

WHITE ISLAND IN A BLACK SEA:  
AN EXAMINATION OF CHRISTOLOGY AND RACE IN A SOUTHERN CHURCH

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## Introduction

*At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography. Aquinas, Calvin, Barth, Tillich, working out their systems in their own ways and in their own language, are telling us the stories of their lives, and if you press far enough, even at their most cerebral and forbidding, you find an experience of flesh and blood, a human face smiling or frowning or weeping or covering its eyes before something that happened once.<sup>1</sup>*

A college-aged black woman walked down the long, red carpeted aisle of First Christian Church. Tall, ogival arches rose above her head, while a stained glass depiction of Jesus with his arms spread wide declared, “Come to me all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” He cast his kaleidoscopic colors across the young college student and the congregation, but they could not see him. Only the pastor could see this gospel image high above the nave’s balcony. The young woman and congregation, on the other hand, could easily see the large bronze cross hanging above the baptistry, and the Eucharistic table, sitting in the middle of the chancel, admonishing, “Do This in Remembrance of Me.” On either side of the young woman, white members of the congregation filled the pews, and they watched in amazement at each step she took toward the pastor who had invited anyone to come forward who felt called to join the church. When she reached the pastor, she told him that she was a student at the nearby college, a college that was sponsored and funded by the same denomination with which the church affiliated, and that she would like to join the church. He accepted her profession of faith and transfer of membership, welcomed her into the church, and introduced her to the congregation.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 3.

Before the minister could return home from Sunday morning worship, enraged members of the church bombarded the Board Chairman with their protests. They would not allow this Negro into the church's membership. Over the ensuing months, the prominent leaders in the congregation pressured the pastor to withdraw her membership, but he refused. They harassed the pastor and his family until he resigned his position at the church, and the black woman was disallowed membership.

Some forty-five years later, I accepted the call to serve the same First Christian Church, where I heard the story of the nameless young black woman many, many times during my tenure. During my discussions with the Search Committee that called me to serve the congregation, the Chairman called First Christian, "One of the ten most prominent churches in the Southeast." While that claim would have been true in the 1950s and 60s, the church no longer held such a prominent position. In the years following the sixties, most of the prominent bankers, business men, lawyers, and politicians had died, become inactive, or moved to other churches. By the time of my arrival, First Methodist Church, which sat next door to First Christian, exerted more influence, along with the nearby Episcopal Church. The membership of First Christian had declined significantly. I performed thirty-nine funerals during my three and a half years as their pastor, and the neighborhood surrounding them had changed dramatically. The once white, upper, middle class neighborhood had transformed into a small city's version of a black ghetto, and First Christian had become a small white island surrounded by a sea of black. In the midst of this change, the older members clung with ferocious tenacity to the images of the past in which they wielded great power in the community. Thus the

comment made by the Search Committee Chairman. They longed to return to the days when the pews were packed, and the community looked to them for leadership.

Their idealization of the past deepened the trench that isolated them from the surrounding black community. When I arrived, the church had no intimate or persistent relationships with their black neighbors. The members only permitted black bodies to enter the sanctuary for custodial, “entertainment,” or bereavement purposes. I invited local African American congregations to share their liturgical dancers with us, and sometimes we had a black man or woman sing. The congregation always responded with enthusiastic applause. Sometimes, black men and women would come to the funeral of someone they were paid to care for or worked for, but black and white people knew their place in the church. Black people could visit the island to entertain, but they could not live there. When I played a sermon of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a prelude to worship on the Sunday of his remembrance, a retired school principal questioned his friends in the pew beside him, “Why is that nigger preaching in our church?”

Furthermore, we did not reach out to minister to or with black people. The Boys’ and Girl’s Club, composed of almost exclusively black children, met in our Fellowship Hall, but the only members of the congregation to volunteer eventually moved to New Zealand, because they believed, “Any good we contribute to the American political and social system will get lost in the evils that prevail.” No one stepped in to take their place.

Shortly after their departure, I organized a Get Out the Vote drive during the election of 2008. I worked with the Martin Luther King Commission, a non-partisan multi-racial, community commission, and I offered First Christian’s fellowship hall as a place for organization. No one from the church showed up to help. The GOTV drive

corresponded with a newspaper article regarding the newly formed Barack Obama action committee, which I helped co-found. A newspaper article quoted me and placed a prominent picture of me alongside Obama and a black lawyer in town. The news story and the GOTV created a storm that required extended discussions involving myself, key church leaders, local pastors, and the Regional Minister. Friends in the church and the community, and colleagues warned me of the gathering clouds. An African American friend who worked for the newspaper called me one afternoon. She said,

They are out to get you. You better watch your back. I just got a call from one of your parishioners who wanted to know more about your support of Barack Obama. Some folks want to press legal charges against you for mixing church and politics. They think you broke the law.

My pastorate never recovered. Vocal opponents began to block every move and decision I made. It made no difference whether the decision related to race or national politics. They saw everything I did as a threat. Supporters of my leadership remained privately supportive, but publicly quiet. The church could not move forward with important ministries. Some families stopped their financial support, and others moved their membership to the Methodist Church. By the end of 2009, I was hospitalized for severe depression. Surely, the causes of the depression were various, but I point to the constant struggle with these racial issues as one of the foremost causes of my illness. I announced my resignation from the church three months after returning from medical leave.

Two pastors, separated by forty years, confronted the powers of white racial dominance in a Southern Church, and both lost. The spouse of the pastor who accepted the nameless black woman into the community told me that neither she nor her husband ever fully recovered from their time at the church. Perhaps my wife will say the same

thing to another young pastor in forty years. For my part, while I may heal from the wounds of this racial struggle, I believe I may always bear the scars. The tension that seized the muscles of my body, the joy of acting for justice, the fears of financial loss, the hopeful visions of a new community, the anxiety of pacing hospital halls, the friends who consoled me in my hours of darkness, and dozens more yet unrecognized feelings and experiences have etched themselves into my body and spirit.

### ***The Question, The Hypothesis, and the Results***

In the midst of the pain and joy at FCC, I began to look for ways to understand what was happening. I sought to understand the situation and the people, and one question began to dominate my thoughts “Why do some people see racial disparities and the importance of addressing them?” I recognized that *some* white people in my congregation were willing to work for and move towards positive racial relationships in the community and the church, and others vehemently resisted those efforts. Some white people see the advantage provided them by their race, while others seem completely oblivious. Some can name the disadvantages that accompany blackness in their community, and others think that color disadvantage ended with the Civil Rights movement. Why do some people fight against racial integration in the church, and how can their minds be changed?

After hours of late night conversations with friends, I hypothesized that theology was one important factor in the equation. Something in the theology of those who possess a growing awareness of racial disparities enables them to see, and something in the theology of those who appear blind hinders them from seeing. From these inchoate suspicions, I posited three hypotheses. One, Christians whose Christological model

parallels that of the early Bishop of Lyon, Irenaeus (c. 202 b.c.e.), will evince greater awareness of the privilege that accompanies whiteness, the disadvantage that accompanies blackness, and some measure of the correspondence between the two. Two, Christians whose Christological models parallel those of Tertullian (c. 160-220 b.c.e.) and Origen (c. 185-254 b.c.e.) will evince little or no awareness of their racial dominance and the privilege it provides, nor will they see the disadvantages of blackness. Three, Christological models will explain the divergence among the two groups.

Ethnographic interviews of eighteen members in the congregation enable us to conclude that, at least in this community, a correlation exists between theology and racial attitudes.<sup>2</sup> I found a clear correlation in the data between those who are oblivious and those who evince a growing awareness of racial disparities and their thoughts about Christology. What I cannot discern from the data is the degree to which Christology shapes racial attitudes, whether or not racial attitudes shape Christology, and what other forces (exposure to black people, or the lack thereof, explicit racism in the family of origin, community stereotypes, and a host of other forces) impinge on Christology and racial perspective.

Beyond Christology, however, a deep sense of commitment to discipleship and an intentional and prolonged faith journey emerged as factors that marked the lives of white people who see the advantages and disadvantages that accompany race. These individuals explained in depth their experiences in the church, their memories of important stories about Jesus, and people in the church who have shaped their lives. On the other hand, the oblivious are people who appear to attend church out of civic duty or

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<sup>2</sup> First Christian Church has approximately 550 members, out of which 300 participate in the life of the congregation. Approximately 180 people attend worship on average.

as just another activity in their lives. They do not demonstrate a strong commitment to discipleship and spiritual growth.

In the following chapters, I will explain my methods for interpretation and research, the results of my interviews, and observations for change. In chapter one, I outline a theoretical framework for the study, and describe the practical tools that helped me get beneath the surface of First Christian, and into the deeper social and spiritual forces that shaped the people and the place. In chapters two and three, I provide detailed description and analysis of the ethnographic interviews, and in chapter four I offer some concluding reflections and suggestions for further research.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Theoretical Frameworks and Methods**

In 2002, I traveled through Europe after a summer of mission work in Bangalore, India. Before my arrival, I wrote Jürgen Moltmann and asked if he could meet with me while I traveled through Germany. He graciously agreed to a meeting, and during our time together, I confessed a terrible feeling of failure: “I went to India hoping to make great changes. I hoped to see the gospel come alive. I wanted to see the sick made well. I wanted to bring justice in the midst of injustice.” He gave me a gentle smile, and simply responded, “You are not an Indian.”

His admonition has followed me throughout my pastoral and theological work. I have learned, in the years that followed our encounter, that if Christians want to make a difference in the world, they must root themselves in a community. Christians must know and be known by the people in the community. We must see and allow ourselves to be seen. We must build relationships, enter authentically and honestly into all the practices and rituals that form the community, and allow the community to shape and change us. Once we have entered into this relationship with a community, then we can begin to offer tools and strategies for change. Stephen Schensul and Margaret LeCompte support this supposition. They write, “Ethnographers voluntarily expose themselves to the processes of enculturation or socialization, while at the same time studying their own transformation as it happens.”<sup>3</sup>

Working for change, though, requires intentionality. The effective pastor, church leader, or theologian must employ specific methods that provide them with the tools

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Diane LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, Designing & Conducting Ethnographic Research, The Ethnographer's Toolkit 1 (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 1999) 74.

necessary for meaningful, critical reflection on the variety of forces that shape individuals and communities, and open a space for imagining new ways of living as a community. The synthesis of *reflexive analysis, place theory, critical and interpretivist ethnographic paradigms, and open ended interviews* serve as the theoretical and practical methods I found helpful in foregrounding the powerful forces that produce deeply imbedded racial obliviousness in a Southern Protestant church, interpreting the complex relationship between those forces, and imagining ways in which clergy and church leaders might address the obstacles that prevent the church from becoming a place where whites and blacks can enter into relationship.<sup>4</sup>

#### *REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS*

I come to the research task before us with a set of experiences, assumptions, and criteria that impinge on my theological production, and I must make an honest attempt to recognize and attend to the ways in which those experiences, assumptions and criteria shape my research and writing. Rebecca Chopp rightly criticizes theologians that rarely discuss the “who” of theology, but instead speak of tradition and experience in general terms, as though a “*common human experience exists.*”<sup>5</sup> Hermeneutical self-implicature

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<sup>4</sup> No matter how carefully and consciously one chooses a theological method, there exists something prior to or beneath that methodology. As Edward Farley explains, church theologians have consciously or unconsciously chosen methods for theological reflection, but beneath those reflections lay “criteria (authorities or norms) that functioned in theological work whether it was methodologically self conscious or not.” Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection : An Anatomy of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 3-4. For example, I might define my most basic criteria by the norms set forth in the creed adopted by the Council of Nicea. Here Farley points us in the right direction. My commitment to the norms of the Nicene Creed and the authorities that produced it will shape the telos of my theological production. Farley’s foregrounding of ecclesial criteria, though, stops short of the broader sociopolitical criteria that shape theological reflection. The norms and authorities of the church shape theological reflection, but these norms and authorities exist within a broader matrix of power struggles involving race, class, gender, sex, and politics. Neither the church nor the theologian can escape the formative power of these matrices. I attempt to account for these criteria by a carefully chosen methodology, but some of will, no doubt, slip through the method without proper critical reflection.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis Seymour Mudge and James N. Poling, *Formation and Reflection : The Promise of Practical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 130.

is essential to the postmodern theological endeavor, and theologians must explicitly recognize themselves as phenomenologists of experience and appropriators of tradition.

To the end of implicating myself in this theological work, I have drawn on Mark Kline Taylor's use of reflexive analysis in *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural Political Theology for North American Praxis*, where he makes the reflexive analytical move in two important ways.<sup>6</sup> First, Taylor constructs a theology within and for the North American context, and as such he explicitly chooses to address some themes, i.e. sexism, heterosexism, classism, and racism, while he omits other themes. Second, he intentionally situates his theology within the remembering of Esperanza, a Zapotec girl who lived down the street from him while his father conducted anthropological research in southern Mexico. He confesses, "The mix of substantive themes in the complex of memories about Esperanza (cultural difference, Christian practice, and political oppression) is an element of my reflexivity that sets the agenda for the entire work."<sup>7</sup> For him, the memory of Esperanza, and all that the memory entails (gender tension, cultural tension, sexual tension and class tension), guides his choices and conclusions as he engages a North American theology for postmodern Christians. By thus situating the book, he allows the reader to glimpse why he, as an embodied subject in the North American context, interrelates themes of gender, class and race, thereby allowing the reader more easily to anticipate the potential limitations of his theology.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Kline Taylor, *Remembering Esperanza : A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 27

Similarly, I have carefully examined the theological assumptions and interpretation of specific Christians in a specific time and place. While the Christian community beyond First Christian Church (FCC) may find the reflections and discoveries in this work helpful and relevant, what I have laid out here emerges not from generalized Christian theologies and practices, but rather from a concrete context. Furthermore, I have situated myself within that context. My recounted memories of pains and struggles, joys and triumphs at FCC make explicit some of the important ways that I enter into this work. The “who” of this study was wounded, encouraged, doubtful, enraged, hopeful, delighted, and sorrowful, and these experiences direct thematic choices, questions asked, and conclusions reached.

Finally, as a subject within this study, I occupy a certain place within the community. Gender, race, political affiliation, class, education, sexual orientation, and marital status simultaneously affect how individuals in the study relate to me and how I relate them, and these effects have consequences on the final product, consequences of which I have tried to remain aware. I will discuss these consequences in more detail later.

#### *PLACE, PRACTICE, AND GATHERING*

With an awareness of how my personal experiences set the focus and drive my theological reflection towards a certain end, I can begin to engage more fully the community that served as the stage for my experiences. We live in a complex melange of mental, psychological, emotional and physical relationships. As Clifford Geertz writes,

“[M]an is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”<sup>8</sup> We live in rich, deeply textured places filled with memories, rituals, people, objects, sounds, and smells, all of which shape the way we think and live. Making sense of these complex relationships and experiences is a formidable task.

Before we turn our attention to racial awareness and the theology of individuals in this study, understanding something of the web of meaning the people have spun for themselves will aid us in our interpretive endeavor. This web exists first on a surface, physical level, but beneath that veneer lie powerful forces that work on the mind and the body. Mary McClintock Fulkerson suggests “framing a situation” as a preliminary tool for discovering meanings beneath the surface of communities and their theologies.<sup>9</sup>

For us to address problems facing a Christian community, we must not only recognize and name the problems, but we must also critically examine the multifarious cultural components and power relations that generate the problem. Fulkerson’s nuanced tools for reading communal practices will enable us to reach a “thick description” of FCC, thus opening a space to observe how race and theology function within the community.<sup>10</sup>

So, how do we frame the situation and practices that shape racial obliviousness in the place we recognize as First Christian? Attention to the *items, events, and powers* involved in the situation under consideration comprise the primary components for framing, and

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<sup>8</sup> Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures : Selected Essays (London: Hutchinson, 1975) 5.

<sup>9</sup>Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Places of Redemption : Theology for a Worldly Church (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 12.

<sup>10</sup> Fulkerson borrows the term “thick description” from Clifford Geertz, who views ethnographic research the complex process of observing, analyzing, and rendering a coherent account of a culture and its practices. He writes, “Doing ethnography is like trying to read . . . a manuscript--foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherence, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior.” (Geertz 10)

each situation involves unique items, including embodiment, temporality, language, and relationship. Items are the objects in a situation. In this study, we will observe and categorize many items in the situation of FCC, and within its frame we will see beach front vacation houses, boats, cars, debit cards, business suits, and homes emerge. The aforementioned items and their interrelationship to the people within the situation create a certain culture of privilege; whereas other items, such as hotel rooms, bicycles, food stamps, work uniforms, and rented apartments create a very different culture.

In a similar manner, ecclesial and theological items serve important functions in the situation of First Christian. The sanctuary, pews, pulpit, pastors, and eucharistic table combine with Christological ideas such as sin, atonement, and redemption to create meaning and patterns of thinking and living. The importance of these items arises not from their existence within the situation, but rather the way they interrelate and how the people relate to them.

The way in which subjects in the situation think about and relate to the items within their field produce events such as rituals, behaviors, and kinship relationships. In the story at the beginning of chapter one, we observe that the white members of the church in the 1960s possessed a specific kind of access to the sanctuary that sits on the corner of North and Pine Streets. They consider the architectural space and all that it contains as theirs, and they could use it for functions they designated as appropriate, namely services of worship and praise. Black people, on the other hand, did not have the same access to the space. White subjects controlled the space, and they denied black membership, which excluded them from the rituals of the community. They could not sit in the pews as worshippers. They could not preside at the Eucharistic table. They could

not read the scriptures at the lectern, and they could not preach from the pulpit. The church community did, under certain circumstances, allow black people into the space. The black custodian who worked at the church during my tenure had complete access to the sanctuary and its objects. He could stand in the pulpit, behind the communion table, and at the lectern, but he did so in an empty space, in the absence of white bodies and eyes. Thus, within the ritual of Christian worship at FCC, we see a pattern of white segregation from blacks emerge, which produces cognitive and behavioral patterns that allow white power brokers to overlook black experience and to avoid relationships with those with darker skin.

Furthermore, rituals, behaviors, and kinship relations combine with the items in the field of First Christian to create a complex and invisible web of power dynamics, which we see in the varieties of access to worship space. White people in the church have the power to negotiate the terms of access to their items, their space. They can allow or deny access to black people based on racial preference and habits.

This situations does not occur in a vacuum, in an uninhabited, blank space. The social and ecclesial items, ritual events, and white uses of power exist within a larger context, which Fulkerson calls “place,” a variation of Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical “field.”<sup>11</sup> FCC is a place inasmuch as it sits on a plot of land, in as small town, in the Southern part of the United States, and during my tenure as their pastor, the place existed in a specific time. This surface level description, though, fails adequately to portray the particularities of place that shape racial and Christological consciousness. We need a thicker description of the place, a description that looks beyond the simple surface,

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<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990) 58.

and physical traits of the place to uncover the complex web of practices that create racial woundedness.

Fulkerson, borrowing from Edward Casey, suggests that, as a territory of meaning, “Place is a kind of gathering,” where items, events, and powers correlate.<sup>12</sup> A sense of unity of place arises from the simultaneous gathering of *experiences, subjects, landscapes, and histories*. At this synchronic level, First Christian gathers as a melange of these components. The subjects of the place, the members of the congregation, possess within themselves all the experiences, landscapes, and histories of their past. The older parishioners remember the old sanctuary that once existed across the street from the “new” sanctuary. They remember the smells in the narthex and chancel. They can recollect how the light shone on the pastor from the pulpit, and the familiar patterns of the liturgy. They can, in an instant, recall the racially familiar faces in the neighborhood that surrounded their congregation. The cleanly painted houses, manicured lawns, and respectfully dressed bankers, lawyers, and entrepreneurs created a strong sense of comfort and familiarity. In 1954, the congregation built a new sanctuary and Christian Education building on the block adjacent to the old space. They chose a neo-gothic style church, with heavy wooden doors, a stone floor, complex and colorful stained glass windows, an elaborate chancel with a raised pulpit, and seating for their 500 members.

This history gathers with the tumultuous upheaval of the sixties, when the physical, political, and historical landscape changed radically, in what probably felt like an instant. Ten years after the completion of their physically imposing new sanctuary, which communicated their status to the community, the mortar of their advantage began to

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<sup>12</sup> Fulkerson, 28

crack. Signs and laws no longer separated white and black water fountains, and the racial landscape of “their” restaurants, buses, and gas stations began to transform. By 1972, outside government officials forced schools to integrate, and eventually the black faces and bodies that were carefully contained on the other side of the railroad tracks began to ingress into “their” white neighborhood. White people moved out of the neighborhood, but the church was economically bound to the land. They would have moved, and they spoke of it often during my tenure as their pastor, but finances would not allow them to escape the sea of black faces that had surrounded them.

All these experiences, subjects, histories, landscapes, gather in the present, along with the experience of the young black woman who walked the membership aisle, to form a unified reality that shapes contemporary space. Thus, the postmodern sense of place is “Neither reducible to geographical boundaries on a map, nor to our projections onto an ostensible ‘outside’ . . . place is better described as a matrix of feelings that a place ‘releases’ to us.”<sup>13</sup>

For the individual to make sense, consciously or unconsciously, of this matrix, she must arrange the components into a comprehensible whole. Not every detail of past and present experience carries the same weight, though. The light refracting from the stained glass windows will not weigh as heavily on the members of First Christian as the strange and fearful *feeling* of black bodies intruding into white space. Subjects “*select*” some experiences, histories, and landscapes as especially relevant, and these selected experiences weigh more heavily on their cognition and emotion.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 27

Usually, this selection process occurs unconsciously and indirectly. Fulkerson writes, “A first form of connecting has to do with the affective character of human experience, and is best described with the acoustical term *resonances*.” Defined as ‘the intensification of prolongation of sound produced by sympathetic vibration,’ resonances suggest modes of connecting that are indirect but tangible and strong.”<sup>14</sup> The changing landscape produced by the intrusion of blackness into a white world created a dissonant feeling among the members of First Christian that intensified over time. If one black face appeared in the “wrong” place, like the nameless black college student seeking membership, the white subjects could right the wrong by denying membership in this case, and the black body would return to its rightful place in the system. Once those in power restore the equilibrium of the social system, the dissonance fades into the shadows of their consciousness. The prolonged and permanent intrusion of blackness around First Christian, though, turned the congregation into a white island surrounded by a sea of strange dark bodies, which generated a dissonance with intense, lasting resonance, one that continued until my arrival and lasted after my departure.

The story of the nameless black woman, told repeatedly, moves multiple instances of black intrusion into white space to a conscious level where subjects can make sense of densely entangled experiences, memories, and emotions. Over time, “Narratives move resonances to the level of conscious interpretation.”<sup>15</sup> By the time I arrived at First Christian, some forty years after the power brokers in the church denied membership to the black college student, that story became one of the essential gathering stories, a story

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 28

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 29

that equipped church members to make sense of the powerlessness, frustration, anxiety, fear, anger, guilt, and longing induced by the changed racial landscape.

The dense web of emotions, and how the community works through those emotions deserve fuller consideration than I can give them here, but that work is beyond our scope. I will offer a few observations, not offered as a full interpretation of the meaning-making process, but as a partial attempt to situate the study participants in the emotional context that gives rise to their understanding of race and theology, and how they live that out.

During my tenure as the pastor of FCC, the community leaders exhibited deep feelings of powerlessness, frustration, anxiety, and fear in relationship to the black people that had surrounded them. They often expressed feelings of exasperation regarding their inability to attract new, young, white families into the congregation, and they frequently compared themselves to the suburban churches who were adding young white families to their roles. In the minds of some, white families did not want to drive “downtown” on Sunday morning. Rather, they preferred to stay in the suburbs. Indeed, the downtown churches (First Christian, First Methodist, St. Timothy’s Episcopal, and First Baptist) were bastions of the old guard aristocracy, and the suburban churches were made up primarily of the middle class and newcomers to the city.

In the minds of church leaders, the membership crisis grew out of the changed racial landscape, not broader cultural shifts or problems endemic to the congregation, and they were powerless to address shifting racial lines. At one time, they possessed that power. They denied membership to the young black college student and maintained their hegemony over the church community and the surrounding neighborhood. But those

days were gone. They did not possess the power to reverse the changes induced by the Civil Rights Movement, and thus return the space around the church to its 1950s condition. The repeated story of the unnamed woman carried a tone of longing with it, as though some people wished they could return to the time when they had control over racial access to the space around them, and so could reverse the thirty year membership decline.

Old and young members were confronted with a contemporary situation that they were not equipped to handle. Even though they could not alter the course of the changing neighborhood around them, they could theoretically have embraced the new context by diversifying their worship, fellowship, and governing practices. This option eluded them, and their membership steadily declined, as did their budget, which deepened their sense of powerlessness and frustration, slowly metastasizing into anxiety and fear. They grew fearful that they would soon reach a critical point where they could no longer pay salaries and electric bills, where their noble history would be lost.

They entertained only one possible solution to the problem. In board meetings, some members suggested that the church sell its property and move out of the city. Since they could no longer stem the swelling of the black tide flooding in around them, proponents of this course of action would put the congregation in another environment, thus alleviating, in their minds, the greatest obstacle to growth: the black neighborhood. The older power brokers in the church always defeated this proposal, not because they wanted to embrace the new context but because they felt tied to their history. They did not have any interest in racial integration. They simply wanted to hold on to a rapidly dissipating history.

Some members of the church wanted the practices of the congregation to change so that they could welcome black and Latino members, and for them the story of the black woman was told with a sense of guilt. While some saw the story as something they wanted to repeat, others wanted to escape it. The story revealed their troubled past, a past which haunted their present. In the minds of those embarrassed and ashamed by the actions of those who denied membership based on race, the continued presence of racism was one of the major obstacles to church revitalization. They could not get past their shame so as to find a concrete set of goals that would lead to transformation. They were or felt powerless in the face of the members who wanted to resurrect the past.

The gathering story of the young woman is but one story by which we gain access to the deep emotional roots of the congregation, but its frequent repetition and broad circulation make it essential. The story carries with it many unspoken longings and desires, fears and anxieties, all of which continue to shape the church as it seeks to resolve its past and current conflicts around race.

The community uses more than gathering stories to make sense of their situation. Considering only gathering stories leaves unexamined the complex ways in which the community attempts to resolve dissonant resonances by repeating certain actions in the form of practices, which serves, consciously or unconsciously to reinforce the prestige and power of the white community. To frame place thoroughly, we must move beyond resonances and gathering stories, and examine the practices that shape community.

Fulkerson calls the practices that shape the world, “*place-making functions*,” which include pronouncement, symbols, landscape changing, mapping, and laws.<sup>16</sup> To make the

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 32

place called First Christian, the members pronounced their place by buying land, obtaining permits, staging a ground breaking ceremony, and asking reporters to record and announce the event to the community. They carefully and intentionally chose symbols that reflected their sense of identity and the kind of place they wanted to inhabit. The sanctuary built in the 1950s represented the most important symbol of the congregation I pastored in the twenty-first century. The neo-gothic structure and the symbols it contained, the vaulted ceilings, the stained glassed windows, the raised pulpit, the prominent baptistry, the centrality of the Eucharistic table in the split chancel, all these symbolized their sense of identity, an identity that resonated with established white, European social, worship, and theological traditions.

Furthermore, the prominent sanctuary altered the landscape of the city, and it became an identifiable landmark on the map. At the time, the structure stood out as the most prominent space of worship in the city, standing taller than First Methodist, First Baptist, First Presbyterian, and the Episcopal Church, all of which only permitted whites into their membership. Its size pronounced to everyone in the town the power and wealth of those who resided within the space, and set those who belonged to the ranks of its membership in a social status above those who did not belong.

Finally, a constitution and by-laws governed the boundaries of relational action. Explicit laws structured conduct, committee functions, leadership roles, and membership constitution. Implicit social norms governed the continued structuring of the space. While blacks were not explicitly denied membership, the denial of unnamed black woman's membership reveals the hidden laws of the place. Hence, FCC employed in the

past and continues to employ in the present all the functions associated with place making.

The gathering of subjects, histories, landscapes, and experiences, coupled with the practices of place making, create the *habitus* of the members of FCC. Concerning *habitus*, Bourdieu writes, “The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices. . . .”<sup>17</sup> These “structured structures” give “formal coherence to actions that are materially extremely different, mediates between the invisible system of structured relations (by which actions are shaped) and the visible actions of the actors (which structure relations).”<sup>18</sup>

The members of First Christian and the citizens of the community, white and black, operate within a field of possible action shaped by the “durable and transposable structures” that they have internalized. In 1954, the *habitus* that sanctioned racial segregation existed and endured with little opposition, and we see the church’s complicity in this practice by the “permissive conditions” of location, architecture, governance, and, most importantly, its relationship to black bodies. The external expression of their internalized attitudes manifested itself in the location of the church on the white side of town. The chosen architecture, the neo-gothic cathedral style sanctuary, resonates with the tradition of white, European Christianity. The formal ordering of governing boards, chairmen, vice-chairmen, and subordinate committees paralleled the corporate business

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<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu, 53

<sup>18</sup> Frederic Vandenberghe, “The Real Is Relational”: An Epistemological Analysis of Pierre Bourdieu’s Generative Structuralism,” *Sociological Theory* 17.1 (1999): 48-49.

relations familiar to the racially advantaged members of the congregation. Thus, we see the ways in which the members of the church are shaped by and shape a racialized habitus. The external ecclesial structures reinforced internal dispositions, which again reified external ecclesial structures, and so on. It is within this *habitus* that we observe the participants in this study.

### *ETHNOGRAPHIC PARADIGMS AND METHODS*

I utilized both the critical and interpretivist paradigms as models for research and interpretation. In anthropology, the selection of paradigms forces the researcher to assess how she sees the world, how she interprets what is seen, and how she decides which of the things seen are “real, valid, and important to document.”<sup>19</sup> The combination of critical and interpretivist paradigms allowed me to remain aware of socio-political realities (race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation) that shape my worldview, to look carefully at the relationship between socio-political realities within the field of study, and to explore how those realities shape theology, racial awareness, and consequently create a racialized reality.

The interpretive paradigm presupposes that reality is socially constructed. What people know about Jesus, whiteness, and blackness in the place called FCC is socially constructed as its residents interact over time and in this specific social setting. Social and theological constructs and meanings are situated, which is to say, “[they are] located in or affected by the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, age, gender, and other contextual characteristics of those who espouse them.”<sup>20</sup> Critical theory furthers the

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<sup>19</sup> LeCompte and Schensul, 41

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 49

presuppositions of the interpretive paradigm because it empowers the researcher to examine how “history and political economy . . . exert[s] direct or indirect domination over the political, economic, social and cultural expression of citizens or residents.”<sup>21</sup> This paradigm reflects my desire to uncover the factors within FCC that exert control and shape theologies and worldviews. Specifically, critical theory is congruent with my intent to uncover how whiteness and theology correlate to make research participants oblivious or aware of the condition of black people in the community.

In like manner, the critical paradigms aim to “call attention to the inequitable actions and policies of the dominant social paradigm” makes it a logical choice for the research at hand. I assume that the operative cognitive and social models of racially oblivious members of FCC must be changed, because they create and perpetuate inequalities among black and white subjects. Foregrounding the practices that create obliviousness and the practices that create awareness provides the observer with an opportunity to replicate the practices that produce the latter.

The assumption that subjects within a situation can change and reshape practices within the situation brings us to the final contribution of the critical paradigm. Those who operate within the critical paradigm “believe that institutions can be transformed, and they seek ways of using research to serve the transformation process.”<sup>22</sup> Oblivious subjects can learn to see, the institutions that create obliviousness can be transformed to create awareness, and the researcher can, on the basis of his findings, advocate change--a task I attempt in the final chapter of this paper.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 45

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 46

With the aid of reflexive analysis, theories of place, and ethnographic methods, I set out to interpret how whiteness combines with theology to create obliviousness. Since in-depth, open-ended interviewing “explores undefined domains in the formative conceptual model, identifies new domains, breaks down domains into component factors and subfactors, and obtains orienting information about the context and the study site,” it became clear that audio-recorded, in-depth and open-ended interviews would yield the most relevant data for the study.<sup>23</sup>

These interviews probed the participant’s religious history, theological conceptualization of Jesus, and their awareness of white and black life and experience.<sup>24</sup> During a one and a half hour interview, the participants answered a series of questions that I divided into four sections: 1) basic demographic information, 2) their personal life including favorite vacations places, employment, how they travel to work, place of residence, and whether they feel their color advantages or disadvantages them, 3) their understanding and beliefs about Jesus, and 4) their knowledge of black people in Wilson. The questions in section four paralleled the questions in section two.

The study group included twenty people who occupy advantaged social categories, with privilege defined as those individuals who inhabit three of the following categories: white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, male, or college educated. For example, a white, middle class, and college educated lesbian would fit into the study because she resides in three of the five categories. To find these participants, I looked through the Church Directory of First Christian, and I selected,

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<sup>23</sup> Lecompte and Schesul, 121-122

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix 1 for this guide.

1. Three senior (at least 60 years old) males from the managerial class
2. Two senior females from the managerial class
3. Two senior males from the working class
4. Two senior females from the working class
5. Three young (under 60 years old) males from the managerial class
6. Three young females from the managerial class
7. Two young males from the working class
8. Three young females from the working class

Difference in the number of participants I selected based on class resulted from an inadequate representation of working class subjects in the research site. Of the twenty individuals I selected, I interviewed eighteen. One declined to participate, and she did not give a reason. The other subject missed two scheduled meetings. I interpreted this as an unspoken wish not to participate.

After interviewing the participants, I constructed a content analysis tool to supplement and analyze the audio-recorded data from the interviews.<sup>25</sup> With the intent of uncovering the Christological typology of individual research subjects, and their awareness of white advantage and black disadvantage, I coded data from the interviews in the following manner:

1. I wrote down each biblical story the subjects mentioned, their explanation of who Jesus was, what makes him significant, his mission in the world, and why he died on the cross.
2. I wrote down key phrases and words regarding race and advantage that respondents mentioned in the interview. When appropriate, I transcribed entire stories, or significant segments of stories, for comparison purposes.
3. I divided the participants into two categories based on their racial obliviousness or awareness. Group one represented fearful obliviousness. Group two

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<sup>25</sup> See Appendix 2 for the content analysis tool.

represented growing awareness. I will define these groups with more detail in the following chapter.

4. I gave each participant a belief system questionnaire, which presented participants with forty-four belief statements. The responses to these statements tested participants theological models by asking them to scale from 7-1 their agreement with the theological statements. Participants who marked a statement with a seven believed strongly in the statement. Participants who marked a statement with a one did not believe in the statement at all. Each statement corresponded to one of González's three typological categories, and I divided the typologies evenly among the statements, fifteen type A statements, fourteen type B statements, and fifteen type C statements. Only eight of the participants completed the questionnaire.
5. I determined participants theological type by adding up their responses to type A, B, and C statements, and dividing the total score by fifteen, fourteen, or fifteen, depending upon the number of statements for the category.
6. I supplemented the results of the interviews, content analysis, and questionnaire data with participant observation of worship services during my three and a half years of service as their Senior Pastor.

**Chapter Two**  
**Place, Practices, and Privilege:**  
**Wilson, First Christian Church, and it's Inhabitants**

***Business Practice and Race in Wilson***

Business and economic practices, relationships, and behaviors gather to form the place called Wilson, and in this gathering, racial advantage and disadvantage emerge as dominant characters. Through all the social changes and shifting boundaries and practices, the divide between the advantaged and the disadvantaged, the chasm separating whites from blacks remains boldly inscribed on the community. Even though churches, the Federal Government, and individuals have attempted to shift some of the racial boundaries that create the practice of 'in town' segregation, business and economic systems keep racial segregation and privilege firmly etched on the palimpsest of Wilson.

From its earliest days, white advantage over dark bodies marked the landscape of Wilson. The Native American Tuscacora Tribe were the earliest residents of what the State Legislature eventually called Wilson County. The official city website recounts, "By the end of the eighteenth century, most of the tribe had left the area," and the native people slowly "migrated" north to join with other members of the Iroquoian Confederacy.<sup>26</sup> This "migration" coincided with the defeat of the native peoples in the Tuscacora War of 1716. The Tuscacora, on the other hand, tell a different story. They viewed the entrance of white settlers into the area as an incursion, one that lead to the

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.wilson-co.com/index.aspx?nid=199>. The historical accuracy of this account is unknown. The authors of the site disclaim, "The information made available on this website is intended to provide general information to the public. All practical measures have been made to ensure the quality and accuracy of the information on our site. [The] County, however, makes no claims and no warranties of any kind, expressed or implied, nor assumes any legal responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of any information provided by this website." Even though we cannot assess the accuracy of the claims, we do know that this version serves as the "official" government history of the events between the Tuscacora Tribe and early settlers.

slow and methodical “annihilation” of native culture and land by the settlers.<sup>27</sup> Councilwoman and tribal historian Marilyn Mejerado writes, “Our people were moved off most of the tributaries and waterways and relocated to Bertie County on a Reservation.”<sup>28</sup> To use the goods of the tributaries and land, white people, empowered by economics, weapons, and laws, moved dark Tuscacora bodies off the field, like a chess player taking control of an opponent’s space.

By 1740, more wealthy white settlers and African slaves moved into the area, and the production of turpentine and pitch from the mass of pine trees provided income for white families and their slaves. Others, presumably non-landowners, survived on subsistence farming, hunting, and gathering. “During this time period, the geography of this area was considered unsuitable for mass agriculture.”<sup>29</sup> The arrival of the railroad in 1839 changed the population, architecture, and landscape of the community, as more settlers moved in and businesses grew. On January 29, 1849, the Legislature incorporated Wilson County, and named it in honor of Louis Dicken Wilson, a prominent politician and military officer.

One of the early citizens, Alpheus Branch, was the son of a large planter in Halifax County. Through the acquisition and merger of several businesses, he created the Branch Banking Company, later renamed BB&T. It became one of the largest and most successful banking companies in the Southeast. While some successful businesses created an economic infrastructure, agriculture formed the backbone of the community. Once the citizens began organizing mass agriculture, the town changed again. They began

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<sup>27</sup><http://www.southernbandtuscacora.com/webdoc7.htm>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.wilson-co.com/index.aspx?nid=199> October 2010

farming cotton as a cash crop, but the successful plantations in the deep South and the nutrient absorbing cotton plants depleted the loamy soil and required extensive fertilization of the fields. These factors thwarted attempts to create a robust cotton market. So, the land owners and farmers turned to tobacco, and the increased demand for flue cured tobacco in the late nineteenth century forever changed the town. “Wilson County was ideally suited for growing tobacco because of its climate and its sandy, loamy soil. By the turn of the century, tobacco had largely replaced cotton as the county’s main cash crop. In 1920, Wilson became known as the ‘world’s greatest tobacco market.’”<sup>30</sup> After World War II, the government constructed I-95, which connects southern Florida to northern Maine and runs down the middle of Wilson County. Like the railroad, the interstate attracted new businesses and larger corporations.

None of the historical resources available revealed the relationship between business practice and race relations in the town, as no one has written a critical history of Wilson. So, the stories told to me by parishioners and friends about race serve as the primary access point, and through these stories we not only learn about the place, but we gain access to the unconscious “resonances” of the place. Throughout my interviews, a clear narrative of race relations appeared. Most of my parishioners grew up in share cropping families, and even though many of them eventually went to college and obtained white collar jobs, they grew up “dirt poor,” as one parishioner described. As sharecroppers, their parents worked closely with poor black families of similar economic means, and these close working relationships placed them in proximity to black neighbors, which yielded frequent interaction. White children played openly with blacks, and black

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

women frequently served the white children as nannies. All the participants in my study who grew up through the 1930s and 1940s reported experiences with black friends and nannies. I will discuss this later in the chapter.

The field as a work space created a different relationship between whites and blacks than the town space. While poor whites and blacks frequently interacted in the tobacco field, town practices demanded strict segregation. Robert told me,

I grew up in this town, and I remember the black and white water fountains . . . the segregated bathrooms. When I was a kid, blacks lived on the other side of the tracks in east Wilson. They had to sit in the balcony at the movie theatre, and I remember going to Tobs games (the local minor league baseball team) where the black people had a separate section just for them.

In Robert's remembering, we observe the ways in which the railroad, built in the 1800s, continues to shape the landscape and relationships in the community. Originally built to serve the interests of land and business owners, the railroad eventually became a man-made boundary that geographically segregated black Wilson from white Wilson.

The residents of Wilson also made distinctions according to economic standing, and these distinctions dictated the nature of relationships between rich and poor, black and white. The NC Regional Minister of the Disciples of Christ lived in Wilson, and attended First Christian. In his experiences with the people, he observed, "There is a huge divide between the landowners and the field workers, even today. A lot of people in our church look at us ministers as hired hands to do the work of ministry. It's a mentality that has been handed down from generation to generation." The work practices from the tobacco boom still affect those who consider themselves members of the landowning class. Even though most of my parishioners grew up under the direction of landowners, their accumulation of education, wealth, and social status moved them into a new class,

and gave them power over others. I frequently watched the aged aristocrats, feeble and sick, treat their “black help,” a phrase frequently used, like objects present to do whatever they demanded. They spoke harshly and bluntly to them. They saw themselves as the landowners, and the blacks as the land workers.

While these stories help uncover some aspects of racial segregation, a review of contemporary demographics provides a more textured picture that corroborates the stories of Wilson’s segregated past. The contemporary place called Wilson did not emerge *ex nihilo*. Fulkerson writes,

It is better to describe a place as the gradual shifting of boundaries instigated by the introduction of new practices. Like a palimpsest, [place] has the past ‘scrawled upon it’ in a variety of ways. Like those scrawlings, as a kind of deep subconscious, that past is not consistently visible. Partially erased it exists in various modes of accessibility.<sup>31</sup>

As a historical place, we can access Wilson through written and oral history. Wilson grew out of the complex history of relationships between Native Americans, settlers, African slaves, trains, tobaccoists, fields, bankers, and interstates, all of which made unique impressions on the psyche and landscape of the community. Many of the brush strokes on the palimpsest of Wilson paint a picture of conflict.

By the time I arrived in Wilson, new experiences, histories, and practices had completely erased the conflict with the Tuscacora peoples in the 1700s from conscious memory, but the pattern of conflict was already set, and it persisted through the centuries with the emergence of new practices which perpetuated the “good” of white privilege.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Places*, 57

<sup>32</sup> Fulkerson, borrowing from Alasdair MacIntyre, asserts that one aspect of practice is “the *participatory development of a good*. To do a practice well is to enhance one’s capacities and to realize goods internal to the practice” (*Places*, 39). In the case of Wilson, white business practices extend the financial advantages of whites by, at the very least, ensuring free or cheap labor and the creation of a class of people dependent upon goods and services provided by whites.

The transition from cotton to tobacco farming created immense wealth in the community, which also produced a chasm between the rich and the poor, often corresponding to white and black respectively. The arrival of the railroad in the 1800s introduced new people with new practices and created a new landscape, which would later become a racial dividing wall, a physical and psychological etching upon the community that persists into the present.

When I asked study participants, “Where do black people live in Wilson?” fourteen of the eighteen said that black people live “across the railroad tracks,” “on the East side of Wilson,” or “in the downtown area.” White people live, on the other hand, in “West Wilson,” “in the country club,” or “towards Raleigh.” These perceptions, based in physical reality, reveal the present economic and social segregation practices of the community.

A study of Census data from the year 2000 elucidates how economic advantage or disadvantage segregates the contemporary inhabitants of Wilson. According to the available data, 74,511 people live in Wilson County. 39,229 people identify as white, and 28,928 as black.<sup>33</sup> Hence, fifty-one percent of the community identifies as white, and thirty-eight percent as black. White individuals earn \$21,816 per year; whereas black individuals earn \$11,135.<sup>34</sup> To look at these numbers from the perspective of advantage, we see that for every \$1 a black person earns, her white counterpart earns over \$2. The advantage is clear, and this advantage extends to family income, housing, and transportation. Median household income among whites was \$41,517 and \$22,191 for

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<sup>33</sup> <http://factfinder.census.gov>, search: Wilson, North Carolina. October 2010.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

blacks.<sup>35</sup> This means that white families have \$114 per day to spend on housing, utilities, food, clothing, transportation and recreation. Black families have \$60 per day for the same necessities. Of the 17,261 housing units occupied by whites, 12,915 own their home, and 4,346 people rent. Only twenty-five percent of whites rent, while seventy-five percent own their home. The converse is true in the black community. Of the 10,599 housing units occupied by black families, 4,356 own their dwelling, and 6,243 rent.<sup>36</sup> Fifty-nine percent of black families rent, while only forty-one percent own their homes. If I am white, I am *more* likely to own a home rather than rent an apartment, which means that I can live in “West Wilson,” five miles away from the railroad tracks and well outside the boundaries of downtown rental property. As a white homeowner, I can safely live away from black people.

These facts directly correlate to poverty in the community. Of the 74,000 Wilsonians, 3,145 white people fall below the poverty line, while 9,079 black people fall into the same situation.<sup>37</sup> Again, as a white person, I am *less* likely to be poor than if I am black. Finally, within the city of Wilson, 15.9% do not have access to a vehicle.<sup>38</sup> Logic dictates that the majority of those without access to a personal vehicle live below the poverty line, or close to it. Most of those people are black, and therefore sustained employment becomes difficult at best or impossible at worst.

***Appearing Inhabitants: “Non-Innocent Obliviousness” and Growing Awareness***

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Racial advantage and disadvantage exist in the place called Wilson, and the continuing business and ecclesial practices perpetuate social and economic inequity. Do the members of FCC see how practice shapes their worldview? Some white people do not. They are oblivious to the advantage of their race and the disadvantages that accompany blackness. Other white people, on the other hand, see more clearly the relationships among race, economics, politics, and social prosperity/poverty. These divergent world views return us to the original question, “Why do some people see social disparity caused by race, while others do not? Both the oblivious and the aware inhabit a similar *habitus*. They share experiences and histories. They have relationships with many of the same people. They travel through the same landscape. Why the difference? I used these questions as the starting place for my ethnographic research, which revealed two clear groups of inhabitants in the place called First Christian.

From the experiences, landscapes, histories, and practices of First Christian, two categories of subjects emerge, which I label the *non-innocent oblivious* cohort, and the *growing awareness* cohort.<sup>39</sup> The data requires two sub-cohorts within the non-innocent oblivious

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<sup>39</sup> I have borrowed the term “obliviousness” from Fulkerson, as it most clearly describes the participants in this study. She defines obliviousness as “the not-seeing that characterizes far too much of North American society” (Place, 18). The not-seeing that she details does not originate from conscious beliefs about white or black people. As the data will corroborate, most of the participants in this study claim to believe that blacks are equal to whites. Obliviousness, as she describes it, does not originate in malice, either. Hence, the study participants reports that they live black people very much. Obliviousness is something that is deeply embedded in our bodies and minds through experience. Fulkerson writes, “Obliviousness is a form of not-seeing that is not primarily intentional but reflexive. As such, it occurs on an experiential continuum ranging from benign to a subconscious or repressed protection of power.” (Places, 19) These experiences that register on a visceral level give rise to more overt forms of oppression.

cohort: *fearful obliviousness* and *benevolent obliviousness*.<sup>40</sup> The *fearful obliviousness* sub-cohort frequently stereotypes black people based on previous negative experience, which serves to divert their attention from the wide range of black experience and life. Additionally, they do not think that their whiteness provides them with any privileges. Rather they see their whiteness as a handicap. Two, the *benevolent obliviousness* sub-cohort thinks that race does not matter. The members of this sub-cohort avert their gaze from black disadvantage from a feeling of benevolence. They consider themselves colorblind, and they believe that race should not and does not play a role in social relationships and economic advancement. This form of “aversion” prevents them from seeing the disparities between whites and blacks.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, my interviews and observation revealed a second cohort, which I have labeled the *growing awareness* cohort. This cohort demonstrated varying degrees of awareness regarding the complex and varied lives of black people in Wilson. Furthermore, they see many privileges that their whiteness provides them. These individuals provide the promise of cooperating with each other and clergy leaders to create opportunities for blacks and whites to build substantive relationships that foster individual and communal growth.

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<sup>40</sup> These two sub-cohorts conform to groups implicitly identified by Fulkerson. On the one hand, we have the fearful oblivious cohort, which “substitutes social stereotypes [based on negative experience and socialization] for knowledge of individuals” (*Places*, 19). This form of obliviousness is rooted in a fear that clouds the vision of the subject, and veils the individuality of the object. Therefore, those who suffer from this kind of obliviousness cannot see the other, because they can only see their visceral fears. On the other hand, we have the benevolent oblivious sub-cohort, which overlooks complex differences out of a sense of benevolence. Fulkerson, quoting Toni Morrison, writes, “‘The habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture.’ Yet the will to ‘not see’ these differences . . . is a costly ‘solution.’ Aversive reactions eventuate in practices of avoidance and group isolation, providing supports for an obliviousness that is a denied, thus repressed, will-to-disregard” (*Places*, 20). Because they the will-to-disregard has imbedded itself deep inside those suffering from benevolent obliviousness, they cannot see the very real suffering of the other. Therefore, their ‘not-seeing’ is no solution at all.

<sup>41</sup> *Places*, 20

### **A Sketch of the Non-Innocent Oblivious Cohort**

A variety of attitudes mark the members of this cohort. The obliviousness of two members in this cohort manifests itself as deeply entrenched fear and anxiety, while the obliviousness of seven others manifests itself as an attitude of benevolence that overlooks social disparity because they *believe* that white and black people should be equal. Both the fearful and the benevolent, though, remain blind to the real economic disadvantage that accompanies blackness and the privilege that accompanies whiteness.

#### *FEARFUL OBLIVIOUSNESS*

The most overtly fearful participant in the study is Edgar, a 66 year old, white, heterosexual, married male with children, and a college education, who grew up in Wilson. He worked as a tobacconist, and earned, at the peak of his career, around \$70,000. He claims throughout the interview that he really likes black people and their culture. For example, when I asked him about how black people spend their leisure time, he replied,

They go to the beach, to the mountains, overseas, and to visit family. They pretty much do anything I would do. I don't think there are any limits to any vacation they can take. The limits are cultural, about what they like and don't like. For example, when we went to Branson, we don't see a lot of them there, because that music ain't their taste. I like negro spiritual music, though. It's some of my favorites. There is this one song that a lady in our church sang, and I always ask her to sing it cause I like it so much.

Even though he reports liking black people, he cannot see the privileges he has that black people do not, and he cannot see the social challenges that white people create for blacks. When pulled over by the police, he reported being treated with respect and given extensive privileges. Edgar recounted this story about a time when an officer pulled him over for speeding. He told me,

I thought, ‘What in the world is going on?’ I didn’t know I was in a speed zone. When the officer got to my car, I got out and said that I was dead on 55. The officer told me that they had changed the speed limit within the last two weeks, and that I had passed three speed limit signs. He had been sitting there for a speed trap. I told him that I didn’t believe him. So, he told me to get in his car, and we drove back, and he showed me the signs.

I asked, stunned, “He let you in his car?”

“Yeah,” Edgar said, without thinking twice about it.

“How did he treat you?” I pushed farther.

Edgar responded, “He was polite, but, ummmm, how do you say it, no nonsense.”

When asked how a police officer would treat a black man, Edgar reported that a white officer would probably treat the black man differently than him, but he blamed the difference on the attitude of the black man. Black attitudes and actions are the root of racial discord and disadvantage in the twenty-first century, according to Edgar. He reports,

Well, if he [a black man pulled over for speeding] saw a white officer, he would probably think it was racist. I disagree with that. I know of the ones [black people] that were around me. They thought everything was against them because they were black. That wasn’t true. They usually set the tone around them about how people talked to them and acted around them. I don’t think there is a prejudiced bone in my body. I grew up with black families. One of my best friends was black.

To some non-innocent oblivious white people, black people are “militant, combative,” and dangerous. Regarding living situations, Edgar thinks,

They [black people] live in some of the better places and some of the poorer places, but that’s not a racial thing. You have Latinos and whites in the same position. Caucasians may be dominant in some areas, because historically they may have had access to better education and could make more [money] to support that lifestyle, but blacks are doing that now, and *they are moving into white neighborhoods for a safer environment.* [emphasis added]

This last sentence reveals the fear endemic to his obliviousness. When I asked Edgar about the advantages black people might have because of their color, he began a long diatribe. “I think that blacks get by with a whole lot more than white people do. I’ve been in restaurants where blacks are loud and boisterous, and their kids a runnin around, and nobody says anything to them. When you see the same thing with white families, somebody goes over and says something.”

“Why do you think there is a difference,” I asked?

“Because they [the white people] don’t want to get into a confrontation. Joshua, there is not a racist bone in my body,” he assured me for the second time.

He continued,

I’ve worked with them my whole life. There are sorry white people and sorry black people, but blacks are more militant actin and combative actin than whites. Part of it is reverse prejudice on their part. There are more racist black people than white people. They have crossed over into the white beauty pageant, but they still have their own [black beauty pageant] that white people cannot enter. They have black colleges, but we can’t have white colleges.

I immediately followed up with a question about black disadvantage. “Are there any disadvantages to being black?”

He explained,

There are so many opportunities for blacks that whites don’t challenge them. I’ve always questioned the allegations about white people being so cruel to their black slaves. I don’t believe in slavery at all, but they [the white slave owners] were business men, and they wanted to look after their property. From a business angle, they didn’t want them to starve or freeze. They [the slaves] might not have had as nice a house, but that’s capitalism. The ones who make the most get the most, and the ones who don’t should work harder to get it. I feel like this country is makin some terrible mistakes and bad choices that we are going to pay for.

I wish I had pressed a little further on this subject, but I presumed that the answer would mirror much of what he had already told me. So, I moved on to white privilege. I asked if he could tell me any advantages to being white. After a thirty-five second pause he said, “No, but I can give you some advantages to being black. They can get by with more than white people, take Obama for example.”

“You think Obama is getting by with stuff because he is black,” I inquired.

“Liberals think the sun rises and sets on him,” he said.

I don’t care that he is black. I just don’t like his extreme liberal standards. He’s gettin by with stuff that a white president could never pull off. The media just sweeps it under the rug. It is downright criminal. It’s the same with the Attorney General. He refuses to prosecute the Black Panthers. You should hold everybody to the same yard stick.

“Are there other ways that blacks have an advantage over whites,” I probed?

He replied,

Well, economically they can get by with much less attention to appearance, language, education and abilities, discipline with their children, job . . . ummm, requirements. They just don’t have to fulfill them. I remember back when I was managing ‘em, I had to write out the reports for the black folks ‘cause they couldn’t do it themselves. And when we had meetings, and I had to get them to come up with ideas, I had to just sit there, and basically put the ideas in their heads.

Without any prompting, he began a string of stories that appear to form his perception of *all* black people. “I knew this guy, he was a hard worker. I thought the world of him. He had fifteen children by fifteen different women, though, and he was proud of it.” Then he shifted to another story,

There was this other guy, I thought the world of him. But Joshua, he said something that blew my mind. It made me take another look at black people. He was a womanizer, and he was dating this girl at work. It got to the point where it started affectin their work, and I had to threaten to fire them both, ‘cause I was worried about what his wife would do. He was married, and she had already shot at him once, and ran him over too. I

knew what she was capable of. I tried my best to make something of him. He was a hard worker, a good worker, but one day I asked him if he was afraid of gettin AIDS, and he said something that blew my mind. He told me that if he got AIDS he would impregnate every woman in Wilson, even if he had to rape 'em. He said, Iif they gave it to me, I'm gonna get somebody back. I'd get white women, black women, it wouldn't matter."

He continued to tell three more stories, all of which revealed his experience with sexually promiscuous, violent, hard working black men and women that he "thought the world of." He repeated this phrase every time he told a story about a black person he knew. None of them had names, and these experiences became the lens through which he saw black people.

#### *BENEVOLENT OBLIVIOUSNESS*

Seven participants fit into the benevolent obliviousness sub-cohort. Their obliviousness manifests itself differently from those blinded by fear.<sup>42</sup> They consider themselves freed from racist conditioning, and as such they overlook the social disadvantage with which black people continue to live. Participants in this category range from age 43 to 64, and half of them grew up in Wilson. They include male and female. The majority have college educations, but one has a certificate from a two year technical school, and a second graduated from high school. Yearly income for this category stretches from \$16,000 per year to \$200,000 plus, with a median yearly income of \$124,000. All of them had children, and identify as heterosexual.

Other than their whiteness, a remarkably similar vocabulary ties this group together. The following responses, or some version thereof, reoccur in every interview. They describe black experience as "the same as" white experience. Black people are treated the "same way" as white people. They do the "same thing" as white people.

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<sup>42</sup> See footnote 40.

They live in places “just like mine.” Contrary to the history of Wilson and the current demographic data, which reveal a huge gap between white and black income, housing conditions, and access to transportation, the inhabitants of the benevolent obliviousness type have largely ignored these differences, thus missing the suffering of their neighbors, and avoiding any obligation to act. The recurrence of similar phrases, the tone of voice, and body gestures indicated that they overlook black suffering out of a sense of good will or the desire to see white people and black people as “the same.”

When asked about vacation experiences, I received responses like, “I don’t know. They usually don’t go where it is really hot. I don’t know. I never really thought about it. The ones I know, they would go basically anywhere I would go.” Shirley told me, “NOW [spoken emphatically] they go the same places white families do. They go to the beach, the mountains, Disney World, or over to Europe.”

This group’s perception about how black people travel around town, what they wear to work, and how they pay for groceries parallels their sense of vacation potential among black families. They have the same opportunities and access as white people. Terri reported, “They drive a car, if they can afford it, but if not, they ride with someone. They get there the same way I would get to work if I didn’t have a car.” We see some nuance in the answer. Terri recognizes that some black people cannot afford cars, and that those people would get a ride with someone else. She does, however, assume two things in her response: one, that immediate friends and family have access to a vehicle, which may or not be true, and two, that blacks get to work the same way she does. Amanda reports seeing *more* methods of transportation used by black people than Terri. She notes, “A lot have cars. I’ve seen people take taxis. The bus is there, but generally

they have cars.” Cars, taxis, and busses appear in her observation of black access to transportation, but she thinks that most blacks travel by car, which is how she travels. Of all the respondents in this category, Shirley is the only one who did not equalize white and black access to transportation, or overlook the multiple disadvantages of black experience. She simply stated, “Some drive, uummm, some use public transportation. I have seen some walking.”

Walking appears to serve as the primary mode of transportation for many black people in Wilson. Every day on my way to work, I drove through the city--the section of town with the highest density of African American residents--and I always saw at least one person walking to the corner gas station, the neighborhood Piggly Wiggly, or standing at the bus stop.

Concerning what white residents of Wilson wear to work, and how they pay for their groceries, I observed a similar tendency to equalize white and black experience. All the respondents gave varying degrees of details about work and supermarket experience among black people, but all seven gave some variation of “the same thing as white people.” Shirley provided a response that equalizes white and black experience in a different way than observed above. She comments, “Umm, some of them use food stamps, but, ya know, I’ve seen white people use them too.” Rather than saying that white people and black people do “the same thing,” she moves to equalize white and black experience by identifying her observation of black economic disadvantage (food stamps), and she immediately follows that observation with the qualifier that white people do the same thing. She does not reflect on whether she sees black people use them more frequently than white people. Considering the economic inequity in contemporary

Wilson, where black people are more likely to live below the poverty line, the respondents completely fail to connect the frequent use of government assistance by blacks to the economic inequities that blacks face daily.

Similarly, they fail to see the prejudicial nature of the justice system. Black experience with the police during a routine traffic stop provided interesting complexities that previous questions did not uncover. I asked all the respondents a variation of this question: “If a black man were pulled over for speeding, what do you think would be the first thing to go through his mind?” All of them mentioned race as a perceived reason for the stop, but they went much deeper into the issue. Amanda tried to equalize the perception of race as a reason for legal confrontation. She said,

He probably would look and say, is that a white or a black cop, and I guess that is just kinda human nature. I even look for that. You are trying to figure out if the person is going to be nice or not so nice. If it’s a white cop, I don’t know, it depends on the character of the speeder. He might be a little nervous [when confronting a white cop]. If it’s a black cop, though, he might think, I can get out of this.

Her comment on the character of the speeder sounds similar to Edgar’s readiness to blame black people for how white officers treat them: “They set the tone.”<sup>43</sup> In the minds of the benevolently oblivious respondents, some measure of moral deficiency in blacks explains why the police treat black people differently from white people, and why black people perceive that difference.

Shirley said, without hesitation, that a black man would think,

He stopped me because I was black. I’ve heard it so much. I don’t think that should be the reason, and . . . ummmm . . . I’m not saying that isn’t the reason for some police officers, but I’ve seen black police officers pull over black men. He [the black man pulled over] really should think, “I was doing something wrong,” but that’s not how they think.

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<sup>43</sup> See page 45 for Edgar’s complete response.

Four important factors mark this response. One, Shirley has heard about how white police treat black people differently, but she appears to think that black reports of unequal treatment are false. When she said, “I’ve heard it so much,” she sounded exasperated and rolled her eyes. Two, after implying that black people shouldn’t think they have been pulled over for their color, she immediately appeals to her sense of racial justice: “I don’t think that should be the reason.” The police should not target black people because they are black. She knows that that “some officers” pull black people over because of their color, but she immediately offsets that observation with, “but I’ve seen black officers pull over black men.” Three, even considering that some white officers pull black men over for their color, she does not think that black men “should think” they were pulled over for being black. Four, Shirley exhibits a conflicted opinion about black encounters with white police officers. On one hand, racial prejudice exists among white officers, but she cannot fully commit to that observation. On the other hand, black officers pull black men over, so black men should not feel targeted because of their race. She cannot seem to reconcile her perceptions of racial injustice, with her sense that this injustice is a wrong that needs correcting.

When asked about where black people live in Wilson and what kind of places they live in, the most common response was, “NOW, they live all over, in places just like mine.” This response looks back to the past when blacks lived on the “east side of town,” and it suggests that segregation has been obliterated by, one would presume, the Civil Rights movement. I pushed farther by asking, “Is there any particular place where they are more concentrated?” Every respondent immediately pointed to the downtown, Eastern

part of the city. It seemed to escape respondents in this category that even though *de jure* segregation had ended, *de facto* economic segregation persists.

I asked each respondent to tell me what kind of jobs black people could not obtain because of their color. The responses paralleled their views regarding housing, “The playing field has leveled out, and black people have equal access to jobs.” As Amanda reported, “Jobs are about ability, experience, and education. They have an equal right to any job as long as they are qualified.” Shirley echoed Amanda, but she gave more detail: “I don’t think so now, but there were a lot of jobs they couldn’t get when I was growing up. Now, though, they can be doctors, lawyers, whatever they decide to be. They just have to earn it.” Terri, though, immediately responded, “Garbage men, is that what you are thinking? Used to, you would think a garbage man was black . . . you always think of, maybe . . . I don’t think it . . . garbage men, dig ditches, but if they have the education, they can get any job I can.” While she thinks that education plays an important role in gaining employment, she also notices that a large portion of sanitary workers remain black. During my three and a half years in Wilson, I never saw a white garbage man. They were exclusively black.

The question regarding black disadvantage fully reveals the dissonance between what benevolently oblivious people *want* to be true, and what really *is* true. Amanda grew up in a predominantly black school, and she has a close relationship with a black college friend. Of all the respondents in *any* group, she was the only one who listed a black person as one of her closest friends. Even though she thinks that black people have equal access to economic and social resources, she revealed personal stories endemic to Wilson. She reports,

My husband's grandmother was telling us about how she went to Bill's BBQ, and when she came out she had trouble getting out the door because she had stuff in her hand and there was ice on the parking lot. A black man helped her to her car, and she said, "That was the nicest nigger I ever met."

As Amanda told this story, she began to blush and whispered the last part of the story. She went on to tell about a comment her stepfather made while he was watching a football game: "One of the guys made a mistake, and Ed yelled, 'That dumb nigger.' It was so terrible because my black friend from Virginia was there, and she was staying with us."

I asked, "What did she say?"

To which Amanda responded, "Nothing. We just ignored it."

Each respondent in this category reported similar stories, or told me that they thought white people saw black people differently. White people see blacks as "dishonest," "not worth being nice to," and "lazy," but respondents wanted to make these white attitudes a condition of the past. The phrase, "Not as much as there used to be" reoccurred frequently.

Within the group of benevolent obliviousness cohort, we see five tendencies emerge:

- 1) The tendency to equate black and white experience;
- 2) The tendency to assume that the Civil Rights Movement solved obstacles to social goods based on race;
- 3) The tendency to offset black suffering with white suffering;
- 4) The tendency to blame black people for the continuation of white prejudice and black suffering;

5) The tendency to overlook white privilege.

*A SKETCH OF THE GROWING AWARENESS COHORT*

Within the same church as the non-innocent oblivious cohort, we can find individuals with a growing awareness of white advantage and black disadvantage. The seven respondents in this sub-cohort inhabit complex and diverse social situations. In age, they range from thirty-two to seventy-eight. The participant with the lowest income earns roughly \$42,000 per year and the wealthiest makes \$260,000. Three of the participants have lived in Wilson for at least fifty years and two of them have lived in the town their entire lives. The others have moved into the area for job reasons. Four of the participants completed four years of college and work for the city, hold management positions for local companies, or own their own businesses. Three participants obtained Masters of Divinity degrees, and one of those finished a Ph.D. in Old Testament studies. All three work in full-time ministry. Only one participant in this sub-cohort did not receive a four year degree, and she spent most of her life working as a homemaker, or helping out with the family business that her husband inherited and operated.

The inhabitants of this category display varying degrees of awareness. Some show a keener awareness of economic inequality than social inequality, while others show the reverse. Some see the interconnected nature of social and economic disparity, and others have yet to make that connection. As a group, though, these eight participants revealed significant awareness of black social and economic disadvantages and white advantages.

Among the respondents in all categories, Mildred revealed the sharpest awareness of black experiences in the community, due to intimate experiences with black people that

seemed to serve as the fountainhead of that awareness. Mildred, now in her seventies, was a stay-at-home mom. Her husband made a sizable fortune selling farm chemicals, and after his death she became the sole beneficiary of his considerable wealth. After the death of her husband, Mildred moved into a three-thousand square foot home worth approximately \$500,000. Her “retirement home” is decorated with antique furniture, rugs, and dishes. Mildred drives a full sized luxury SUV, owns a purebred boxer, and freely spends money on her grandchildren. For example, she bought a townhouse in Washington D.C. so that her granddaughter would have a safe place to live while she attended law school at American University.

Mildred’s current economic position places her among the five wealthiest members of the church, but her racial and economic privilege have not blinded her to the varieties of black life. She reported a story from her early childhood that she thought shaped much of her willingness to form deep, meaningful relationships with black people in the community. She told me,

My experience [with black people] goes back to my early, early, childhood. My grandmother was the most loving, kind person in the whole world. There were some black people who lived right at the edge of our lot. We [Mildred’s brothers and sisters] went to their house, and played with the little black children, and their mother cooked for all of us. We loved her just as if she had been an Aunt. I didn’t think in terms of her being someone who waited on me. In fact, my grandmother nursed one of her babies.

Shocked, I asked, “You mean she breast fed the baby of your black neighbor?”

“Yeah,” she said, “my grandmother breastfed a black baby. She had just had a baby herself, and the woman next door got sick. So my grandmother took her baby, and nursed her until she [the black mother next door] got well.”

Mildred fluidly moved from this story to other experiences she had with black people. “My feeling about black people is very warm,” she asserted. “I’ve never been afraid of them. The lady who helped my mother, Jenny and Seabury [Jenny’s spouse], I went to see them all the time. Until she died, about ten years ago, I would go see her, take her to the grocery store, and help her with things she needed.”

Mildred continued, “Eloise, you’ve met her. She comes to clean my house, and it’s not like she comes to do all the cleaning. We are like sisters. We call each other that. When she comes to clean, we do it together, and we sit down and talk and visit”

Mildred’s experiences and close personal relationships with black people shocked me. No one of her age group, seventy to eighty, reported such intimacy and depth of experience. I asked her. “Do you think that your experience is typical of other people in town.” She replied, “No, umm, I don’t think so. There could be a whole lot of people who did, but I just don’t know. But I did have someone in our church tell me, ‘My mother raised me to be afraid of black folks.’ I said, ‘I’m sorry, that is not how I feel.’”

Throughout our interview, Mildred revealed a complex and nuanced understanding of black life in the town. When asked about how black people get to work, she responded according to what she *sees*: “Well,” she said, “I see them walking, riding bicycles. Eloise has a car, and more and more of them are getting cars. I have a black man who walks by here on his way to work everyday.”

While many of her responses reveal awareness of varieties of black experience, she also demonstrated awareness of black disadvantage. Unlike those who demonstrate non-innocent obliviousness, she did not mistake variety for equality. Her answers did not

indicate a desire to equate white and black access to social, economic, and political capital. When I asked her about what a black man would think when he was pulled over,

She responded, “I don’t stand a Chinaman’s chance.”<sup>44</sup>

I asked, “Why.”

“Well,” Mildred explained, “it would depend on the color of the officer, but I think it would run through his mind, ‘How is he going to treat me?’”

In Mildred’s mind, black men are disadvantaged in interactions with police officers. She also sees similar disadvantages in black job and housing opportunities: “Most of them [black people] live in substandard housing. Some of them just look like dumps.” Even though she lives in an affluent neighborhood, she sees the conditions of those who live from “Bragg Street east, and in the housing projects, and in Tasmin Towers.” All three of these locations contain houses, apartments, and rooms with peeling paint, unkempt lawns, broken porches, inadequate plumbing, and high population density.

When I questioned her about what kinds of jobs black people can get *because* of their color, she immediately answered,

Garbage man job, and of course they can get jobs in a maid service. We have so many cleaning services now. I don’t know how many [black] domestics there are, but you know, ummm, there are nurses. I’m not familiar with day care. So, I don’t know about that situation. They are able to go to school now and become teachers. Some I’m not sure they are limited to being garbage men because of their color.

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<sup>44</sup> In this response, we see one form of obliviousness from which Mildred still suffers. She showed no compunction using the derogatory phrase “Chinaman’s chance” to describe a black man’s poor chance of receiving leniency from a police officer. I speculate that she used the word without any knowledge of its history or that it is currently considered offensive and derogatory, but this is the kind of obliviousness that I hope to uncover and address.

At this point, Mildred reveals another aspect of her views regarding black experience and opportunity. Not all black people are relegated to the position of garbage men. Some opportunities exist for black people that did not exist in the past. They can go to school. I asked her about jobs they *could not get* because of their color, and she exclaimed, “I didn’t know that could happen any more. You know, I thought they were able, really, if they had the education, they could get into any field. I know that the veterinarian up the road has their first [black] vet. You’ve got black doctors and nurses.” While she recognizes new opportunities for black people, it appears that those opportunities, especially through education, outweigh the disadvantages. She overlooks how enduring white racism that may prevent black people from getting some jobs in the community, regardless of their education. This oversight, though, does not prevent her from seeing all forms of white racism.

I asked her about places black people cannot get into because of their color, and she told me, after a long pause, “Not in this . . . well, there is a black Elks Club and a White Elks club. Robert [her husband] has been dead eight years. I don’t know if the white Elks Club has had any black folks ask for membership or not. It may be like the church situation.”

Furthermore, Mildred sees more than black disadvantage. She sees glaring instances of white privilege. When I asked her about where white people live in Wilson, she immediately reported that three quarters live on the West side of town in “better kept, bigger homes.” She also pointed out that white people historically had advantages over black people in employment and education opportunities. Subtler forms of white

privilege escaped her recognition, though, and other respondents in the study demonstrated greater awareness of white privilege than Mildred.

The three seminary trained participants saw white privilege most clearly, and they named a wide variety of instances where whiteness privileges them and other white people. Where Mildred could only name job and education disparities, the clergy named buying power, treatment in restaurants and stores, access to credit, ease of travel, and the opinion of strangers as significant advantages to being white.

Don, an ordained Old Testament professor at the college, said that his color provides him with substantial social and economic advantage: “Personally, I think my color provides me advantages in everything I do. When I go to buy a house or a car, or when I need to buy something at Target, or anytime I have a problem. People are more likely to believe me because I am white. They are more likely to think that I am telling the truth.” Molly, an ordained minister who serves as the chaplain at the same college as Don, said,

Traveling is easier, especially traveling abroad. Now I think color is not, ummm, well, white European makes it easier to get through the system, like customs. I have noticed with people, our society today, people judge by your color where they think that you are from. It’s not just black or white. If you are dark skinned at all, people automatically think that you are of Middle Eastern, and, uh, Muslim.

The participants in the study with seminary degrees gave the most detailed reports of how whiteness privileges them, but a seminary education is not a prerequisite to see racial inequity. Richard, a 78 year old retired accountant, revealed nuanced insights about black disadvantage, insights that were based on personal experience. He recognizes

how social advantage helped him succeed where others failed. My question regarding the sports black teenagers play elicited a long and complicated story,

They play basketball, predominantly, and football, because they see on TV the blacks that are making a lot of money and they can achieve that goal also, but still, I should add a side note. A lot of that [their ability to succeed] depends on their family situation. So many of them live in a single parent home. I remember that my wife had two kids in her art class. She taught at the all-black school, and she was the only white teacher there. That was when I lost all my prejudice. I remember when I had to go over there [across the railroad tracks], and see how those kids dressed. Well, she had two boys who were really talented, naturally talented, but they never had the opportunity to develop that talent. Back then there was no financial aid, and scholarships were hard to come by. So, they didn't get to go to college. Now, the world is missin out on having these young people [and the art they could have created].

I asked, "Could they have worked and put themselves through college like you did?"

"Well," Robert replied,

I had the G.I. Bill, and when my mother got breast cancer, I almost didn't make it, but Milton [one of First Christian's patriarchs] made arrangements for me to get loans to pay tuition, get books and have enough money to take care of the family. I remember one time, we had our furniture repossessed, and I felt so embarrassed, but he encouraged me, and helped us financially. He was the reason I stayed in school. I never would have made it without people in my life. I saw Jesus in him.

Robert's response evinces an acute awareness of the connection between communal support and success. He sees the interconnection between the individual and social support structures. The black artists in his wife's class could not succeed because they lacked familial and social support. They possessed talent and drive, but social structures prevented their continued growth as artists. Robert, on the other hand, succeeded because the government, the church, and the community supported him when he could not support himself.

The lack of communal support for black people that existed in the past continues into the present, and Robert sees this. When I asked him to tell me about what jobs black people could not get because of their color, he responded, “If they got the education, they SHOULD [emphasis his] be able to get any job they apply for.”

I implored, “Can they?”

“No,” he responded.

Even though Richard sees a correlation between communal support and individual success, he only vaguely sees how the white community has advantages that the black community lacks. When I asked if he could tell me any advantages to being white, he gave a vague answer: “Society, per se, more readily accepts Caucasians whether they are male or female. Their first impression is more positive.” Richard quickly shifted from white privilege to gender disadvantage. He continued by telling me about a woman in his P.A. firm who had a difficult time with some clients. She was white, but her gender stood between her and full acceptance. Some people would not work with her because she was a woman. They thought that women were not good with numbers, and therefore they did not make good accountants. Richard said, “She was one of the brightest accountants in our firms, and I tried to tell them that.”

Referring to specific black people and naming black friends and acquaintances emerged as an important trait of members in this cohort. Mildred named five different black people during our interview, the most of any respondent. Also, when I asked Thomas, a middle judicatory member of the clergy, about what black people do in their leisure time, he drew from his observations of people who live in the neighborhood around the state office. He explained,

In the neighborhood where we are sitting now, they sit on the porch because they have no air conditioning. They are at home a lot, and on weekends there is often a large gathering of family at friends at a home or in the park. They probably work in jobs with lots of hours, and when they come home they cook and rest. But those in jobs similar to mine, have a similar life as I do.

This report reveals both economic and social awareness. The black people in the downtown neighborhood where Thomas works stay at home in their leisure time. They do not go out to eat. They do not travel to the nearby state capital. They do not sit around the dinner table talking, or in the living room watching TV. They sit on their front porch, and they choose that location, or that location is chosen for them, because they cannot afford air conditioning, which makes the heat in their homes intolerable. His black neighbors have limited access to economic freedom, and they do not have access to the leisure opportunities available to Thomas: gardening, remodeling the house, hunting, and deep sea fishing with a wealthy lawyer friend.

Furthermore, by remembering individuals he observed, Thomas manifests broad awareness of black employment opportunities and the form of dress that accompanies various occupations. When I asked him about what black people wear to work, he reported,

I have lived in Atlanta, Houston, Memphis, and Stuttgart, Arkansas, and I saw a lot of black folks in all those places. A lot of them wear work clothes: overalls, jeans, and T-shirts, because most of them have manual labor jobs; but there were also professionals who wore the best suits you could buy.

Again, Thomas responded according to *specific* black bodies he saw, and thus he recognized the varieties of black access to economic capital. *Some* of the people he observed had access to significant capital, while *most* wore uniforms that marked them as manual laborers denied access to the power and social advantages that accompany higher

management positions. Unlike those who consider themselves colorblind, he does not avert his gaze from specific black bodies, which leads to a false sense of racial equality, nor does he look on them with contempt, like the fearfully oblivious sub-cohort, who stereotype all black people based on limited negative experiences.

Elaine also related to the people she sees every day. She grounded her observations regarding black dress in the people who work for her in the restaurant she owns. When asked about what black people wear to work, she reported, “They wear uniforms or regular clothes they pick out. Most of the people I know who work for me in the restaurant wear uniforms.”

As a restaurant manager, she works with dozens of black employees, and one of her managers is black. The relationship with this particular manager opened a story that reveals for her the disparity between white and black positions in the community, and the persistence of white prejudice and racism. Elaine spoke of “trigger words” that she recognizes in the community. During a particularly successful community event organized by the employees of her restaurant, a white business leader came to Elaine and complimented her on the professionalism and success of the event. To this, Elaine gave credit to the black manager. She explained,

I gave credit to my black friend and manager, and he said to me, ‘Oh yeah, everyone needs one of them.’ I knew what he meant. He meant that everyone needs a good nigger to work for them. Later on that same guy wanted to tell me an off color Obama joke, and I just had to walk away.

Elaine’s racial awareness allowed her to see places in the community that still deny access to black people. When I asked her to tell me about jobs that black people cannot get because of their color, she responded very differently from those characterized by non-innocent obliviousness. She immediately responded,

I think that there are jobs still in town [that black people cannot get]. Family owned restaurants won't hire black people. The local BBQ place won't hire black people to work in the front of the restaurant. For years the only way a black person could eat there was to go to the side door, and that has carried on. Most black people go to the side door.

Her observation surprised me because it revealed my obliviousness. I ate at the restaurant several times a month, and I had never noticed the absence of black faces in the front of the restaurant, nor did I relate that absence to all the black faces I saw in the back of the restaurant when I picked up food for carry out. The cooks in the kitchen were all black, and mostly black people got their food from the back door to take home, or to eat at the picnic tables beside the parking lot.

These respondents, and others in this cohort, show more awareness than the non-innocent oblivious cohort, but they are still oblivious to some aspects of black experience and suffering. While they do not display overt fearfulness, or say that black people have the same experience as they do, or that the Civil Rights movement was the panacea for black inequality, they sometimes tried to offset black suffering with white suffering. When I asked Mildred about the disadvantages of being black she said,

I don't think they get the general respect of the masses. I know that they get respect from a lot of people, but they don't get it from everyone. That would be a disadvantage. However, you have white people that don't respect other white people, and you have black people that don't respect other black people.

Elaine gave a similar response about the disadvantages of being black. When I asked her, "Are there any advantages to being black," she said,

Yes and no, there are people that are prejudiced, the household you are born in may be a disadvantage. Black people are still coming out of that history, but the same is true of white people. I grew up in a disadvantaged household. It's what you make of it. I wouldn't have a problem being black except for all the girl things, especially the hair. I wouldn't know what to do with my hair.

Interestingly, Elaine reported that some whites in the city still think of black people as property, which the story of the man who commented, “Everyone needs one of them” reveals, but she did not list this as a disadvantage, nor did she use it as a reason for saying that she wouldn’t want to be black.

It is possible that her social position as a lesbian who grew up in a poor family makes her feel that she has more in common with the suffering of black people than heterosexual whites in middle or upper class households. She overcame her impoverished childhood, and she sidesteps the disadvantages of her sexual orientation by keeping it a secret from the public, thus ascending to a prominent place in the community and to the top economic tier. In Elaine’s mind, black people can make similar social and economic advances, if they so choose.

#### *SUMMARY*

The participants in this study inhabit and shape the same community and church, but all see race differently. Some think that white privilege is a myth, and they live in fear of black bodies and gaze on them with contempt. Others wish that their vision of racial equality was reality, and therefore they avert their gaze from the persistent inequalities that privilege the white community and disadvantage the black community. They do not see privilege or black disadvantage. Still others, to varying degrees, see the advantages of whiteness and the disadvantages of blackness. They can recognize and describe the inequalities they see by recalling people they have known in childhood, at work, or observed on the street.

The question, “Why do some people see racial disparity while others are oblivious?” remains. Considerations of age, gender, socioeconomic status, place of birth,

or sexual orientation do not help to answer this question. From the data collected in this study, we see that gender and sexual orientation seems to open up some people, but that does not preclude older heterosexual men from seeing racial injustice. Furthermore, some forms of education help white people see, but other forms of education leave white people entrenched in their obliviousness. We therefore can conclude, the people who see racial inequality occupy varying social locations, and the same is true of participants evincing non-innocent obliviousness.

Do the original hypotheses set forth at the beginning of this Thesis hold true? Because we cannot look to age, socioeconomic status, gender, or sexual orientation as a reliable predictor for awareness or obliviousness, perhaps we can look to theological paradigms. Solid relationships with black people emerges as the most constant and predictable element among those who see racial advantage and disadvantage, and this correlates directly to their Christology, as I will explain in the following chapter.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Christology and Racial Awareness**

I set out the following hypothesis at the beginning of this study. One, Christians whose Christological model parallels that of Irenaeus will evince greater awareness of the privilege that accompanies whiteness, the disadvantage that accompanies blackness, and some degree of the correlation between the two. Two, Christians whose Christological models parallel those of Tertullian and Origen will evince little or no awareness of their racial dominance and the privilege it provides, nor will they see the disadvantages of blackness. Three, Christological models will explain the divergence between the two groups. The data collected in the open-ended interviews *confirmed this hypothesis*, but the follow-up belief questionnaires neither confirmed nor disproved the hypothesis.<sup>45</sup>

#### ***THREE TYPES OF THEOLOGY***

The vast array of symbols, words, practices, and meanings in religion make mapping theological ideas and paradigms extremely difficult. Can we collect data, measure, analyze, and categorize one belief system and compare it to another? How does a researcher categorize a subject's conception of God? How does a researcher measure one subject's idea against another subject's idea? How can a researcher label a subject's beliefs about Jesus Christ?

To measure and to compare theological explanatory models in this study, I use the three the types of theology described by Justo Gonzáles. Each of the three types has a long history in the Christian tradition, dating back to the early church fathers.

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<sup>45</sup> The data does not elucidate the how and to what degree Christology shapes racial attitudes and vice versa. Furthermore, we cannot determine, based on the evidence in this study, what other forces (exposure to black people, or the lack thereof, explicit racism in the family of origin, community stereotypes, and a host of other forces) impinge on Christology and racial perspective.

## *TYPE A*

Legal interests preoccupy type A theology, and thus *Law* functions as the main category. González writes,

If one were to seek a single word with which to characterize Tertullian's [the father of Type A] basic theological concern, that word would be *Law*. As he saw it, Christianity is superior to any human philosophy, since in it one receives the revelation of the ultimate law of the universe, the law of God.<sup>46</sup>

Those who operate under Type A theology view God as the Lawgiver and Judge who orders the universe with strict, clear legislation, and He communicates those laws and that order through sacred scripture. At the beginning of creation, the Divine Lawgiver constructed a complete and perfect universe. The original state of creation was “a perfect order, it was God's final purpose,” and everything that has occurred since the beginning derives from human sin.<sup>47</sup> Breaking the divine law constitutes sin, as interpreted by Tertullian and other Type A theologians, and Adam and Eve, humanity's progenitors, were the first transgressors of God's laws in the ordered universe. Consequently, each subsequent generation inherited the sin of the parents. For Tertullian, children inherit original sin from their parents much like they inherit hair color, eye color, and other biological traits.

Within the framework of Type A theology, Jesus Christ saves humans from the consequences of their sin, but for Him to accomplish this, He must fulfill tasks specific to Type A theology. Since humans have broken the divine law, they stand guilty and deserve punishment. Humanity owes a “legal debt” to God.<sup>48</sup> While Jesus' salvific work isn't

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<sup>46</sup> González, 25

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 22

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

completely clear in Tertullian's theology, it seems likely that Tertullian would have said, "Jesus has paid the debt we owe to God."<sup>49</sup> Jesus' work of forgiveness and payment emerge as the central components of Type A theology, but Jesus plays another important role in human salvation. Jesus gives a new law. He becomes the new Moses who prescribes the law of repentance to humanity.

Type A theology struggles to address the problem of racism because its focus on legal categories privileges those empowered to construct the law, and it does not demand that they change their use of power.<sup>50</sup> In a society where powerful whites create laws that order the world in their favor (i.e. slavery and Jim Crow), the idea of a God who demands a similar kind of legal obedience serves the interest of the lawmakers. It was such an evil misuse of Type A theology that enabled slave owners to employ Pauline theology in admonishing their slaves to submit to the yolk of bondage.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Tertullian's theology encourages an individualistic interpretation of sin and redemption. The data collected in the interviews elucidates the problematic individualism arising from this theology; a problem that prevents people from seeing sin as anything other than an offense against God's commands. These commands, exclusively interpreted as the Ten Commandments, function as arbitrary rules, not

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 70

<sup>51</sup> Howard Thurman provides a provocative account of his grandmother's experience of the ways in which the powerful misuse Type A theology. When Thurman was a child, she tasked him with reading to her from the Bible every night, and she was very selective about what he could read. She absolutely refused to let him read anything from Paul except for First Corinthians 13, because, "Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text, 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters. . . , as unto Christ.'" Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1981) 30-31.

guidelines for a healthy relationship between God and humans, and humans among each other.

By extension, Jesus exists as a non-relational savior who buys our forgiveness from a Divine Judge who is angered by our misdeeds. Jesus' work of salvation is limited to the blood shed on the cross as the cost of our forgiveness, and it ignores the complex relationship between His ministry with the poor and His confrontation with the powers of Rome and Jerusalem. Instead, Jesus completes the salvation transaction on the cross and provides us with the new law of repentance.

Theoretically, the new law that Jesus' gives could rest on His commandment in John 13:34, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Such an interpretation would foreground the relational nature of God, thus making room to address racism, but none of the Type A participants provide such an interpretation. Type A theology places no priority on relationship, only on satisfying Divine justice and wrath. In such a theological paradigm, there is no need to address fractured relationships between humans and God, and humans with each other, because its primary interest is fulfilling the law rather than restoring relationship. Hence, this theology, as practically applied by the participants in this project, becomes useless at best and oppressive at worst.

### *TYPE B*

Type B theologians think of God, creation, sin, Jesus, and the final consummation in very different ways than Type A theologians. Origen, the father of Type B theology, drew inspiration from Platonic thought, as the theology's main interest evinces. Type B

theologians shift the focus from morality and law to metaphysics and truth: “If one were to summarize in a single word the central theme of Origen’s thought, just as Tertullian’s theology can be best understood by *Law*, Origen’s can best be characterized in terms of *Truth*.”<sup>52</sup> Within a metaphysical theology, it would make little sense to imagine God as Lawgiver. Therefore, Origen and other Type B theologians “Tend to speak of God as the Ineffable One and to underscore the distance between the Godhead and the material world.”<sup>53</sup> Borrowing from Platonic thought, Type B theologians characterize God as the Ultimate Truth, the Supreme Idea of Good or of Beauty, the Source of all. This God transcends human language, images, and even human thought; therefore, we can only speak about God by saying what God is not.

As for creation, Origen saw two different creation narratives in Genesis, and he argued that the two accounts tell the story of two *different* creations. In the first, God made only spirits: “With the intention that the entire creation would remain spiritual.”<sup>54</sup> God created these first spirits for one purpose: to contemplate and to commune with the Source of all Truth. Sin, though, infiltrated the original creation when some of the spirits ceased to contemplate the Ineffable God, resulting in their fall. They would have fallen into nonexistence were it not for a merciful God who created the material world as a temporary abode. The most important part of Origen’s theology remains the high priority given to the *intellectual and spiritual* over the *bodily and material*. For Origen, “Intellectual life was superior to bodily life.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 25

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 25

Furthermore, Type B theologians interpret sin as the individual's failure to contemplate God. Unlike Type A theology, children do not inherit original sin biologically, as Tertullian posits. Rather, the individual failed to contemplate God in a previous life and thus fell from grace into the present material world. While the church never fully accepted this highly Platonic theology of original sin, the individualistic nature of sin proves most important for this study. Type B theologians narrow the scope of sin from Type A's collective inheritance to individual failure. This individualism generates a highly insular theological and social framework. Because individuals failed to contemplate the Good, Jesus functions as the Ultimate Teacher, and God charged Jesus with the important task of revealing the light of truth to humanity.

Origen's dualistic theology compounds the problems of individualism and support for oppressive systems constructed by the cultural elite that arise from Tertullian's paradigm. In Type B, individual sin (imagined as the failure to contemplate Ultimate Truth) and redemption (imagined as the return to contemplation and enlightenment) combine with the Gnostic's disdain for the material world, thus adding disembodied spiritualism to the problem of individualism. As González points out, "Philosophy is an occupation for the fortunate superior souls not entangled in the contemplation of material things. Such souls usually inhabit bodies that do not need to worry about their sustenance, for it is somehow provided."<sup>56</sup> The rulers who have the time and the means endlessly to contemplate God can afford this kind of theology, but it does little to help the poor. In fact, this theology allows the privileged to disregard the oppressed and to persist in creating oppressive systems because the physical suffering of others does not matter

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<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 62

when the goal of life is spiritual enlightenment, not physical salvation. One who has all his physical needs met can easily accept this paradigm.

How can the church begin to address the social sin of racism, when its theology devalues relationships and bodies? It can't. The suffering bodies of the poor demand more than spiritual enlightenment and the promise of a happier life after death.

### *TYPE C*

González names Irenaeus as the father of Type C theology, and as he was the only one of the three theologians to pastor a congregation, Irenaeus' theology displays an acute concern for all things pastoral. González writes, "Irenaeus' theology was eminently pastoral. He himself was a pastor, and his writings had pastoral purposes. But even further, Irenaeus saw God as the great Shepherd who leads the flock towards Divine purposes."<sup>57</sup> The arc of history marks the crux of Irenaeus' theology. All things in history, all which happens in time, move creation towards God's future. God works as a patient shepherd, leading creation towards the divine end purposed at the beginning of time.

Irenaeus attributes anthropomorphic qualities to God that neither Tertullian nor Origen utilize. Like Origen and Tertullian, Irenaeus describes God as spirit and intellect, but he also adds the senses of sight and hearing. In keeping with this anthropomorphism, Irenaeus most frequently uses the "hands of God" to refer to the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus, he provides us with an image of a God who reaches His hands down to dig into the soil of creation. González points out, "While Justin, Clement, Origen, and the entire tradition which springs from them tend to separate God from the world . . . Irenaeus

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

speaks of a God whose very hands enter into the world in the work of creation and the leading of history.”<sup>58</sup>

Irenaeus’ pastoral and historical perspective produces a unique understanding of the creation narrative. In the beginning, God did not create a perfect-complete world (Type A) or a dualistic-spiritual one (Type B). Rather, Irenaeus’ posits that God created a pure and innocent world full of creatures that would grow into maturity through communion with the Divine and communion with each other. God’s original creation served as a beginning, a jumping off point. Neither the material world nor history resulted from sin; quite the opposite. Adam and Eve were created like children who would grow to “enjoy an ever-increasing fellowship with the Divine.”<sup>59</sup>

Situating sin in this larger theological framework means that Irenaeus must explain the origin and nature of sin differently from Type A and B theologians. Sin, within the Type C framework, consists of willful disobedience of a loving Father. For Irenaeus, God did not hand down arbitrary decrees as Tertullian argued, but rather God provided divine laws that would guide humanity in its relationship with God and others, thereby ensuring healthy maturation. Laws create safe boundaries within which humans can safely grow.

In the Garden of Eden, God safeguarded the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil until Adam and Eve could safely and wisely partake of the fruit. God intended that one day they would eat of the fruit, “That humans would eventually acquire the knowledge of Good and evil, live eternally, and be ‘like Gods.’”<sup>60</sup> When the serpent

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 28

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 22

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 30

tricked Adam and Eve into eating of the tree prematurely, he preempted God's plan. Adam and Eve jumped ahead of the divine order before they were ready. As a result of this sin, all humanity became subject to Satan. Unlike the heredity of sin advanced by Tertullian, and unlike the individualism of Origen, Irenaeus views original sin as human solidarity. "Literally, then, 'in Adam we all have sinned.'"<sup>61</sup>

Even in sin, though, humanity continued to grow, but sin's presence distorted that growth, resulting in a monstrous creation full of war, poverty, sickness, and rebellion. To achieve wholeness, humanity requires liberation from the bondage of Satan. For Irenaeus, "We need someone to overcome the tyrant who holds us under subjection, to allow us to become once again the creatures God intended."<sup>62</sup> Hence, Irenaeus describes Christ's work as victory against the powers that held us hostage. Jesus accomplished what Adam could not, namely obedience to God, and in so doing he became the head of a new humanity. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection recapitulate a sin-distorted humanity, and makes way for a new creation, the creation God intended from the foundation of the world. Just as all are sinners because they are members of the body whose head is the first Adam, so too all are liberated from the powers of evil by their existence in a new body whose head is Jesus.

Irenaeus' theology, with its attentiveness to a relational God who leads humanity in a process of liberation and growth, offers the most substantial tools for addressing the relational sin of racism. I will argue in the final chapter that the suffering of Jesus, which results from his willingness reach out as the hands of God and enter into relationships of

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 40

solidarity with the poor and the outcast, provides hope for the liberation from the fears that alienate the privileged from the disadvantaged.

### ***Theological Models and Study Participants***

#### *THE NON-INNOCENT OBLIVIOUS COHORT*

Jesus as Sacrifice (Tertullian) and Teacher (Origen) best describes the theology of both sub-cohorts in the non-innocent oblivious cohort, but their theology parallels Tertullian more closely than Origen. They define the human predicament and sin as “doing the wrong things,” or action that contradicts the Ten Commandments, and Jesus died as a sacrifice for those legal transgressions. Those within this group sometimes draw from Type B theology, but Jesus as a persuasive teacher who communicates how we should live occurs less frequently than the sacrificial Jesus.

During our discussion about Jesus, Edgar (the most explicitly fearful participant) emphasized the significance of Jesus’ death on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins, and this interpretation situates his theological model in close correlation with Tertullian. When I asked him, “Can you name for me some of the important events in Jesus’ life that are important to you?” He answered, “His death on the cross [with passionate emphasis]. To me that is the most important, and his prayerful life, there again the Garden of Gethsemane, and the way he prayed there that night. Those are the things in my mind that come out. And his love, umm.” Edgar points first to sin, and he only stumbles on love as an after thought.

To explore the love of Jesus in more detail, I asked him, “Are there particular stories, in your mind, about his love that stand out to you?” He struggled to find applicable stories, and during a long pause he looked around the room and stammered,

“He ummm, the ummm, the story of the son who took his inheritance, and needed his father to take him back. I like the stories of Joseph and his brothers, and how he took them back in. I think that those are the stories that stand out in my mind.”

The Joseph story appears in Genesis 37, and the Prodigal Son appears in a parable told by Jesus in Luke 15. Even though I asked him to tell me stories about *Jesus’ love*, Jesus does not make an appearance or take any action in either of Edgar’s choices. Unfortunately, my lack of further questioning leaves the significance of these stories unclear. It would have helped the results of this research if I had asked more questions to uncover how these stories shape his theology. What parts of these stories are important to you? Where are you in the story? Where is God? What does this story tell you about God? These would have all been helpful questions.

The object of Edgar’s focus during his brief recounting of the stories reveals something about the way he interprets them. He focuses on impoverished, estranged characters, the Prodigal Son and Joseph’s brothers, who are “taken back” by characters in power, the father and Joseph, who forgive and provide for the physical needs of the reconciled. These stories seem to correlate with his beliefs about God and humanity. In his theology, God appears as a loving father or brother who forgives those that have abandoned Him and consequently live in foreign lands. Ultimately, the estranged are welcomed back into loving and forgiving arms. This interpretation of God could easily fit into Irenaeus’ theology, but other responses provided by Edgar reveal the central role that sacrificial atonement plays in his theology of redemption.

When I asked Edgar, “Why did Jesus die on the cross?” He responded, “I’d have to say for our sins.” He continued, “I think that was part of his mission from God, to

show us how to live, and to die, and to return. Then he could die, and we could ask for forgiveness, and he could forgive [our sins].”

The meaning of his interpretation still eluded me. So I pressed further, “When you say that he died for our sins, umm, I’m going to put myself in the mind of someone who doesn’t understand what you are saying, I don’t understand why someone would have to die for our sins. Did someone require his death on the cross?”

“I think that God did,” he replied. “There is the story where he asked God to take the jug [cup] from him, and he [God] didn’t. So, Jesus yielded.”

Individual humans have sinned, like the young son who takes his inheritance and the brothers who beat, rob, and sell Joseph, and God demands punishment, above all, for that sin. Jesus is the one who takes our place, and willingly dies in our stead *for* our sins. In this instance, it would help if I had probed more into Edgar’s interpretation of sin. The interview does not clearly reveal this part of his theology, but again we can infer from the stories he recounts. Human sin, no matter how it is defined, is something we do to or against God, not each other. This offense against the Divine moves to the forefront, and any offense that we commit against other human beings goes unnoticed and unreported by Edgar.

Other respondents in this cohort gave responses similar to those of Edgar, and therefore they help us flesh out an interpretation of this cohort’s theology. To the questions, “What makes Jesus significant?” and, “Why did Jesus die on the cross?” every respondent highlighted the sacrificial nature of the crucifixion. Rebecca explained, matter of factly, that Jesus died, “For our sins. At the time, uhh, I think the world just wasn’t in a good place, and he died for our sins.” She could not explain in more detail the

relationship between our sin, and Jesus' death, but her other answers indicate that sin is "breaking the Ten Commandments." We stand guilty before God because we fail to follow His commands, and Jesus accepts that guilt on our behalf.

Anna gives a more nuanced explanation, but her interpretation corresponds to Rebecca's. For Anna, "Jesus took on all the sin [of humanity], and all the sin actually killed him. Ya know, he is still taking on all that sin today." Somehow, the sin of the world gets transferred onto Jesus, like a yoke placed on an ox, and the weight of the sin crushes him. I asked her why our sin killed Him, and she did not have an answer, nor could she explain how our sin gets placed onto Jesus.

Perhaps Anna intended to indicate that the punishment for our sin gets placed onto Jesus, rather than the actual sins. Don and Mark's explanations indicate such an interpretation. Don said, "Jesus took the blame for all our sins." Mark provided more detail,

I believe that there was so much turmoil, not just in the church, but in civilization, and humans beings on this earth, and apparently what we were doing to each other . . . There was so much wrong with the world, and there again, I believe he was sent here because of our sins, and basically we needed something to right the ship, and by him being here, and, umm sacrificing, for our killing each other, and you know, again we do that today too. But what my interpretation is . . . is that God sent him to pay for our sins.

We owe a debt to God, and that debt can only be paid by suffering. Most of the participants were reticent to describe Jesus' suffering in detail, but Mark explained it vividly, "The suffering unfortunately was a key, key part of it [his death for our sins]. It wasn't that he was just shot in the back of the head. In my interpretation, the suffering was a necessary part."

I asked, "Why was that a necessary part?"

To which he responded, “Umm, I don’t know, haha, that is a good question. I guess from a human standpoint, from the sins that we had committed, and the umm, way we disregarded the Ten Commandments, and, along those lines, we were doing what we shouldn’t be doing. You know, I guess the suffering brings to the mind of those who believe in Jesus, that He was willing to suffer for us, then it must be somebody we should follow, and that He was the Son of God.”

The crucifixion serves two purposes, redemption and teaching. On the cross, Jesus simultaneously pays the debt we owe to God for breaking divine commandments, and He teaches us that He is worthy of our belief in Him. Tom communicates a similar interpretation. When I asked him, “What was Jesus’ mission in the world?” He responded, “The Ten Commandments. He gave us the rules God wanted us to follow, and He sacrifices everything to show us how much He is willing to give.”

In this response, we begin to see the image of Jesus as Teacher emerge. Every respondent in this cohort made at least one mention of Jesus as a Teacher, and the Ten Commandments were listed as His primary lessons. Rebecca believes that, “He was placed here to help us, to teach us. He wanted us to live a good life, and learn the right things to do. You know, the Ten Commandments, and how to treat others.” Anna said that Jesus was significant because He wanted us to “Believe in him, and follow his Father’s laws and commandments.” Don gave an almost identical response, “He wanted people to obey the commandments and do what was right.”

Unlike the other respondents in this category, though, Don added several others teachings of Jesus to the commandments. Among the important stories about Jesus, he

listed the “time when he ran into the temple and ran everybody out. Uuhhm, the temple is not a place of business, it is a place of worship.”

When I asked, “Who was Jesus?”

Don replied, “He was an individual that just wanted, well, he wanted everybody to believe in God. He wanted everybody to be treated fairly: the sick and the invalid. It seems like he wanted to heal.” To corroborate these intentions of Jesus, Don listed the healing of the paralytic who was lowered through the roof by his friends,<sup>63</sup> the leper who was told to get into the pool of Bethesda,<sup>64</sup> and the casting of the demons into pigs.<sup>65</sup>

For Don, unlike the other members of this cohort, Jesus teaches more than the commandments. He teaches us the appropriate way to relate to God in worship, and how to treat other human beings, treatment that Jesus embodies in His care for the physically and mentally sick.

Finally, five respondents highlighted the importance of Jesus’ miraculous powers, which they define as supernatural and magical. Tom said, “Jesus did some magical things, He healed the sick and turned the snake into a staff.” Similarly Mark explained,

What makes Jesus significant is that, I guess, umm, just the fact that, probably the one and only thing that resonates with me is that He is going through, He’s being, ummm, uhhh, how do I put it, challenged. He’s there, He’s there for our sins, and He can perform all these miracles, but He does do some miracle, but uh, not as I interpret, He’s doing them because somebody asked Him, but at the end of the day He could have called a time out. Ok, we’re not going to do this, but obviously that is not why He was sent here.

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<sup>63</sup> Mt. 9:1ff.; Mk. 2:1ff.; Lk. 5:17ff.

<sup>64</sup> Jn 5:2ff.

<sup>65</sup> Mt. 8:28ff.; Mark 5:1ff.; Luke 8:26ff.

Jesus possesses supernatural and cosmic power over biological illnesses, inanimate objects, and the cosmos. Jesus can heal the sick, transmute inanimate objects into living things, and stop time to alleviate the challenges He faced. While the previous responses reveal the importance of Jesus' miraculous power for the members of this cohort, they reveal something much deeper.

Six respondents in the group *struggled to explain* what they believe about Jesus and what He did. Tom attributes a miracle to Jesus that belongs to the Exodus story. Moses turned the staff into a snake, not Jesus. Mark stumbled over his words, and struggled to construct complete and coherent sentences. Amanda commented on how difficult the theological questions were. These participants expressed little difficulty in answering the questions about their personal lives, but the basic tenets of their faith eluded them and made them feel uncomfortable. During the theological portion of the interview, they fidgeted with their hands, looked around the room uncomfortably, and slumped in their chairs. Their language and their bodies revealed their feelings of inadequacy. Anna said, "I don't know. I hope you don't think that I am stupid."

Imbalance of power could explain the respondents' discomfort. They could have felt insecure because I have an advanced degree in theological studies, and they do not, but those in the growing awareness cohort spoke in great detail about their interpretation of Jesus' life, ministry, and death. Even the non-ordained remained relaxed and confident during the Jesus questions. Some of the respondents could have felt discomfort because I make more money or work in a more professional job than they do, but even those who teach elementary school, own successful businesses, and work as high level bank managers struggled with their answers and exhibited nervousness.

The interviews suggest that the discomfort and insecurity exhibited by members in the non-innocent obliviousness cohort arises from their lack of familiarity with the Biblical narrative, which makes interpretation difficult. Furthermore, this lack of familiarity appears to stem from the lack of participation in discipleship practices such as Bible study, regular worship attendance, and service.

Six of the eight respondents sporadically attend Sunday morning worship and fellowship events, they do not attend Sunday school, and they do not serve in any leadership capacity in the church. The two who did serve in leadership positions chaired the Trustees. Amanda admitted, “I don’t know everything about Jesus, and I don’t read the Bible. The Bible is a little confusing to me, ummm. I don’t attend Sunday School on a regular basis, but when I go, I enjoy it because the discussion is interesting.” Mark confessed, “When our daughter was younger, we would go to church even when we went to our beach house, but now, well, we don’t really do that very much. I know that we probably should.” Tom’s family never attends church during the summer. Once their daughters’ schools close for summer break, they go to the beach, and they return to church when the fall semester begins.

Contrarily, the respondent in this cohort who listed the most stories about Jesus and spoke without fear or insecurity during the theological section of the interview, served as an Elder, chaired the Property Committee, rarely missed a Sunday morning service, frequently attended special Lenten and Holy Week services, and participated in fellowship events during my four years at First Christian. He also participated actively in service ministries outside the church. For example, after he attended a spiritual retreat, the Walk

to Emmaus, he recruited and supported newcomers in the years following his retreat.<sup>66</sup> Commitment to regular worship, personal Bible study, and service appears to create a more comprehensive knowledge of the biblical story, and a more nuanced interpretation than those who do not display a commitment to those activities. The data collected from the growing awareness cohort supports this interpretation.

### *GROWING AWARENESS*

The theology of those in the growing awareness cohort parallel Irenaeus' Type C theology most frequently, and they sometimes draw from Type B, but rarely from Type A. This group exhibits the most detailed understanding and interpretation of Jesus and His ministry, and they describe Jesus as someone who embodies God's love, crosses over social boundaries, confronts the injustice perpetuated by political and religious leaders, lived a humble life of ministry among the poor and outcast, and set us free to live in relationship with God and others. All these identifications of Jesus place Him in close relationship to God and humans, and this relational quality sets the theology of this cohort apart from the non-innocent oblivious cohort.

The members of this group see Jesus in context. Unlike the other group which sees and interprets Jesus in a vacuum, the members of this cohort give detailed explanations of the social context in which Jesus lived and ministered. Rachel explained that Jesus,

Was born into a poor family. He wasn't born to somebody famous, or in a royal household, or something like that . . . I think that was designed by God. I think that His travels were important. All of His traveling around. He was a person of the common person. In going from town to town, if

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<sup>66</sup> The official Emmaus website, [www.upperroom/emmaus.org](http://www.upperroom/emmaus.org), explains, "The Walk to Emmaus is a spiritual renewal program intended to strengthen the local church through the development of Christian disciples and leaders. The program's approach seriously considers the model of Christ's servanthood and encourages Christ's disciples to act in ways appropriate to being "a servant of all."

you do that, you aren't going to meet the people in the limos, you are going to meet the people who are walking that same walk. And I think that is a major part of who Jesus is.

For this group, Jesus inhabits a specific space with real people, and His movement within detailed space has purpose. He goes from town to town so that He can enter into relationship with the poor, sick, and needy. Jesus was, by God's design, born among the poor and ministered to the poor.

At the heart of this cohort's theology is Jesus' relationship to God and others. Its members speak very specifically about who Jesus ministered to, the nature of the community He established in his ministry, and who He struggled against. When I asked Thomas about the important events in Jesus' life, he immediately responded,

Well, I think, simply stopping and talking to someone . . . He just stops and visits with someone as He is walking along the road or the countryside, knowing that He was speaking to a woman, or a Samaritan, or whomever, uhh, and doing that rather intentionally.

Jesus chooses to form relationships with people on the margins: women, Samaritans, and children. Mildred said, "I love the story of him asking the children to come to Him."

Jesus' relationships "Demonstrate how much God cares for creation," Thomas explains.

Robert gave a similar report of God's care for the world. When I asked him why God sent Jesus into the world, he responded,

God saw the world headed in the wrong direction from where He wanted the world to go, and that He somehow needed to come down to earth, and walk among, be among the people . . . God needed His word to be spread. He had tried through the prophets, and other media, but such was not the case.

"What was the content of Jesus' word," I asked?

"That God is a loving God."

God's love is manifest in the world through relational presence. When I asked Rachel about Jesus' mission in the world, she stated, "I struggle with the word salvation. It has the connotation, I'm in, you're out. When I talk to friends who are struggling to understand Christianity, I tell them that, ummm, Jesus opens up a path to connect us back to God. Jesus opens the door to that relationship."

Jesus was present for the poor and the suffering in the Bible, and people in this cohort think that He continues to be present for them. When I asked Mildred, "Who was Jesus," she ignored the past tense formulation of the question, and turned immediately to who he *is*, in the present, for her. He is, "The one who is always there listening. He knows what I am going to say before I say it. I can feel His presence in my life. If you have someone in your life, he or she is always there. David [her husband] was always there, and so was Jesus." While Mildred was the only respondent who spoke in such personal terms, all the members in this category believe that God works in the world through personal and intimate relationships. When I asked Thomas, "How do you learn about Jesus," he replied, "through my own experience, and other people." Six of the respondents in the category pointed to relationships with others as a primary mode of learning about and experiencing Jesus.

The Divine-human relationship reveals God's purposes for the world according to growing awareness Christians. God desires to form deep, intimate, and lasting relationships with humanity, and for humans to enter into harmonious relationships with each other. Harmony is a key part of their theology. Mildred said that Jesus wanted there to "Be peace and love between all people, and if that could happen we wouldn't have all the anger, bitterness, and frustration that goes on in the world." Elaine believes

that Jesus teaches us to “Forgive everyone, love everyone, and put others first.” Don, a trained Biblical scholar, explained God’s intended harmony in more explicitly theological language. He points to, “The egalitarian community that all the gospels clearly have Jesus teaching.” He continues,

One of the lines that always sticks in my head from the gospel of Mark, ‘The Gentiles love to lord it [power and authority] over one another, but it will not be so among you.’<sup>67</sup> And umm, that sort of radical egalitarianism and service to one another, which then follows that, the greatest in the kingdom is not the one who is going to be served but the one who serves. So that common attitude, a shared notion of service to one another, as a sort of foundation of egalitarianism in the church is crucial for me in understanding the church and Jesus.

The radical egalitarianism of Jesus’ message and life resulted in His death. Most of the members in this cohort connect Jesus’ death to His life. He died because He challenged, in word and deed, those in Rome and in the Jewish community who sat in positions of power. Don spoke at length about the ways in which Jesus “stared down Rome.” The first response he gave to the question, “List for me the important events in Jesus life,” was,

His growing confrontation . . . with authorities over the definition of the Kingdom of God and how it extends to certain people, which I think in the gospels have sort of been excluded. But it is not just that, it is also how Jesus confronts imperial power and powers that are oppressive in anyway. What stands out for me in that story is the courage it takes to do that.

When I asked him, “Why did Jesus die on the cross?”

He replied, “That is what happens when you speak truth to power . . . power reacts in that way.”

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<sup>67</sup> Mk 10:42-43

Six of the respondents gave some variation of that answer. Lindsay said, “He was a threat to those in power.” Elaine explained, “They [the people in power] were afraid of Him. They felt like Jesus had too much influence over people.”

Mildred responded, There were too many people [in power] that did not want Him to reign over them. They were afraid that He was going to take away their power. They didn’t want that. They wanted to be in control. They were so afraid that He was going to be a ruler in the sense that they were rulers.

Two respondents gave different answers. Don gave a strong Type C answer. He indicated that many clergy members he knew preferred a theology of sacrificial atonement, but “I find a much more helpful description of Jesus’ death on the cross is that God died on the cross because He loved us so much that He wanted to free us from bondage. God was the one who gave us life, and He was the only one who could free us.”

Rachel, though, gave an explanation for Jesus’ death that parallels Tertullian’s theology. She was the only respondent who evidenced any Type A theological interpretations. She said,

He came to be the sacrifice, to die for our sin, so that all the Old Testament rules and regulations could come to an end, and God’s love could come by grace. He laid His life down as a sacrifice, a living sacrifice, so that we do not have to, and now we have a path to eternal life.

With this answer, though, she admitted that she received this interpretation from the Pentecostal church that she grew up in, and that she was still trying to “reprogram” herself.

Rachel’s admission that her theology and faith was in process reveals the last important finding of this study. Unlike the non-innocent oblivious who speak of faith and belief as a set of static, unchanging ideas and doctrines, persons with a growing awareness think of and live their faith as a journey, which brings new interpretations and

demands new kinds of action. They take the faith journey very seriously. Robert provided two stories that revealed how his theological concepts changed throughout his life. He told me, “When I was younger I thought of Jesus strictly as a baby Jesus, but I don’t anymore. You know, you see pictures of Jesus, and you get a mental picture of what Jesus looks like, and you see other renditions, and early on that tended to confuse me.” Later in the interview he explained a theological issue with which he wrestled: “When I was in college, I wrestled with the concept of the Trinity, but then Fred Craddock came to campus, and he held some classes on the subject, and I haven’t struggled with it since.” Similarly, Elaine reported that her thoughts and interpretations about Jesus and Christian doctrines change frequently.

Their faith journey involves more than doctrinal commitment and changes, though. The members of this cohort report a variety of practices that place their faith at the center of their lives. During my four years at the church, I observed the ways in which each member of this group practiced his or her faith. The following practices emerge as significant elements to the faith journey of the growing awareness cohort: communal worship, personal study of Biblical and extra Biblical sources, group Bible studies, teaching, and service to others.

All the members of this cohort attend worship regularly on Sunday morning, and they attend special services throughout the Christian year. Seven of the eight members listed personal and group Bible study as a regular part of their lives. Don, an Old Testament professor, indicated that scholarship, books, and conversation with other scholars were the primary ways that he now learned about Jesus. Elaine indicated that continually searching for knowledge about Jesus was important for her. As an example,

she said, “When I left Sunday School the other day, I thought about our conversation all day. I love small group discussions.” Only one respondent in this category admitted that he did not read the Bible very much, but he attends Sunday School regularly, rarely misses Sunday morning worship, attends special Lenten and Advent services, and finds a church to attend when he is away from home.

While only three of the participants in this group listed service to others as an important way that they learn about Jesus, all the members actively engage in church and community service. Robert said that he learned more about Jesus by preparing to teach Sunday School than he did through attending Sunday School. Rachel explained, “I learn more out Jesus now through people, helping people, listening to people. There is more Jesus in listening to people than fixing them.” Thomas said that he learns about Jesus in “experiences with children in the hospital while they are suffering. They taught me about suffering and compassion.”

Even though only some of the members in this group list service as an important part of the learning process, they all serve. Three participants are seminary trained, professionally active members of the clergy. They preach, teach, administer the sacraments, and organize ministry opportunities for others. The non-clergy respondents serve on the Elders and Deacon boards, Pastoral Search Committees, Pastoral Relations Committees, Stewardship and Finance, Worship, Outreach and Membership Committees, Board of Trustees, and strategic planning groups. They help serve the homeless at church, sponsored Easter and Christmas dinners, and they host Bible studies for church and community members in their homes. Within the community, they work

on the Martin Luther King, Jr. Commission, the homeless and women's shelter boards,  
and the board of the United Way.

## **Chapter Four Concluding Reflections**

Place is complicated. The two very different groups that emerged in this study, those exhibiting non-innocent obliviousness and those nurturing growing awareness, and their varied ways of interpreting privilege, disadvantage, and theology testify to the complex ways in which place shapes and is shaped by those who inhabit it. Within the non-innocent oblivious cohort I identified *fearful obliviousness* and *benevolent obliviousness* as sub-cohorts. The *fearful obliviousness* sub-cohort frequently stereotypes black people based on previous negative experience, which serves to divert their attention from the wide variety of black experiences and lives. Fearful obliviousness manifests itself as deeply entrenched fear of the Other. Members of this sub-cohort claim to like black people, and they deny that they possess any racist attitudes, but the stories they told me revealed a different disposition. They see blacks as militant, combative, and dangerous people who have overstated the oppressive and destructive history of slavery to exploit white guilt. Additionally, this sub-cohort does not think that their whiteness provides them with any privileges. Rather they see their whiteness as a handicap.

The obliviousness of the *benevolent* sub-cohort manifests itself differently. By overlooking social disparities between whites and blacks, the members of this group believe that they are participating in the dismantling of racist attitudes. Therefore, they proudly admit that they think that race does not matter. They consider themselves colorblind, and they believe that race should not and does not play a role in social relationships and economic advancement. Therefore they avert their gaze from black disadvantage from a feeling of benevolence, and this form of aversion prevents them from seeing the real social inequalities in the community.

This sub-cohort describes black experience as “the same as” white experience. Black people are treated the “same way” as white people. They do the “same thing” as white people. They live in places “just like” whites. Contrary to the history of Wilson and the current demographic data, which reveal a huge gap between white and black income, housing conditions, and access to transportation, the inhabitants of the benevolent obliviousness type have largely ignored these differences, thus missing the suffering of their neighbors and avoiding any obligation to act. The recurrence of similar phrases, the tone of voice, and body gestures indicated that they overlook black suffering out of a sense of good will or the desire to see white people and black people as “the same.” Within the group of benevolent obliviousness cohort, we see five tendencies emerge: 1) The tendency to equate black and white experience; 2) the tendency to assume that the Civil Rights Movement solved obstacles to social goods based on race; 3) the tendency to offset black suffering with white suffering; 4) the tendency to blame black people for the continuation of white prejudice and black suffering; and 5) the tendency to overlook white privilege.

All the members of the non-innocent oblivious cohort evince a very similar theological model. Jesus as Sacrifice (Tertullian) and Teacher (Origen) best describes the Christology of this cohort, but their theology parallels Tertullian more closely than Origen. In their minds, Jesus exists as a savior who buys forgiveness from the Divine Judge who is angered by human misdeeds. They confine Jesus’ work of salvation to the blood shed on the cross as the cost of forgiveness, and they ignore the complex relationship between His ministry with the poor and His confrontation with the powers of Rome and Jerusalem.

One of the most important discoveries of this study is the non-relational nature of their theology. The non-oblivious cohort defines the human predicament and sin as “doing the wrong things,” or action that contradicts the Ten Commandments. Offense against God’s commands stands at the forefront of their theology, and any offense that we commit against other human beings goes unnoticed and unreported. Consequently, they interpret Jesus’ death on the cross as a transaction that takes place between the Father and the Son, and humans only enter the transaction to receive the salvation that Jesus’ sacrifice wins for them as individuals.

Beyond Christology, the interviews revealed an important correlation between depth and breadth of this cohort’s theological reports and their discipleship practices. The members of this cohort struggle to explain what they believe about Jesus and what He did in and for the world, a difficulty that seems to arise from their lack of participation in personal or group Bible study, regular worship attendance, and community service.

Contrary to the non-innocent oblivious cohort, members of the *growing awareness* cohort recognized the many advantages of whiteness and the many disadvantages accompanying blackness. They perceive racial disparities in work and education opportunities, buying power, treatment in restaurants and stores, access to credit, ease of travel, and the opinion of strangers. Without reporting direct knowledge of the census data, members in this group revealed detailed awareness of the ways that white people possess access to social resources that are denied to blacks. In their estimation, though, access to these resources have changed since the advent of the Civil Rights Movement. They admit that opportunities now exist that provide black people with better access to

community resources, but they do not think that those changes have created equality between the races.

Intimate experiences with black people seem to serve as the fountainhead of this cohort's awareness. They had positive experiences with black neighbors and schoolmates during their childhood, and today they maintain close personal relationship with black friends at work and in the community. These relationships opens their eyes to the presence of black people beyond their immediate sphere of relationships, and therefore they see a wide variety of black lives and experiences in the city.

Relationship serves as the core of this cohorts social framework, and their theology bears a remarkable correspondence to their social framework. Their explanations of Jesus, the human predicament, and salvation parallel Irenaeus' relational Type C theology most frequently. This group exhibits the most detailed understanding and interpretation of Jesus and His ministry, and they describe Him as someone who embodies God's love, crosses over social boundaries, confronts the injustice perpetuated by political and religious leaders, lived a humble life of ministry among the poor and outcast, and set us free to live in relationship with God and others. Jesus goes from town to town so that He can enter into relationship with the poor, sick, and needy. By God's design, He was born among the poor and ministered to the poor, and His relationship to those on the margins brought him into conflict with the political powers of His time. Most of the members in this cohort connect Jesus' death to His life. He died because He challenged, in word and deed, those in Rome and in the Jewish community who sat in positions of power and created systems of domination.

Finally, unlike the non-innocent oblivious participants who speak of faith and belief as a set of static, unchanging ideas and doctrines, persons with a growing awareness think of and live their faith as a journey, which brings new interpretations and demands new kinds of action. They take the faith journey very seriously, and they report a variety of practices that place their faith at the center of their lives: personal and corporate Bible study, regular worship attendance, and community service.

### *CONCLUSION*

Concerning racial awareness and theological typology, *relationship* stands out as the most obvious difference between the two cohorts in First Christian Church. A clear thread ties the relational theology of Irenaeus to the growing awareness cohort which sees social disparity based on race. Conversely, the non-relational theology of Tertullian corresponds directly to the non-innocent oblivious cohort which overlooks social privilege and disadvantage out of fear and “benevolence.”

It is important that we look at some of this studies limitations, especially concerning relationship. The data collected in my interviews and observation does not allow us to determine which comes first, positive relationships with black people or theologies of relationship? From where does growing awareness originate; childhood experiences with the Other or belief in and discipleship to a relational Jesus? What causes non-innocent obliviousness, negative experiences with black people or theologies of sacrificial atonement? Do non-relational theologies lead to obliviousness, or does it work the other way around?

The growing awareness cohort offers fertile ground for drawing out the fine details of these unresolved questions. The awareness of some members in the group seems to

come from childhood relationships, whereas the awareness of others seems to originate from theological ideas. For me, theology led to changed racial awareness and dispositions. Which comes first probably depends on the individual, but probing more extensively into the participants childhood experiences could help us uncover the origins of racial awareness. Asking questions about the first time they were aware of racism in their minds or in their community, and eliciting stories about how their family of origins and their childhood churches responded to black people could begin to provide data that will help answer the origin question.

Socio-economic class is another area for further study. My exploration gave no attention to the ways in which class differences affect awareness or obliviousness. Even though most of my parishioners grew up under the direction of landowners, their accumulation of education, wealth, and social status moved them into a new class, and gave them power over others. I did not look closely for a pattern between class mobility and increased obliviousness or awareness, but some of the stories I collected suggests that such a pattern may exist.

Finally, while this study found a correlation between discipleship practices and awareness of racial injustice, we do not know any details about these practices. All we can conclude is that all the participants in the growing awareness cohort frequently participate in Bible study, worship, and community service. What *kind* of practices lead to awareness, though? I grew up in a conservative Baptist tradition that valued study, worship, and service, but non-innocent obliviousness permeated my family and my church communities. A study aimed at detailing the theology and discipleship practices of non-innocent oblivious Christians who regularly participate in Bible study, worship, and

service, and simultaneously looks critically at the theology and discipleship practices of growing awareness Christians would help us uncover the practices that are the most helpful in reducing obliviousness and producing awareness.

Much work remains to be done in this field of inquiry, but I believe that continued investigation will yield important discoveries for those looking to shape theologies and practices that create a space for black people to appear within the church. At the very least, we know by the data at hand that a correlation exists between theology and racial awareness/obliviousness, and that is a step in the right direction.

## Appendix 1

### Open Ended Interview Guide

**Informant:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Demographic:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### I. Subject history

- A. Age \_\_\_\_\_
- B. Gender \_\_\_\_\_
- C. Race \_\_\_\_\_
- D. Education Level \_\_\_\_\_
- E. School \_\_\_\_\_
- F. Occupation \_\_\_\_\_
- G. Children \_\_\_\_\_
- H. Heterosexual      Gay      Lesbian      Bisexual
- I. Single      Married      Partnered
- J. Est. Yearly Income \_\_\_\_\_
- K. Age of first experience in church \_\_\_\_\_

#### II. Whiteness:

- A. Play
  - 1. List the places you go on vacation?
  - 2. What sports or activities do you or your grandchildren play?
  - 3. What do you do in your leisure/free time . . . when you are not working?
  - 4. What athletic gear or other items used for leisure do you or your family own?
- B. Home/Private Life
  - 1. Write down a list of your closest friends, the people you share your deepest emotions with: joy, sorrow, hope, pain. Write down a list of your next closest friends, people you associate with regularly: dinner, movies, church, etc. . .
  - 2. Write down a list of people you regularly invite to your house to dinner or eat out with.
- C. Work
  - 1. How do/did you get to work?
  - 2. What do you wear to work?
- D. Politics/ Public Life

1. Have you ever been pulled over by a police officer? What was the first thing that went through your mind? What happened when the officer came to your car?
2. Pretend that someone accused you of stealing their car, and you had to go to court. How would you prepare for court? What outcome would you expect?

### III. Christological Explanatory Model

- A. Who was Jesus?
  1. How did you, as a child, learn about Jesus/ when you first became a Christian?
  2. How do you learn about Jesus now?
  3. List events in Jesus' life that you think are especially important.
  4. Can you name some songs that tell you important things about Jesus. What do these songs tell you? (Present them with a list of songs or a hymnal)
  5. Can you list some life decisions that have been impacted by your faith?
  6. Who was Jesus? When you think of Jesus, what immediately comes to your mind?
  7. What did he do? What did he do that makes him significant?
  8. What was his mission in the world?
  9. Why did Jesus die on the cross?

### IV. Blackness

- A. Play
  1. List the places black families go on vacation?
  2. What sports or activities do black teenagers play engage in?
  3. What do black people do when they are not at work?
  4. What athletic gear do black people own?
- B. Home/Private Life
  1. Where do black people live in Wilson?
  2. What kinds of places do black people live in?
- C. Work
  1. How do black people get to work?
  2. What do most black people wear to work?
  3. What kinds of jobs can black people get because of their color?
  4. Are there any jobs black people can't get because of their color?
  5. Can you list any jobs that black people should not have?
- D. Politics/ Public Life
  1. Tell me about the black person you know the best.
  2. How often does he/she worship with people of a different race? Why?
  3. If he/she were pulled over by a police officer for speeding, what do you think would be the first thing to go through his/her mind. Do you think the officer would treat him/her differently from you? How? Why?
  4. If he/she were accused of stealing a car and had to go to court, how would he/she prepare for court? What do you imagine they would expect

the outcome to be? Would the courts treat him/her and differently than you?

5. Can you list any places he/she cannot get into because of his/her color?

6. Can you think of any advantages to being black? Disadvantages?

E.

## V. **Potentially Uncomfortable Questions About Race**

### A. Whiteness

#### 1. Home/ Private Life

a) Refer to the list of your closest friends. Write down their race next to their name. Use W for white and B for black. Use O for other.

b) Refer to the list of people you eat dinner with. Write down their race next to their name.

c) When was the last time you visited the home of black person? Share experience. How often?

**d)** Last time you shared a meal with a black person or family? In your home? Share experience. How often?

**e)** Where do white people live in Wilson? Why. How many black people live in your neighborhood.

f) How do you feel when you meet a black person you do not know?

g) What do you think black people you know think of you?

h) What do you think black people generally think of you, as a white person?

#### 2. Work

a) Where do you work? Back when you got this job, was it possible for a black person to be hired for the same position? Why/Why not?

b) Do you think your race places a role in what jobs you believe you are eligible for?

c) Are there any jobs you can't get because you are white?

d) Do you think your race eliminates you from consideration for some jobs? What are they?

e) Can you list any jobs that white people should not have?

#### 3. Public Life

a) When did you last worship with people of a different race? Share the experience.

b) Do you go to any places that are exclusively for white people?

c) Do you think your race affects where you can go and cannot go? Where? Why?

d) Have you ever driven to a predominately black part of town or found yourself in a situation where you, as a white person, was in the distinct minority? How did you feel?

e) Can you think of any advantages to being white? Disadvantages?

f) Some people have mentioned to me that white culture is under attack. Do you agree? Tell me about the ways you think white culture is under attack

#### 4. Christology

- a) When you were a child, what color did you think Jesus was? Why?
- b) What color do you think Jesus was now? Why?

**Appendix 2**  
**Textual Coding of Subject Responses**

Subject:

| Age | Gender | Race | Education Level | School | Occupation | Children | Sexual Orient. | Est. Yearly Income | Age of First Exp in Church |
|-----|--------|------|-----------------|--------|------------|----------|----------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
|     |        |      |                 |        |            |          |                |                    |                            |

|                                 | Explanation |
|---------------------------------|-------------|
| Events in Jesus' life           |             |
| Who was Jesus?                  |             |
| What makes him significant?     |             |
| What was his mission?           |             |
| Why did Jesus die on the cross? |             |

**Methods of Learning about Jesus:**

- First Experience in Church
- Childhood
- Adulthood

| Question                                    | White | Black |
|---|-------|-------|
| List Vacation Places                        |       |       |
| List Sports                                 |       |       |
| List Free Time/Leisure Activities           |       |       |
| How do/ did get to work                     |       |       |
| What wear to work                           |       |       |
| How get to grocery store                    |       |       |
| How pay for groceries                       |       |       |
| First thought when pulled over for speeding |       |       |
| Treated by the officer                      |       |       |
| Where live in Wilson                        |       |       |
| Kinds of places                             |       |       |
| Can get because of color                    |       |       |
| Cannot get because of color                 |       |       |
| Cannot enter because of color               |       |       |
| Advantages                                  |       |       |
| Disadvantages                               |       |       |
| Experience of being a minority?             |       |       |
| White culture under attack                  |       |       |
| Jesus' color: child/now                     |       |       |

### Appendix 3

***Number the following statements according to how well it represents what you believe. 7 represents closely your belief, and 1 does not at all represent your belief. Type each number in the bracket that appears before each question.***

1. ( ) God gave us laws to live by, and requires us to follow them.
2. ( ) God is the source of truth, and he wants us to understand those truths.
3. ( ) God is a good Father who has provided us laws that provide safe boundaries for our spiritual and physical growth.
4. ( ) Following the laws of God are the most important thing I can do as a Christian.
5. ( ) Meditation and focusing on God and understanding the truth is the most important thing I can do as a Christian.
6. ( ) Accepting God's love and loving him in return is the most important thing I can do as Christian.
7. ( ) God can actively work in the world to heal people's diseases.
8. ( ) God exceeds our comprehension, and is the source of ultimate truth.
9. ( ) God is intimately involved in this world, and He works to set right everything, that is wrong in the world.
10. ( ) God created the world perfect, and before Adam and Eve ate the fruit they followed God's rules.
11. ( ) Adam and Eve lived in a perfect creation, and they spent their days meditating on God.
12. ( ) Adam and Eve were not perfect or fully developed. They were immature, and God wanted them to grow and develop their full potential.
13. ( ) In the garden, Adam and Eve broke God's law, and that is why we sin today.
14. ( ) Adam and Eve forgot God's truth, and that is why they sinned.
15. ( ) Adam and Eve presumptuously tried to do things they had not developed the skill to do.

16. ( ) Sin is acting against the rules of God.
17. ( ) Sin is living in a way that contradicts our nature and the nature of reality.
18. ( ) Sin is a cosmic power that enslaves human beings.
19. ( ) Because God is perfect, I deserve to be punished for my sin.
20. ( ) I measure myself by how well I follow God's truth.
21. ( ) God will eventually lead all humanity into communion with Him God and each other.
22. ( ) Because we sin, we are guilty in God's eyes. God will judge us and find us guilty.
23. ( ) Because we are unwilling to pursue the truth, our lives are impoverished.
24. ( ) As a loving Father, God will lead all creation into His Kingdom.
25. ( ) Sin is a result of human rebellion against God.
26. ( ) Sin is a result of human ignorance about God's goodness and truth.
27. ( ) Sin is a result of powerful influences that make me act in ways that are harmful to myself and others.
28. ( ) Human beings sin because we are born with a sinful nature.
29. ( ) Human beings sin because we are unwilling to follow the truth wherever it leads.
30. ( ) Human beings sin because we are born into a world that is enslaved to the power of sin.
31. ( ) I suffer the consequences only for the sins I commit.
32. ( ) I suffer the consequences for my sins and the sins of other people.
33. ( ) Jesus died on the cross to pay the debt I owe to God.
34. ( ) Jesus' primary mission was to point us towards God's truth.
35. ( ) Jesus' life, death, and resurrection liberate me from the power of sin and death.

36. ( ) Jesus' blood covers my sin and grants me access to God and heaven after I die.
37. ( ) Jesus points the way to goodness and truth, and he teaches us how to rightly contemplate ultimate truth.
13. ( ) Jesus was what Adam was supposed to be, and Jesus realized full human potential and began a new creation.
- 14.
39. ( ) If I accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and savior, I will join God in heaven.
40. ( ) If I pursue the truth of God, I can communion with Him now and forever.
41. ( ) Because Jesus lived, died and was resurrected, God will welcome me into heaven as his child.
42. ( ) Those who do not accept Jesus as their savior will go to hell.
43. ( ) Those who do not pursue the teaching of Jesus will live in darkness.
44. ( ) God will eventually lead all creation into communion with him, and we will all enter his Kingdom.

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## Vita

### Education

|   |      |
|---|------|
| Wake Forest University- Winston-Salem, NC<br><i>M.A. in Religion</i>                                    | 2010 |
| Wake Forest University- Winston Salem, NC<br><i>Masters of Divinity (cum laude)</i>                     | 2003 |
| Oxford University- Oxford, England<br><i>Post-graduate Research in Medieval Theology and Literature</i> | 1998 |
| Maryville College- Maryville, TN<br><i>B.A. in English Literature (cum laude)</i>                       | 1998 |

### Experience

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)--Anna, TX<br><i>Pastor</i>                      | 2010-present |
| First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)--Wilson, NC<br><i>Senior Minister</i>           | 2007-2010    |
| Barton College—Wilson, NC<br><i>Adjunct Faculty in Religion</i>                              | 2007-2010    |
| Salem Fork Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)--Dobson, NC<br><i>Senior Minister</i>      | 2004-2007    |
| Pfafftown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)--Winston-Salem, NC<br><i>Interim Pastor</i> | summer 2003  |

### Denominational and Ecumenical Service

|   |                        |
|---|------------------------|
| Commission of Leadership Skills<br><i>Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), North Carolina Region</i>   | 2009-2010              |
| Instructor of Christian Thought And History, Lay Academy<br><i>Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), North Carolina Region</i>  | 2004-2010              |
| Board Member, Hope Station for Homeless Men<br><i>Wilson, NC</i>  | 2007-2010              |
| Board Member, Wesley Shelter for Battered Women<br><i>Wilson, NC</i>  | 2007-2010              |
| Board Member, United Church of Christ, Southern Conference<br>Regional Board and Executive Committee Member<br><i>Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), North Carolina Region</i> | 2004-2008<br>2005-2008 |

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| President, NC Ministers and Mates Association<br><i>Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), North Carolina Region</i>                    | 2005-2008 |
| Disciples of Christ Delegate, North Carolina Council of Churches   | 2004-2007 |
| Community Child Protection Team<br><i>Surry County, NC</i>   | 2005-2007 |
| Chairman, Surry County Faith Based Initiatives<br><i>A broad-based community organization modeled on the Industrial Areas Foundation</i> | 2005-2007 |
| Board Member, Battered Women's Shelter of Surry County   | 2004-2006 |
| Association of Theological Schools Accreditation Steering Committee<br><i>Wake Forest University Divinity School</i>                     | 2003-2005 |