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Justin Bailey

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Abstract

"I found this book to be clear, clinical, and devastating. I thank Kwon and Thompson for reminding us of our proper work, and that the Christian life is one of continual repentance."

Posting about the book *Reparations* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Fruit in Keeping with Repentance: A Review of *Reparations*

Justin Bailey

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Title: *Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair*

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*You're in the seventh inning, and one team is up twenty to nothing. Then we find out that the winning team has been cheating all along. And then they say, "Okay, okay, okay, we're sorry. Let's go back out and finish the game." Obviously, they're already twenty runs up....*¹

In this situation—which may hit close to home for those following the recent history of America's pastime—what would justice require? Is an apology enough, or even a change of the rules? Should the offenders be penalized; the offended given bonus runs? Can the game even continue?

The illustration captures our intuition that acknowledgment of wrongdoing is necessary, but not sufficient for repentance. When injustice is exposed, we feel that something must be done to make things right. In cases of grave injury, perhaps full restitution can never be made. But the sort of repentance that avoids further responsibility is a cheap repentance, indeed.

The history of racial injustice in the United States complicates the analogy of being up twenty runs. We may argue over the "score," as we interrogate past and present disparities. It would take a feat of mental gymnastics, however, to believe that centuries of slavery, segregation, and supremacy could be simply wiped away. The same moral intuition obtains—*repentance requires repair*.

This is the central argument of authors Duke Kwon and Gregory Thompson in their book, *Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair*. Understanding racism as a massive, multi-generational project of cultural theft, Kwon and Thompson define reparations "as the deliberate repair of White supremacy's cultural theft through restitution (returning what was wrongfully took) and restoration (restoring the wronged to wholeness)" (17).

Arguments for reparations (e.g., economic payments for the descendants of slaves) are not new.² But Kwon and Thompson's project is unique in that it focuses on the *Christian church's* responsibility to respond to this theft. "The church" here includes Christian institutions (denominations, schools, organizations, and societies—Kuyper's "institutional" church) as well as Christian individuals (Kuyper's "organic" church, see p. 102). Their argument takes a two-pronged approach. First, the biblical example of Zacchaeus offers a model of *restitution*: "when you take something that does not belong to you, love requires you to return it." Second, the biblical example of the Good Samaritan offers a model of *restoration*: "even when not culpable for a theft, the Christian has an obligation to restore what was lost" (17). The benefit here is that quibbling over *complicity* does not exempt us from responsibility, which also could be drawn from the Church's *capacity* to repair (its resources), and its *continuity* with the mission and message of Jesus (its identity).

Reparations pulls no punches. Early in the book, the authors acknowledge the felt discomfort of the phrase "White supremacy." Indeed, understanding how they define *White supremacy* is critical to understanding the argument. *Whiteness* is not fundamentally a reference to the amount of melanin a person has in their skin. Rather, it signifies a self-justifying way of living in the world centered on mastery, control, and possession.

To justify racial hierarchies, both *Whiteness* and *Blackness* had to become more than melanin. *Blackness*—inscribing intrinsic, inferior capacities to black bodies—became the way to justify their subjugation. But to justify mastery, something more was needed: "The mere fact of not having dark skin was not enough to justify the act of holding another in bondage. Whiteness, too, needed to go beneath the skin.... Where Blackness signified inferior personal capacity, Whiteness signified superior personal capacity. Where Blackness signified moral deficiency, Whiteness signified moral virtue. Where Blackness signified the margins of society, Whiteness signified a rightful claim to the center" (58). The discomfort is necessary, the authors write, for "to cease to use the language of *White supremacy*... simply because it offends the sensibilities of White people is, in our view, to perpetuate the logic of *White supremacy* itself" (16).

The use of whiteness as a social construct (vs. skin color) will mean that some readers miss the point entirely. They will think that Kwon and Thompson are reinscribing new racial hierarchies, with the roles reversed. But the authors—who are Korean American and White American—are not asking anyone to hate, much less change, the color of their skin. Rather, they are asking their readers to see and repent of white supremacy, bearing "fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt. 3:8).

The difficulty with the prescription is the pervasiveness of the disease. Racism, the authors argue, is more than personal prejudice, relational division, and institutional justice. Though each of these capture an important component, they will be limited unless we address racism in cultural terms, "as a force that shapes the entire ecosystem of meanings, values, ideas, institutions of American culture" (15). If *White supremacy* is not just a structure of *power* but a

web of *meaning*, then addressing it means participating, not just in personal, relational, or structural improvements, but in comprehensive cultural transformation.

We might make a distinction between three levels to acknowledging White supremacy. First, we can acknowledge the *history* of White supremacy. For those focused on this level, the horrors of White supremacy are mostly in the past, undone perhaps by the victories of the Civil Rights movement. Second, there is a *legacy* of White supremacy: its lingering effect, the continuing consequences of our history. In this understanding, the worst may be in the past, and things are better now, but all the damage can't be undone in a few decades. Finally, there is a third level, what Kwon and Thompson call the *culture* of White supremacy, which means that it is embedded in American social imagination, practices, and institutions. In this understanding, White supremacy did not die; it merely went underground, shifting its strategy to survive. Racism remains pervasive and ordinary, baked into everyday life. It is not a sign that the system is broken; it is a sign that the system has always been designed to reward particular people.

I imagine that most acknowledge the first level (history), and that many would resonate intuitively with the second (legacy). But it is the third level (culture) that evokes the greatest amount of resistance, especially among Christians.³ Some feel like the terms of racism have been redefined in a way that makes it impossible to escape, making you a damned racist if you notice race, and a damned racist if you don't. To others, speaking about racism in cultural terms feels nebulous and totalizing. "I can try to root out my personal prejudices," a person might say, "but how can I repent of my complicity in the culture of White supremacy?" Seeing racism everywhere and in everything might lead to "wokeism," a new fundamentalism with an underdeveloped account of grace. Still others sound the alarm about "cultural Marxism," in which aggrieved groups replace the powerful, turning the old underdogs into new overlords.

These concerns make sense to me in varying degrees. But to be honest, they don't rank very high on my list of anxieties, not least because they feel to me like ways of remaining comfortable and in control. Indeed, as I read the book, I found myself beset by two basic tensions. First, the *complexity* of racial injustice leads me to defensiveness. Second, the *severity* of racial injustice leads me to despair. How can I move forward amid these tensions?

First, the complexity. To revisit the opening analogy, our racial disparities are not something that occurred in a single game or single generation, but instead constitute a multi-generational pattern of damage. How should the sins of the past be addressed? Does time and distance dilute our responsibility? Isn't it so much more complicated than two teams, the cheaters and the cheated? How can we even begin to figure out what reparations would require, economically or otherwise? Is symbolic action enough?

And yet, in these justifications I hear the question, "but who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). Like that lawyer, I'd like clear lines to be drawn that will allow me to take my place on the right

side of the road. But Jesus's answer, the story of the Samaritan does not permit us much self-justification: "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:37). Perhaps it is better to see *Reparations*, like the parable, as a call to costly instead of cheap grace, costly rather than cheap repentance, and costly rather than cheap hope.

Yes, the work of repentance and racial justice is complicated. But that doesn't mean that there is nothing to say, and nothing to do. And in the face of the unambiguous evil suffered by Black image bearers, we need to begin by putting our defensiveness to death.

That brings us to the second tension: the severity. How could we even begin to repair the devastation wrought by White supremacy? Who could make amends for a system that took past, present, and future from Black image bearers? Can we really disentangle ourselves from sinful systems enough to do any good? Aren't there some things that can only be made right in the kingdom of God?

The answer, to the last question at least, is yes. But it strikes me that these questions invite us to remain in a posture of vulnerability, moving forward with humility. And move forward we must, working to make just institutions, to build reciprocal friendships, to reject prejudices, in anticipation of the kingdom that is coming. Our attempts will always be imperfect. But that does not exempt us from the work.

I found this book to be clear, clinical, and devastating. I thank Kwon and Thompson for reminding us of our proper work, and that the Christian life is one of continual repentance.

1. See this illustration, which comes from a survey respondent, in Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 127.
2. See, for example Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, May 22, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.
3. Emerson and Smith studied responses to racism among white evangelicals and found that they resorted to familiar (and limited) cultural tools. They tend to:
 - minimize the problem ("things have improved so much!")
 - individualize the problem ("I'm not racist!")

- obscure inequality as part of racial division (“It seems like everyone *wants* to stay in their racial groups!”)
- suggest one-dimensional solutions (“we just need to get to know each other!”)
- neglect ongoing racial injury (“look, this happened in the past; but we fixed it, didn’t we?”)

See *Divided by Faith*, 76ff. For an example of these cultural tools in action, see the [review](#) by Kevin DeYoung alongside the [response](#) by the authors.