING FRIENDSHIP

Monique and I (Krista) met in the fall of 2017. Little did we know that first meeting would mark the beginning of a long, uphill, but rewarding journey.

We met through a mutual friend, and for the first seven months, we conversed through Zoom and Facebook since Monique was serving as a missionary in South Africa. We discovered we had a lot in common: We were both raised in Southern California by single mothers. We had both faced sizable challenges as children. We were both passionate about our faith. We both despised hypocrisy. And we were both working in ministry.

Despite all the similarities, we never thought we'd be in ministry together.

Seven months into our friendship, Monique flew back to the United States to visit family, and I drove more than an hour to pick her up from LAX. We met face-to-face for the first time on June 3, 2018, with a curbside hug. Days later, Monique was forced to make an emergency transition off the mission field, and my husband and I invited her to stay with our family for three months while she readjusted to life back in the United States.

This arrangement lasted nearly five years.

THE CLASH OF WORLDVIEWS

There were many days in the first years of our friendship when it felt like we were locked in a duel. It was going to be a fight to the finish over which person's view of Scripture would prevail. If we were going to remain friends, I (Krista) could see that one of us was going to have to make a major shift in our way of seeing the world.

Monique was 100 percent committed to the idea that all white people are racist and that I read the Bible through the lens of whiteness. And I was 100 percent committed to the idea that the most important thing about both of us was that we should pursue the truth of Scripture first and foremost.

These two frameworks were not compatible. But I was willing to shift my point of view. In fact, I would often tell Monique, "Persuade me to your position." But I would add this caveat: "Show me from Scripture used in context that you are correct." I wasn't willing to simply throw away my worldview without a solid biblical warrant.

That's not to say I was always secure in my position. I was going against what the culture was screaming at me. Here I was, a white woman trying to tell a black woman that her theology was wrong and that I thought she was prioritizing her race over her identity in Christ. The dread and thoughts of insecurity flooded me at times, especially at night. *Am I just trying to be some kind of white savior? What if my way of reading the Bible is actually racist? Maybe I really am racist simply because I'm white.*

I started to frantically research everything I could about race, racism, and historical injustices. But I had to do this often in secret, usually at night after everyone else was asleep. Many nights I woke up in a panic, wondering if my strong stand for historic Christianity really was the right path to continue to take.

During this season, I also reached out to a few strangers on Twitter who are Christians and had come out of the social justice framework

that Monique so strongly advocated for. I remember writing to one of them after Monique and I had a particularly bad argument. She encouraged me to stay the course and keep praying that the Lord would bring about a change in Monique's heart.

As it turned out, she was exactly right. Any changes Monique went through were because of supernatural situations orchestrated by the Lord. My methods of persuasion were no match for what the Lord would do.

NOT BRAINWASHED

Since starting the Center for Biblical Unity, some people have suggested that I (Monique) have been "brainwashed by the white woman." That was one leader's direct accusation. My response to these claims is always the same: "It's unfortunate that the attitude of your heart apparently does not allow for a black woman to change her mind or think for herself." Sometimes, you answer a fool according to their folly (Proverbs 26:4-5). Because I have not been brainwashed by Krista. On the contrary, I have been blessed by Krista.

I am my mother's stubborn child. When I was a teenager, her invitations for me to consider things differently always ended with her saying, "Kiki (my childhood nickname), I'm only asking you to bend, not break." I would rather break than bend on what I thought I was right about.

My attitude toward Krista was no different. Her questions and invitations for consideration only caused me to want to stand my ground more. My perspective was *not* going to change simply because I got tired and gave in or because Krista finally wore me down. I was too stubborn for that.

If my mind was going to change on the issues of race and social justice, it would be because God Himself showed me something different, something better. And He has! In my season of debate with

Krista, I took the route of searching out every well-loved Bible verse I knew to defend the Christian's responsibility to do social justice. But instead of only reading the verse, I read the whole book—of Micah, all of Luke, all of Amos—and I also read the books that Krista recommended: Ephesians, Exodus, Deuteronomy, and more.

As I looked deeper into Scripture, I realized two things. First, I had never taken time to read Scripture in context. I cherry picked the verses that were "deep" and "good" and meant something to me or the specific situation I was in. And, second, Krista knew a lot more than I did about exegeting texts. I had things to learn. It didn't make me bad, but it did make me wrong. And I would have to learn to humble myself if I wanted to truly understand God's heart for justice.

God did *not* put Krista in my life to show up as my "white savior," saving me from my "blackness" and bringing me into her kingdom of white. Instead, He used her to show up as a friend who cared enough to challenge me on my theology, regardless of the fact that I am black and she is white. God chose her to confront me on some very difficult topics, of which race and justice were just a few, but the way I viewed the world shifted as I grew in my understanding of the Scriptures. God speaks through His Word; as we listen and choose obedience, we must change.

THE CONFLICT

As you can tell, life under the same roof revealed that Krista and I had very different views of the world. The early years of our friendship were marked by many challenging, and often painful, discussions about race and racism. We were both filled with assumptions, accusations, hard words, and harder emotions. Sometimes this led to heated conversations and even needing to take a time-out, take a drive, and cool off.

Like many people in the United States today, we faced what felt like insurmountable barriers—while we spoke the same language, we had drastically different definitions for words related to race and racial issues. We also entered our friendship with cultural rifts that made talking about racial issues at times confusing and distressing. Instead of retreating permanently into avoidant silence or escalating until we burned down the friendship, we learned to enter those difficult conversations with more grace and humility because the other person was worth it.

You could say that because we lived in the same house, we were forced to find a way to preserve our friendship. We had a spoken agreement to choose the other person, even when we preferred not to. We deliberately kept the fun alive in our friendship and created happy memories together between the hard conversations. We also dove deeper into studying the Bible, seeking God's truth about the issues that divided us. And slowly, as we meditated on and discussed God's Word together, we both began to change.

WALKING TOGETHER

When I (Monique) returned from the mission field, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. As part of my recovery process, my therapist recommended going on daily walks, and Krista thought it would be great if she came with me. So every morning before Krista went to work, we walked three laps around our gated community, reaching two miles exactly. After work, we'd walk the same route again. Sometimes I'd even meet her at work in the middle of the day, and we'd take a quick walk during her lunch break. We walked so much that it felt like we covered the nearly ten thousand miles back to Cape Town.

On one of our first walks I asked, "So, are you a Republican?" Her

face registered shock and confusion at my unsolicited inquiry. Since she didn't immediately respond with a hearty, "No way!" (or with any words at all, for that matter), I just kept talking.

"Republicans don't care about the poor. What are your thoughts on helping the poor?"

Krista remained silent, so naturally, I kept talking.

Finally, she spoke up. "I do care about helping the poor," she said. "But I also think I have different ideas than you do about *how* to do it. I don't really think I'm ready to share my political thoughts."

What? The only thing worse than a completely silent walk is one filled with mind-numbing small talk. If we were going to be real friends, we couldn't be "small-talk friends." I'm just not that type. I kept asking questions—not to bother her, but because I genuinely wanted to get to know her.

Our walks also gave Krista the opportunity to get to know me. She fumbled through her own questions at first, unsure of what was okay to ask and what would be considered rude or racist. But once she found her conversational stride, our walks turned into marathons of questions—very direct questions.

Krista asked me about things that had never crossed my mind—from my worldview and why I believed all white people were racists to why I wasn't married. She asked why I was okay with premarital sex in light of being a Christian. I tried to explain that I wasn't okay with *premeditated* premarital sex, but if you got caught up in the heat of the moment, and it accidentally happened, certainly God would extend grace. For every question she had challenging my errant views of Scripture, I had an answer. She wanted to know why I was so passionate about social justice and where I got the idea that Jesus was a social worker. (She especially disliked that one.)

"What was your experience like at Biola University?" she asked. (Like putting Snoop Dogg on *The Brady Bunch*.)

"Why did you vote for Obama?" (Because he was black, that's why!)

This question got us talking about identity politics and how I, as a Christian, could choose to vote for Democrats.

"Do all black people think like you?" she asked. Not about everything, necessarily, I told her, but about race, the police, and Democrats, definitely!

Krista continued,

"What's your family like?"

"What were the Los Angeles riots like?"

"What was your neighborhood like?"

Her strategically timed and direct questions kept me thinking.

Sometimes our conversations spilled over from our walks into the house. Krista was genuinely curious about black people and our culture. She often mistook the preferences of one black person as universal to black culture. I was curious too, but that interest extended only to Krista as an individual. Because I had been raised in a majority white nation, attended a predominantly white university, and worked among many white people, I thought I already knew everything I needed to know about white culture.

For example, I *knew* that, for white people, being too loud was nearly synonymous with being irreverent. And yet, white children always seemed a bit rowdier than what black mothers allowed from their own children. I *knew* all whites voted Republican and didn't seem to care too much about blacks or other minorities. They expected people of color to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, clearly without any understanding of the historic racial injustice black people had suffered that had removed those boots altogether. I *thought* I knew plenty about what it meant to be white.

After a deeper study on race and Scripture, I realized I was wrong. I had lots of assumptions but not many facts.

Our conversations were lively, at best. At worst, they were heated

arguments, ending with us in tears, walking away from each other, or not speaking to each other because our hot heads needed time to cool off. I was committed to my beliefs about racism, America's racist past, my thoughts on white people, and how Scripture should be lived out in light of those things. Meanwhile, Krista was committed to a historic Christian worldview and approach to Scripture. This is not to say that she didn't care about history or racism or injustice; she simply thought that to think correctly about those things, one first had to properly understand the Scriptures in context. This was a confusing idea for me, so I considered it another facet of whiteness. Nevertheless, we continued to walk.

We walked in summer and in winter. We didn't let changing seasons or the elements stop us. There were many times when neither of us wanted to show up because the relationship felt too hard. But we both knew that walking was healthy for me, and though we couldn't see it then, walking was healthy for our unity. That season of walking formed our friendship.

The conversations that flowed from those walks were a key part of what moved me away from the social justice ideology that had served as the framework for my worldview, and they also broadened Krista's understanding regarding issues of race and racism. Those conversations serve as the foundation for the Center for Biblical Unity and this book.

BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

In October 2019, I (Monique) made a YouTube video explaining changes in my thinking on race issues and who was actually my spiritual family. I called on all Christians, regardless of race, to treat one another first and foremost as family. Soon after this, the Lord planted in my mind the name for our ministry: the Center for Biblical Unity.

Despite not quite knowing what it would be, the following January, I filed paperwork for our organization to become a nonprofit. Krista built a four-page website for me, and in February 2020, the Center for Biblical Unity (CFBU) was born.[1]

We didn't have any solid plans for CFBU, but God did. When social unrest erupted in the late spring and summer of 2020, CFBU was positioned to offer a biblical voice on race, justice, and unity. God had placed us in the right place at the right time to speak truth into the chaos and proclaim His plan for racial unity.

Together we have had the privilege to travel across the country speaking on race, ethnicity, and culture. People have a lot of questions, and answering them can be complicated. Krista often compares this difficult undertaking to trying to solve a Rubik's Cube with forty-five sides. While we can't cover all forty-five sides of the race conversation in this brief book, we will answer the main questions we've received in our ministry. To maintain balance between our perspectives and approaches, you'll see that we've split the chapters roughly in half between us.

Along the way, we will examine how the *racial reconciliation* model and the *biblical unity* model address these race-related questions, and we will do our best to point you to the greatest healer and reconciler of all: Jesus. It is important to note that this book is not an academic response to critical race theory (CRT). Other authors have already done that work. We simply hope to equip regular Christians, including laypeople, pastors, Christian schoolteachers and administrators, and other ministry leaders to stand as countercultural voices and proclaim God's vision for biblical unity.

Because we are Christians, we ground our beliefs about race, racism, and justice in the tenets of Scripture. We also give strong deference to what Christianity has historically believed on these matters. It serves as our authority and the lens through which we see and make

sense of the world. We believe that the Bible offers the best understanding of human nature and the way the world really works. The available evidence combined with the work of scholars and Christian apologists have established that the words of the Bible are accurately preserved. We believe that the Bible is objectively true, regardless of whether a person believes or agrees with its teachings. As such, we have an obligation to conform our thoughts, feelings, and opinions to the Bible's directives. Because it is our authority, our primary desire is to explain what the Bible says before presenting our thoughts or opinions. If the Bible speaks clearly to a matter, we will say as much. If not, we will offer our perspective drawn from biblical principles and the best available evidence. We recognize that some of those opinions are debated points and may change over time.

We invite you to walk with us as we seek to conform our thoughts, feelings, and opinions on race, ethnicity, and culture to God's Word and His vision for unity. We pray that God will use the journey of our friendship to help you see the beautiful simplicity of His plan for racial unity: *family*.

May this book inspire you to boldly proclaim the hope God offers for racial unity—a better hope than *anything* the world has to offer.

CHAPTER 1

HOW DID WE BECOME SO DIVIDED?

Monique Duson

I grew up in South Central Los Angeles. Life was tough. But more than that, life was *black*. Lessons the streets taught me about drugs, prostitution, gangs, and being poor were secondary to what my mother instilled in me—being black. I was a black child and one day would grow up to become a strong, black woman.

My mother always based her most important life lessons on my blackness. For instance, when she wanted to remind me to think for myself, she'd say, "Kiki (my childhood nickname), you don't have to do what your little friends tell you to do—you hear me? The only two things you have to do in this world are be black and die."

Occasionally, we'd ride the bus to the Fox Hills mall. It was the bougie mall where "fancy" blacks and white people shopped. When we saw white kids throwing tantrums, my mother would remind my brother and me, "You see that? That's what white kids do. You better not ever!" And, just in case one of us was considering "acting a fool" in front of a white audience, she'd give us the pep talk, "Don't y'all get in here and start acting a fool in front of all these white people. You hear me?" ("Yes, ma'am" was the only appropriate response.) My mother listened to black music, so I listened to black music.

Her record player only turned for black singers: Regina Belle, Anita Baker, Michael Jackson, Luther Vandross, Whitney Houston, Karyn White, Prince, Sade, Stevie Wonder. The one and only time I listened to "white music" while living at home was when I played Michael Bolton, and all my mother said was, "That sounds like white music." I immediately knew not to play it again.

It wasn't merely that there was something different about "white music." I learned from an early age that black and white people were different entirely. Race was an identity, not simply an aesthetic. Being black was intrinsically who I was—not just how I looked.

MY GREAT AWOKENING

On April 29, 1992, I stood on the corner of 61st Street and Normandie Avenue in South Central Los Angeles and watched my neighborhood burn. The previous year, Rodney King (a black man) had been nearly beaten to death after being pulled over by four (white) Los Angeles police officers after an eight-mile car chase.[1] The whole thing, including the beating, was captured on video. The recording proved to the world something the black community already *knew*: the system was stacked against us. The subsequent acquittal of all four officers resulted in riots that ripped the city apart. While most of America watched the televised riots from the safety of their living rooms, my family and I watched it from right outside our home.

The year leading up to that moment had been a racially tumultuous one for black people in South Central. In March 1991—just 13 days after King's beating—a Korean store owner shot a 15-year-old black girl, Latasha Harlins, in the back of the head after wrongly accusing her of trying to steal a bottle of orange juice.[2] This happened three miles from my house. That November, Judge Joyce Karlin, who

was white, fined the store owner five hundred dollars and placed her on five years' probation. Residents of South Central were outraged and called for Karlin's removal.[3]

By the time the Rodney King trial ended five months later, the city was a racial tinderbox, primed to catch fire—and it literally did. Crowds ran down the street. Some people held protest signs and yelled, "No justice, no peace!" Looters carried off televisions, stereos, and clothes, targeting stores that were owned by Koreans or white people. Parents sent their kids to grab whatever they could. (My friends brought home 40-ounce liquor bottles for their father.)

My mother wouldn't let me or my siblings out of her sight. Finally, when I asked her what was going on, she said, "Kiki, white folks think they can do black people any kinda way. And we're tired. Black people are tired."

Until then, I hadn't really thought about the ways white people treated us. At this point in my life, all I knew about black-white relationships I had learned in school or by eavesdropping on my mother's conversations with her friends. I often heard her say, "White folks always gonna think they better than black folks."

Black people and white people were from two different worlds with little overlap. From what I could see, black folks lived in South Central and white people lived everywhere else. Any kid whose family left South Central to live somewhere else we labeled as "sadiddy," "uppity," or "acting white." We lived, shopped, went to school, and worshipped with people who looked like us, and white people did the same. I only had one white teacher throughout my entire elementary education, and we made fun of her.

My world wasn't so much filled with an understanding of racism as it was filled with the understanding that black and white people were different. Our differences meant we didn't interact on any level—no white friends, no white teachers, no white store owners.

My world was proudly black. "White" was reserved for my grandmother's soap operas, doctors, and folks you saw at work. Otherwise, we all kept to ourselves.

Division didn't start in 1992 with the Los Angeles Riots. We'd already been divided; I was just waking up to it.

AMERICA WAKES UP

Twenty-eight years later, inner-city Los Angeles was burning again, and this time, so were other black neighborhoods in cities across the country. This unrest was sparked by the death of George Floyd, a black man, who died while being detained by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The scenes were all too familiar—looting, burning buildings, and black rage. The screams of "No justice, no peace!" were now replaced with "black lives matter!" Celebrities and corporations denounced systemic racism and demanded that everyone recognize the racial injustices being committed against black people. The footage of Floyd pinned under the knee of Derek Chauvin, a white police officer was, for some, all the evidence needed to condemn America as a racist nation.

Until this uproar, most white people thought America had come a long way in race relations. Civil rights for all had been codified into law decades earlier. Interracial relationships were more widely accepted. Eminem, a white rapper, was accepted as a legit hip-hop artist in a space that had been completely black. And finally, for a brief moment, the television show *Friends* had a significant black character with a recurring role. Surely, America was headed toward a post-racial society. There were black movies and television shows. A few *Fortune* 500 companies had black CEOs. Black people were working in STEM fields and nonprofit sectors. We'd elected America's first black president—*twice*. For many white people, this was evidence

that America had put racism behind us. In light of what seemed like progress, the events of 2020 caught many off guard.

Most black Americans were not surprised, though. Conversations about race and injustice were still the waters that many black people were swimming in, and those waters ran deep. While many white people saw Floyd's death as the first recent sign of *potential* racism, many black people saw it as the last straw, the confirmation of long-standing systemic police bias against us. Between 2014 and 2020, several high-profile cases of black people being killed by the police had made headlines nationwide: Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Botham Jean, Atatiana Jefferson, and Breonna Taylor among them. Many (but not all) of the offending police officers were white.

While much of 2020's social unrest mirrored 1992's, something was drastically different this time around—*me*. Through God's grace and many hard conversations with Krista (beginning in 2017) and divinely placed situations, I had been shifting away from the progressive social justice mindset I had adopted as a child. I started to ask different questions and became slower to jump to conclusions about people based on their skin color. I was now consulting Scripture as my first authority on issues of race, justice, and unity. As mentioned earlier, Krista and I started the Center for Biblical Unity (CFBU) in February 2020, just as rumors of the pandemic were surfacing. During the riots that summer, our ministry's popularity began to grow. As social media began focusing on "lifting black voices," my black voice was pushed out to hundreds of thousands of people every week.

But all of that stopped when the social-media algorithms realized I was a *theologically conservative* black voice, promoting a *biblical* path to racial unity. Once they caught on, they stopped promoting my black voice. (Perhaps their slogan should have been, "Lift *some* black voices.")

Nonetheless, in those early months, thousands of emails from, what was at the time, our mostly white audience poured in to CFBU, asking variations of the same question: *How did we become so divided?*

A PEOPLE DIVIDED

Complex questions call for careful answers. We kept hearing the same question: "How did we become so divided?" On the surface, the question was about United States history and slavery, Jim Crow, or civil rights. The underlying question, though, was much more complicated. Those who believed our nation was on a trajectory to a "post-racial" society wanted to know, "How could the death of George Floyd stop all our progress?" Christians specifically wondered:

"Why are our churches so divided?"

"What started the black church?"

"If we're all believers, why don't black and white people usually worship together?"

"What can we as Christians do to help heal racial division?"

Answering these questions and exploring every causative factor in detail would take a book of its own. Since much has already been written on the topic, I'll give an overview of four main factors of the division: nation, church, history, and culture.

Divided Nation

It is sobering to look back on our nation's history and remember that United States legal institutions once sanctioned the enslavement of black and indigenous Americans and allowed legalized discrimination to continue for more than one hundred years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. While slavery dates back to some of the oldest civilizations and is mentioned in Genesis 37:2-36, slavery was seen as a result of fallen human nature and belonged to

all people.[4] Although slavery was normal in most parts of the world throughout history, America pioneered a new version of it, which was predominantly based on skin color. This and other institutionalized racial mistreatment created its own kind of division in our nation, leading some to justify brutality toward (and even murder of) black people.[5]

Some Christians even argued that this was God's will because Africans descended from the line of Ham (Genesis 9:20-27). Since Noah had cursed Ham's son Canaan to be a "servant of servants" to his brothers, slavery advocates concluded this was a biblical war rant to enslave Africans. This view was published in books, pamphlets, sermons, and newspapers. Even Dr. Louis T. Talbot, namesake of Biola University's Talbot School of Theology, affirmed this interpretation as late as the 1940s. In a leaflet titled "Studies in Genesis" he wrote:

> But not only did the Canaanites prove to be morally and spiritually depraved and degraded. Not only was their immorality accompanied by the worst forms of idolatry. But they also became "abject slaves," servants of the descendants of Shem and Japheth.[6]

And yet again, certain historians tell us that, when Israel took the land, some of the Canaanites "fled away into Africa." Surely this curse upon Canaan gives us the only true account of the origin of the Negro race, "a servant of servants."[7]

Some also argued, then and more recently, that Africans descended from Adam's son Cain. After Cain killed his brother, Abel, God cursed him. But He also showed Cain mercy by putting a mark on him so he wouldn't be killed by others (Genesis 4:1-16). Although the Bible doesn't indicate what the mark was or whether it was passed down through Cain's descendants, some Christians thought that white skin

was "normal" and interpreted the "mark" placed on Cain and his descendants as black skin.[8] Therefore, slavery, discrimination, bans on interracial dating and marriage, and other injustices were not only legislated, but *scripturally* justified. The dehumanization of black people resulted in inexcusable acts like the nonconsensual, forced obstetrics experiments performed without anesthesia on black slave women.[9] The publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) and *Descent of Man* (1871) furthered these ideas and played a role in laying the scientific and philosophical groundwork used to justify future ideas like eugenics.

Divided Pews

When I was a child, my grandmother took me to Sardis Missionary Baptist Church—a black church that met in a small storefront building. There I learned to clap, shout, and sing old black worship songs like "Jesus Is on the Mainline." Some of the older women wore nursing uniforms and white gloves. These church "nurses" would catch kids or glasses when parents started to "shout" (which is church dancing, not random screaming). They'd also cover the legs of women lying on the floor after being slain in the Holy Ghost; this was to respect their modesty. Ushers (who would snatch the gum right out your mouth if they caught you chewing any!) seated attendees. The small choir marched in from the back of the sanctuary, their rhythmic sways and sharp turns commanding the attention of those in the pews. Musicians would beat on the Hammond organ and drums when the pastor was "preaching good," and "the mothers" (the oldest women in the church) would wave fans with pictures of Jesus on the front and a picture of Martin Luther King Jr. or funeral home advertisements on the back. (In the absence of air conditioning, these fans would be used to cool off, encourage the pastor, or fan people who passed out from "catching the Holy Ghost.")

That was all I knew about church.

I was my grandmother's church buddy. From the time I was a toddler, my grandmother would dress me up and take me to church with her, sometimes for multiple services. She was a diabetic and became very ill when I was ten, and she was no longer able to take me to church. Off and on her church friends would pick me up for Sunday service, but in the long run, her absence would result in me leaving the church. My grandmother died when I was 13. At that time, I had no personal faith or understanding of who Jesus or the Trinity was. Thankfully, a short three years later, a friend from my high school would invite me to her youth group at a large multiethnic church. There I would hear the gospel and choose to place my hope and trust in Jesus. Ten years passed before I returned to the black church. By then, I was studying at Biola University, a predominantly white Christian school in the Los Angeles Basin, when black friends invited me to a black church in Compton. I grew to love that community. The people took Christianity—and blackness—very seriously. This time around, the black church taught me what it meant to be a black Christian.

At Biola, I saw the stark difference between the black and white church. Collective worship at Biola usually meant slow music led by barefoot white people with guitars. There wasn't a whole lot of clapping (even less clapping on beat), and I barely knew any of the songs. I was out of my element. Occasionally, the university's gospel choir would be scheduled to sing black gospel music during the chapel service. Not everyone appreciated it, and some students asked why a gospel choir was even needed. The black and white church remained divided on that campus.

In a 1960 *Meet the Press* interview, Martin Luther King Jr. called eleven o'clock on Sunday mornings the most segregated hour in America.[10] While routine necessities of weekday life pushed white

and black people into shared spaces at work and on public transportation, church services remained separate. Attending church with those of the same color and culture was standard and, in fact, preferred. While many within the black church fought for the civil rights reforms of the 1960s, most white evangelical churches appeared to remain silent on those issues. White evangelicals usually fell into one of three camps: segregationists (those wholly opposed to integration), moderates (who believed segregation to be biblically and legally wrong but frowned upon miscegenation [reproduction between people of different ethnic groups]), or integrationists (those who believed segregation was a sin and openly spoke against it on all levels).

Most white evangelical churches in both the North and the South were not completely silent on matters of racism. Many evangelical leaders openly condemned racism in their writings instead of joining black people marching in the streets.[11] While Dr. King and other civil rights movement leaders called for the government to address racism and segregation structurally, white evangelicals were largely of the mind that involving government was wrong. They believed that the end of racism would come, and it would be better accomplished by the gospel transforming individuals' hearts.[12] This notion added to the mistrust between black and white believers—a suspicion that continues today. Some black Christians still view all or predominantly white church congregations as racist or unsafe spaces.[13]

Segregation was standard in many churches from America's earliest days. White slave owners questioned whether black people could or should be offered the gospel and salvation. Christianity was seen as the religion of the free, and initially, slaves who accepted the gospel and were baptized were often freed. The Christian faith would not allow any Christian to own another,[14] but the Virginia slave law of 1667 began to change this practice nationwide by stating that "An act declaring that baptisme [sic] of slaves doth not exempt them from

bondage." (White slaves who were baptized into Christianity, on the other hand, were freed afterward.)[15] Slave owners feared that teaching Christianity to their slaves would lead to revolts, escapes, or demands to be set free; therefore, they tightly controlled literacy, access to the Bible, and worship in the slave quarters. As a result, slaves created "invisible churches"—secret meetings where they could pray, worship, and listen to preaching without restriction.

Free blacks formed churches and held worship services, finding support from many white Methodists who generally welcomed both free and enslaved blacks. But even in this setting, racism eventually forced black and white congregants apart, leading to the formation of the black church.[16] This gave blacks a generally safe space to worship God through their own cultural expressions, though they still faced vandalism and bombings.

Sadly, an overemphasis on biblical themes of freedom from slavery, the Exodus, and God as the champion of the oppressed opened a door to reinterpret and reimagine Christianity through the experiences of oppressed people. James Cone, the father of black liberation theology, compared the black struggle for freedom from slavery to the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt and argued that God is, first and foremost, the God of the oppressed—therefore, white people can't possibly understand Him.[17] In one of his works, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), Cone writes,

> In Christ, God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed. Their suffering becomes his; their despair, divine despair. Through Christ the poor man is offered freedom now to rebel against that which makes him other than human.[18]

Black liberation theology aims to liberate black people from white

oppression while holding very strong—at times racist—views on what it means to be either black or white. It often conflates politics with theology and pits the "oppressed" against the "oppressor." God is seen primarily as the Liberator from earthly oppression rather than the Redeemer of sinners.[19]

Cone wasn't the first to hold this view—or the last. In 1895, African Methodist Episcopalian Bishop Henry McNeal Turner asked his congregants to see God in a new way, saying, "I worship a Negro God. I believe God is a Negro. Negroes should worship a God who is a Negro. If we are created in the image of God, then God is black."[20] Deeply influenced by leaders like Cone, Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, Reverend Al Sharpton, and Jesse Jackson, many black preachers still focus primarily on social justice messages pertaining to white-inflicted oppression.

Divided History

In history class at school, I learned about white-toward-black racism—slavery, lynching, water hoses, poll taxes, separate bathrooms and water fountains, and "Colored Only" signs. I thought these things were relics of the past.

My history teachers reinforced the beauty of my blackness. We were taught to be proud because, even though white people had tried to keep us down for centuries, black people were strong, smart, and talented. We weren't only slaves "beaten and mistreated for the work we gave."[21] That's only one small part of our history; our lineage was that of kings and queens. We were inventors and doctors, authors and poets, teachers and singers, and freedom fighters. My early days of studying black literature and authors like Maya Angelou taught me that despite our history, we rise.

To be black was to be phenomenal, and young black girls like me were being raised to be phenomenal black women. The story of my

people was the story of rising, again and again, tired but determined, even while white people thought they could do us "any kinda way."

History is a divisive topic today, and many believe the idea, as I once did, that there is a white history and a black history of the United States. On my walks with Krista, this concept came up regularly. We each knew parts of American history—just not the same parts.

Once, Krista mentioned Benjamin Franklin. I enthusiastically responded, "Oh, wasn't he the fifth president?" Her silence and confused expression—and later, bursts of laughter—let me know I was wrong. Krista knew about the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the founding fathers, and the Bill of Rights. She knew all the words of the national anthem. I knew about the Emancipation Proclamation, Crispus Attucks, Juneteenth, Emmett Till, redlining, and Black Wall Street. I knew all the words of the Black National Anthem. Krista didn't even know there *was* a Black National Anthem. It's as if we had spent our childhoods learning about two different Americas.

Today, American history and how it is being taught has come under scrutiny. Over the years, intentional efforts have been made to educate the public on the historical contributions of black Americans. Carter G. Woodson began Black History Week (now expanded to Black History Month) in 1926 to increase knowledge of black people's contributions to American society.

But since then, new endeavors to revise American history have come to the forefront. For example, Nikole Hannah-Jones's 1619 Project "aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative."[22] But our nation's history doesn't and shouldn't belong to just one group. It's *all* American history—and we should all know about all of it. It should serve as a guide, leading us to live wisely by exposing the patterns of our successes and mistakes.

Sadly, some people are taught certain pieces of history, and others

are taught entirely different pieces. The way history is taught often depends upon the teacher's proficiency or priorities. Leaving out any "side" is incomplete and unrealistic. Is the moon landing not part of my history because I am black and Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were white? Should the Emancipation Proclamation be considered white history because Lincoln was white? What are we to make of black slave owners like Anthony Johnson, Elizabeth Frazer Skelton, William Ellison, and John Carruthers Stanly?[23] Do they belong to black history or white? To categorize the work of Frederick Douglass, Charles Octavius Boothe, or Daniel Hale Williams as only black history and not American history simply because of their brown skin demeans their contributions to our nation and silos them into a much narrower, less significant category: race.

To omit or minimize one group to highlight another is dishonest to who we are as a nation. We must not rewrite our historical narrative to center the accounts of one group or minimize the harms many have endured. We must not teach only the good or only the bad. Yet too often, that is exactly what happens. To overcome racial divisions, we must tell a full and accurate history. A split history is no history at all.

Cultural Division

Culture demands that we divide. By "culture," I mean the values, behaviors, customs, and ideologies social-media influencers, newscasters, musicians, athletes, celebrities, academics, ideologues, and everyday people see as routine, acceptable, and beneficial. These values often strive against those of the historic Christian worldview.

During the unrest of 2020, people were going berserk on social media, demanding that everyone post black squares on their pages to show their support for black people. Many who didn't were publicly shamed. Businesses were targeted. Pastors publicly called for

congregants to deny their privilege and support Black Lives Matter. The narrative was that all black people are systemically oppressed. Anyone who questioned that was labeled a racist.

Cultural divisions have also deepened due to widespread "diversity" practices in hiring and recruiting. It is now common for employers to favor a "candidate of color" or ignore other applicants because of race-based practices meant to bring about diversity.[24] Some see these practices as a necessary corrective to compensate for historic injustices and as a means to achieve "equity"; others see them as exchanging one form of discrimination for another.

HOW DID WE BECOME SO DIVIDED?

The answer to this question may differ according to whom you ask. Someone's worldview will likely determine how he or she identifies the origins of division today, both in the church and the culture, but most will look to American slavery as the starting point.

But I believe this is the wrong place to start. Before George Floyd, before Rodney King, and before slavery, were Adam and Eve. Our ethnic division, at its foundation, is rooted in the sin and division of humankind's first family (Genesis 3:1-7).

Racial division is a byproduct of sin, and that sin starts in the broken hearts and bent nature of human beings.

Our nation's past, church divisions, incomplete history, and secular cultural pressures certainly play a role in our division too. Adopting race as our core identity, ignoring or nursing unhealed wounds and distrust, and catalyzing events among racial groups also contribute to this brokenness. We may find an infinite number of explanations for modern racial division, but the heart of the issue is *sin*.

When God asked Adam and Eve why they had done the one thing He specifically told them not to do—thereby damaging for all time

their perfect fellowship with Him and each other—the first man blamed his wife instead of confessing his disobedience and willful rebellion. The cycle of sin, blame, and division between people had begun. Something had gone very wrong. Sin brought with it severe consequences: breaking the relationship between God and His people, the unity between man and woman, and the harmony between humans and the rest of creation (Genesis 3:8-24). This strife between Adam and Eve continued down through their descendants.[25] Genesis 4 records Cain's jealousy-driven murder of his younger brother, Abel, and Lamech's vengeful murder of a young man who had only wounded him (Genesis 4:23-24). The rest of the Bible confirms that sin and strife have been passed down through every generation. All of humanity has been affected by the first humans' rebellion, and division is one aspect of it that we still participate in today.

Our biggest race problems are neither liberal policies nor conservative policies. I could easily criticize those who choose to not speak out against biblically defined injustice. Rather, the line we must draw is between Christianity and culture. Regardless of one's political or ideological affiliation, culture will always fail to bring about true unity. Any culture that is not rooted in Christ can only foster more division.

In 1992, I saw that reality up close as I stood beside my mother and watched my neighborhood burn. At the time, my mom didn't know Christ, so her immediate response was to blame white people for the looters' poor behavior. The biblical answer, though, is that all people are sinners, and sinners are going to sin.

So who is to blame for today's division? The answer, quite simply, is all of us.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. From this chapter, what did you learn about the history of slavery and race relations that surprised you?

2. What conversations in your own life have led you to reexamine your perspectives on social or spiritual issues? What is the value of having relationships with people who challenge you?

3. What are some recent examples of racial division you've witnessed? How does understanding the sinfulness of human nature impact how you view these conflicts?

4. How does your faith inform how you perceive the politics surrounding race relations in the US? How does your personal background (cultural, racial, political, socioeconomic, and so on) inform how you see these issues?

5. How does a fuller understanding of Western and American history affect how you understand today's conflicts in the US? Are there any areas of history highlighted in this chapter that you'd like to examine further?