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Chapter 1

The Importance of Understanding History

As a teenager in 1968, I boarded a train and headed from Baltimore to Atlanta to attend Carver Bible College. Carver was a small black college that had been started by white fundamentalist missionaries to train "Negroes" in the Scriptures. I'll never forget arriving at Carver the very first time. I had expected a "college" to be large—I had expected something majestic. What greeted me was a few small rooms, a parking lot, some students, and a handful of professors. Carver wasn't my idea of college at all. But in those days, as a black American, I did not have many other better choices if I wanted to study the Bible.

Standing in that parking lot the very first day, I told myself I would only stay a year. Then I would move on and find something better that more resembled my idea of a college. But during that first year, I came to be mentored and taught by two men who took me under their wings and forever changed my life. One was a black man—Dr. John McNeal, the Dean of Students. Dr. McNeal quickly

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assumed the role of a father figure in my life. Recognizing my insatiable passion for learning and preaching the Word of God, he challenged me to always balance biblical study with personal spiritual depth. He also opened his home to me and encouraged me to spend as much time there as I wanted, with him and his wife, asking as many questions as I wanted about the Scriptures. Dr. McNeal knew the lack of strong biblical training in the black community at that time and he had made it his life mission to pour into the future of the black church in America by investing in her leaders while he could.

The other man who impacted my life was Dr. Howard Dial, a white professor who came to teach at Carver at the request of Dr. McNeal. They had worked together at another location where Dr. McNeal supervised Dr. Dial. At that time, Dr. Dial and his wife had their heart set on becoming missionaries overseas. But through their friendship and work relationship, Dr. McNeal explained the missional need for training black Christian men who would go on and pastor and lead churches in sound, biblical teaching. Dr. Dial accepted the calling to commit his life to investing in the lives of young men like me so that we could gain access to the biblical training that was mostly only available to white people at that time.

Due to the brilliance, compassion, love, and support of these two men, my one year at this small Bible college turned into four. I gave up my hopes of attending something bigger or grander. Instead, I realized the value of what I was receiving in my education there as well as the personal discipleship and mentoring I was able to maximize through a close personal relationship with both men.

Because Carver was located just minutes from the Atlanta University system that included Morris Brown, Morehouse, Clark, and Spellman colleges—the centerpieces of black educational and cultural life—there was never any lack of sociological discussion during my years there. Carver was also located just minutes from the Interdenominational Theological Center, which was a predominantly

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black seminary that emphasized black history, black culture, and black theology.

Here I was at a Bible college that stressed biblical theology, evangelism, and discipleship in the midst of a city of great diversity of thought of civil rights and black culture. You can imagine the confluence of perspectives that I was exposed to in an area so inundated with differing views. Students from ITC often challenged us from Carver about our relevance to the social realities that blacks were facing. Carver students challenged the students at ITC about their liberal orientation to Scripture. These debates, along with living in Atlanta in 1968 at the height of the civil rights movement, provoked questions in me that traditional theology had not clearly addressed. I began formulating answers to these questions out of a kingdom theology that continued to develop as I went deeper in my study of Scripture.

Living in Atlanta brought the issue of the black church, our racial history, and our role in society even more to the forefront of my mind because racism in Atlanta was more overt than it was in Baltimore where I had been raised. For example, one of my white "evangelical" professors asked me to do some work on his house for him one afternoon. When it came time for lunch, he put me in another room to eat by myself. He told me that his mother lived with him and that she would never eat with a black man. That was an eye-opening moment, one of many to come.

I also remember being very nervous when I had to drive through small Georgia towns because of the horror stories I had heard about the South. A white medical doctor had been told about my passion for theology and proclaiming God's Word at Carver, and had hired me to conduct an outreach Bible study to Christian blacks in his area. He paid my way and provided me with a place where I could sleep at night. As best as I can remember, though, he never once came to the Bible study he initiated.

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The Bible study was located several hours away from Atlanta, making driving there an experience. The "n-word" got thrown at me if I was in an area where I needed to slow down. I saw black men and women walking with their heads held down. If I stopped for gas (I tried not to stop at all), I saw black men and women who wouldn't even make eye contact with the whites around them. These realities along with two major events affected me greatly toward devoting myself to theologically grappling with the contradiction between the white "evangelical" church and what it taught in comparison with the segregation that it was practicing. It stoked the fire in me to study, understand, and apply the strengths and uniqueness of the black church, which could benefit society at large.

One of these events was the time Lois and I visited Bob Jones University. Bob Jones University was a leading evangelical school that taught that the Bible was the inerrant Word of God, yet it also publicly practiced racial segregation. Not only did BJU publicly promote racial segregation, but it actively taught that it was biblical. Bob Jones Sr. preached and published a sermon titled "Is Segregation Scriptural?" in 1960, and a few years later, Bob Jones III said this in a magazine interview:

> A Negro is best when he serves at the table. . . . When he does that, he's doing what he knows how to do best. . . . And the Negroes who have ascended to positions in government, in education, this sort of thing, I think you'll find, by and large, have a strong strain of white blood in them.[1]

I will never forget driving onto the campus of this "Bible-based" university and being followed and stopped by the campus police not only to inquire what we were doing there, but to ask us to leave.

The second impacting event was when I attended Colonial Hills Baptist Church in East Point, Georgia, with my mentor and professor,

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Howard Dial. As I mentioned earlier, Dr. Dial was white. He attended an all-white church. Yet he was also a committed Christian man who had a heart for racial reconciliation. He was the academic dean at Carver. Over my time there we became very good friends.

The Sunday I attended church as a guest of Dr. Dial just so happened to be the Sunday that the leading candidate for the vacant pastorate was preaching. He preached a powerful message while giving a call to come forward in a commitment to discipleship at the end. I responded to the call, not realizing that the focus would turn to me when I did.

First, the man who received me at the altar to pray with me made it clear, not only to me but to everyone in the church, that there was a monumental difference between making a spiritual commitment to discipleship and making a commitment to come to church. Those were two very separate deals.

Next, the leadership made it explicitly clear that they did not want blacks coming to the church on a regular basis. In fact, the church ended up splitting over this one event and the prospective pastor declined the invitation to become senior pastor, saying that he could not pastor a church steeped in racial segregation. Unaware to most at the time, a young Philip Yancey was sitting in the pews witnessing this whole situation take place as well. He would later go on to tell how this injustice within the body of Christ impacted the way he viewed spirituality and helped inform his role in seeking to bring clarity to it through his writing and ministry.[2]

These and other less dramatic events brought the major disconnection between evangelical belief and practice to light for me on a highly personal level. I understood afresh the anger and frustration of the black church in America at the hypocrisy of white Christianity in general and white evangelicalism in particular.

Experiencing firsthand the reality of what black theology and black power sought to correct propelled me to wrestle with theological

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issues at a deep level. I already had a passion that had been birthed in Baltimore and Philadelphia to address these issues, but studying in Atlanta at the height of the civil rights movement fired my passion to a supersonic level. In fact, it thrust me into a desire to study further at seminary so that I could address the issue not only from a popular level (such as a pulpit), but also from an academic level. I set my mind to bridge the divide both on theological and practical terms in a way that would be consistent with the kingdom concepts that I had been introduced to and had become extremely inquisitive about.

In August of 1972, Lois and I arrived at the campus of Dallas Theological Seminary. I was the fourth African American student ever accepted into the master's degree program at a school that had begun nearly fifty years earlier. The first three were Eddie Lane, Ruben Conner, and Ron Roberts.

Not wanting to distance myself from my own culture while learning in a nearly entirely white evangelical culture, I began attending a black church called Community Bible Church pastored by Dr. Ruben Conner. This provided me the contextual reality to keep before my theological queries.

The environment on the DTS campus was welcoming to me by most of the professors, but it also became clear that many of the students had not been around African Americans up until then. Therefore, either they didn't necessarily want to relate to us or just weren't quite sure how to do so. Some were reacting to the social climate and felt like the actions of the African American community were not keeping in line with how Christians should act. But what that meant to me was that, while not all of the actions they were witnessing on the news could be justified, the white students likewise did not understand the social, political, and economic realities that prompted much of what they were seeing and hearing about.

I would categorize the professors I had during that time into three distinct groups. The first group was very open and welcoming

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to me. They wanted to interact and initiated mutual engagement and discussions, inviting my perspective. Four who stand out to me the most were Howard Hendricks, Haddon Robinson, Charles Ryrie, and Gene Getz. All four, plus others, were very welcoming. I would often spend hours in their respective offices talking one on one. Or we would go to lunch together, or they would invite Lois and me to their homes for dinner.

The second group was clearly not comfortable. There would never be an outright rejection, but you could tell that they either didn't know how to interact with a black man or with the concerns of the culture, or simply resented having to do so. The third group was somewhat in the middle. They had chosen to go with the flow, as it were.

I'll never forget one of my earliest conversations with Dr. Walvoord, the president of Dallas Theological Seminary at the time. We were talking about the fact that Dallas Seminary had been segregated for so long. And while I realize he had addressed this issue as far back as the mid-1950s by saying the openness was there but that there were not any qualified African Americans to accept into the program, I felt that was an insufficient, and convenient, answer to the problem. Especially when no real effort had appeared to have taken place to locate qualified applicants. I wondered why, so I asked. His statement to me was, "Tony, I'm not a fighter. I kind of go with the law—the protocol." Another professor pastored a church in Dallas and informed me that the deacons at his church would not allow me to even visit. It was disconcerting to know that some of my professors still went to and pastored churches that practiced segregation. Perhaps the most influential church that was attended by many professors was First Baptist Church of Dallas, pastored by the late Dr. W. A. Criswell, who publicly proclaimed segregation based on the "curse of Ham," a position he recanted shortly before he died. That seemed to be the atmosphere of the Bible churches at that time. It was a culture of self-segregation without the overt rejection. It was subtle, but real.

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This context is given as we begin our time together in this book to shed light on why I feel compelled to speak and write about the black church in America, and also to help the reader see the complexities that go into the history of the black church. The history of the black church is not a neat set of dates, locations, or names. Rather, it is a complex narrative speaking of a diaspora comprising a multiplicity of ethnicities from the continent of Africa somehow seeking a spiritual hub in an oppressed and limited environment.

When I finished my four-year ThM in 1976, having graduated with honors, I decided to look for another school to pursue my doctoral degree. That was when I called James Cone, the founder of black theology. I wanted to find out more about the program he taught because I had been challenged from reading his material, even though we used a different hermeneutic to address issues. Dr. Cone had captivated me with his insistence that God's perspective on this issue of racial disparity and oppression was not a minor biblical theme.

I enjoyed our phone conversation. He was a very warm and friendly man, but due to other reasons, I eventually decided to pursue my doctorate at DTS. However, I chose to make Dr. Cone's theology the topic for my doctoral research and dissertation. During this time, I was also invited to become an associate professor. Simultaneously, Dr. Ruben Conner and Dr. Gene Getz challenged me to start a Bible church in Dallas under Black Evangelistic Enterprises as a way of modeling the ideas that I had percolating within me resulting from my theological training and burden for connecting the spiritual and social state of my community. These ideas had become foundational concepts for what would become a kingdom perspective on ministry.

Lois and I prayed about whether I should be a full-time professor at the seminary or whether I should start a church. Being a professor would have been a lot easier for me at that time with a wife and small children and a doctoral program to complete. However, Dr. Getz encouraged me instead to live out my beliefs. He and his church

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also committed to financially support this effort over the initial years of starting up a church. Dr. Getz had a calling and desire to see the black church in America strengthened, and he worked, often behind the scenes, in significant efforts to strengthen and spread the black church's footprint.

So, after being confirmed by God that this is what He wanted us to do, interestingly enough over a dinner at Dr. Ryrie's home, Lois and I agreed to begin a church in the southern section of Dallas. That is when I also became an adjunct professor at DTS.

Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship was organized on June 6, 1976, in our home with about ten people who joined us for a weekly Bible study. We set forth a vision of building a church that would not only be about making disciples, but would also have a social impact in the community. As the church began to grow, these concepts of connecting the spiritual and the social began to be implemented through ministries designed to affect our community. I aimed to establish a church that would reflect the heartbeat of my culture and meet the needs of my community while integrating a higher study of and understanding of scriptural principles and truths. Over four decades later, our church has grown even larger than I ever hoped and has been used by God through His grace to impact people locally and—through our national ministry, The Urban Alternative—even worldwide.

In looking back on how God shaped my perspective and opened doors for me through so many caring and well-positioned individuals, I know that I have been blessed. I am aware that not everyone has this path and that for many, if not most, black Americans, it is an even more uphill climb than I experienced. This is largely due to the devastating impacts racism, inequality, and even the hotbed phrase "systemic racism" has produced.

When you understand that in a sprint some racers are allowed to get started quicker or are allowed to start at a point much farther ahead of another group—and the rest of the group spends their

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whole time just trying to catch up because the sprint is intrinsically inequitable—it may help in the level of empathy you have about this historical reality of the separate worlds many blacks and whites live in. When you can grasp this reality, and how frequently it appears in our culture—especially its resultant cyclical effects—it can give you a different sensitivity to the conversations at hand or historical realities of institutions such as churches. And while the existence of racism cannot and must not be used as a reason for not accepting and maximizing personal and corporate responsibility, neither should we ignore its realities and impacts over time. In studying the history of the black church in America, it is a large part of the story.

The root of the racial problems we face in our nation today are clearly spiritual. It's only when we identify and understand the spiritual components that we are then able to translate them to the pragmatic realities of the cultural crisis at hand.

As an African American, my vision was formed in the pragmatic reality of racial disparity that caused me to focus on questions about race, oneness, and justice in church history that many of my white counterparts did not have to address. This dualism forced me to read Scripture to shed light on these issues. I had to look not only to the theology but also the practical application of that theology within the *Sitz im Laben*—or situation in life—for how that theology fleshes out.

White evangelicalism often expressed belief in the right things concerning the oneness of the body of Christ, but throughout history it did not consistently apply this belief system in either the church or the culture. In fact, the white church became a primary means, through either or both explicit and complicit manners, of justifying the racism and injustices perpetuated within the broader culture. Its overt racism and segregation—as well as its silence about injustice, human dignity, and racism—allowed it to become a co-conspirator to the generational perpetuation of racist views and actions throughout all the structures and systems of society. These

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include the family, educational institutions, law, government, business, and economic development. While there have always been individuals and groups in white culture who wanted to apply the right practice of this belief—remnants such as the Quakers, the abolitionists, and the white freedom marchers, among others whom I have mentioned by name and who have helped me personally—they did not always have a paradigm through which to express it, nor do they always have that today. There has existed a dichotomy, making it difficult to implement the applicational truth of not only oneness, but also biblical justice. As Dr. Warren Wiersbe, renowned white Bible teacher and father to many in the ministry, acknowledged, this roadblock often led to an ignoring of these and like issues in the white church. He wrote,

> We are handicapped in the white church. If I preached Jesus' first sermon (Luke 4:14–30) and gave it the social emphasis that He gave, our church has no vehicle for doing anything about the problem. People would respond in one of two ways: 1) "This preacher is off base, so let's get rid of him," or 2) "I've never seen it quite that way, but what do I do next?" For the most part, our white churches don't have the instruments, the organizational structure, to get involved in social action. Our usual solution is to put some inner-city organization into the budget or maybe to collect and distribute used clothing. . . . When it comes to racial issues, many white churches will participate in any number of symbolic activities, but they're hesitant when you ask them to get involved in sacrificial services in the trenches.[3]

Promise Keepers, the men's movement that became popular in the 1980s and 1990s and at which I spoke on numerous occasions, experienced this as a parachurch movement. Churches were happy

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to send their men to listen to a black preacher, or hug a minority person in attendance and verbally commit to racial reconciliation (Promise 6 out of 7). But when it came to diving deeper into the sin of racism, what might be done to address it, the repentance needed for it, and the actions that follow repentance, many churches pulled back. "Mark Pollard, a special associate of Promise Keepers in the 1990s, remembers that major donors started to back away, saying they weren't interested if Promise Keepers was going to be a civil rights organization. As he traveled the country with Promise Keepers founder Coach Bill McCartney planning and promoting events, Pollard, who is Black, was also asked again and again why race should be an issue at all. Wasn't the gospel colorblind?"[4] Not long after this greater push for reconciliation, the funding for PK began to dry up.

Yet although difficulties and challenges exist, their presence should never be the criteria for whether we give up or keep trying. Views of theology formulated through the lens of any culture will not only produce a myopic view, but also the resultant effects of an inability to carry out the true teaching in Scripture. This inability not only affects those who would be the recipients of the ministry outreaches, but it also affects those doing the ministry because it limits God's involvement in what is being done. Only when biblical truth is the absolute standard by which thoughts and actions are aligned will we experience the full manifestation of God's glory, purposes, and plans in the body of Christ. Maintaining an informational and otherworldly view of theology while neglecting a holistic view of God's kingdom aborts any real opportunity for application. That's why studying the true stories of history and what has shaped our churches as we know them today is important. God desires that we live and work together in order to advance His kingdom agenda on earth. But living and working together becomes difficult if we do not truly know each other and each other's authentic histories.

One of the elements of God's kingdom agenda is His heart for

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oneness, also known as unity. Unity can be defined in its simplest of terms as oneness of purpose. It is working together in harmony toward a shared vision and goal.

Unity is not uniformity, nor is it sameness. Just as the Godhead is made up of three distinct coequal persons (i.e., the Trinity)—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—each unique in personhood and yet at the same time one in essence, unity reflects a oneness that does not negate individuality. Unity does not mean everyone needs to be like everyone else. God's creative variety is replete with displaying itself through a humanity crafted in different shapes, colors, and styles. Each of us, in one form or another, is unique. Unity occurs when we combine our unique differences together as we head toward a common goal. It is the sense that the thing that we are gathered for and moving toward is bigger than our own individual preferences.

Through the establishment of the church, along with His overarching rulership above it, God has created a reflection of His kingdom in heaven on earth. He has reconciled racially divided groups into one new man (Eph. 2:14–15), uniting them into a new body (Eph. 2:16), so that the church can function in unity (Eph. 4:13). The church is the place where racial, gender, and class distinctions are no longer to be divisive because of our unity and identity in Christ (Gal. 3:28). This does not negate differences that remain intact—*oneness* simply means that those differences are embraced. Joining our unique strengths together, we add strength to strength, making a more complete and balanced whole based on our mutual relationship with and commitment to Christ. Biblical unity does not create color-blindness, but rather gives divine purpose to the diversity of color-uniqueness.

The issue of oneness in the church is so important that we are told to look out for people who seek to undermine it (Rom. 16:17). In fact, God promised to judge those who divide His church (1 Cor. 3:17).

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This is because the church is to reflect the values of the kingdom of God to a world in desperate need of experiencing Him.

The church is the only authentic cross-racial, cross-cultural, and cross-generational basis for oneness in existence. It is the only institution on earth obligated to live under God's authority while enabled to do so through His Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 12:12–13, Paul wrote:

> For even as the body is *one* and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are *one* body, so also is Christ. For by *one* Spirit we were all baptized into *one* body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of *one* Spirit (italics added).

The baptism of the Spirit at the moment of salvation, the act whereby God places us into the body of Christ, secures the oneness God wants us to have. This inimitable work of the Spirit positions us under the rule of God. The Greek word for baptism used in the Bible means identification. It was used when a cloth maker dipped cloth into dye so that the cloth would take on the color of the dye. The cloth was then said to be baptized, or identified, with the dye.

When we got saved, we were baptized into the body of Christ. We are now identified with a new family, having been placed into a new spiritual environment while still on earth. No matter what our race, gender, or class, when we came to Jesus Christ we entered into God's oneness because we came under His authority.

That is why Ephesians 4:3 says that we are to "preserve the unity of the Spirit." The Scripture uses the term *preserve*, indicating that we don't create unity. Authentic unity, then, cannot be mandated or manufactured. This is so because God desires that His standards alone serve as the basis, criteria, and foundation for oneness. It is also why He thwarts attempts at unity and globalization that ignore or

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exclude Him (Gen. 11:1–9). The Spirit created unity when we were saved. Our job is to find out what the Spirit has already done so that we can live, walk in, and embrace that reality in the black church, white church, or multi-ethnic churches in our land. In this way, we will gain greater ground in expanding God's glory and advancing His kingdom agenda on earth.

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