

STUDY GUIDE

for

RECONSTRUCTING

 **THE**
GOSPEL

Finding Freedom from

SLAVEHOLDER

RELIGION

**JONATHAN
WILSON-HARTGROVE**

Part I

SLAVEHOLDER RELIGION

Chapter One: CHRISTMAS ON THE PLANTATION

1. Have you ever had an experience akin to what Jonathan describes where the good news of the gospel began to sound like bad news? If so, describe your experience.
2. Jonathan writes that the gospel he inherited is divided and that he is a “man torn in two” by institutional racism. Why is this diagnosis important?
3. Walltown taught Jonathan that a “gospel that doesn’t confront racism is no gospel at all.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. Jesus spoke to the religious elite of his time, calling out their divided faith and reconstructing the good news. Where do you find hope in God’s ability to reconstruct?

Chapter Two: IMMORAL MAJORITY

1. Can you think of a historical “fact” that you later learned was a myth created to preserve power?
2. Has your life been interrupted by Jesus? If so, how?
3. What has kept you blind and blocked from seeing the gospel?
4. How did Frederick Douglass distinguish “the Christianity of this land” from “the Christianity of Christ”? How would you characterize these two different Christianities today?
5. Jesus’ ministry addressed religion’s tendency to turn against itself, to be hypocritical, and to lose sight of God’s ways. Can you describe your own Cleopas moment, when your eyes were opened to hypocrisy or contradictions in the church or in your own life?

Chapter Three: RACIAL BLINDNESS

1. “Christians support and participate in atrocious evil,” Jonathan writes, “not because we choose to do wrong but because we think we’re doing the right thing—the *righteous* thing even.” Is self-deception a sin? What can we do to confront our contradictions?
2. Are racial blindness and color blindness the same? What does it mean to be shaped by a history of race but unable to see it?
3. What enabled Levi Coffin to see? What could empower black and white Christians to see each other?

Chapter Four: LIVING IN SKIN

1. In the beginning of the chapter, Mario shares Tupac's music with Jonathan. Have you ever had a similar experience that opened your eyes to the humanity of others and exposed your racial blindness? If so, describe your experience.
2. What does Jonathan mean when he says, "my problem as a white man was that I didn't know how to live in skin"?
3. How does being out of touch with your body or biases keep you from reading the Bible well? Does it affect how you understand Scripture?
4. Rev. Thornton Stringfellow's argument for slavery "severed his gospel from the real, bodily conditions in which people live" by "prioritize[ing] the eternal security of souls above temporal living conditions of bodies." Is this dualism manifested in Christianity today? If so, in what ways do you see it?
5. Jonathan says we carry the wounds of white supremacy in our bodies. What does he mean?
6. In Mark 9, a father who desperately wants his son to be healed brings him to Jesus. Jesus then asks a diagnostic question: "How long has he been like this?" Why is this question more helpful than seeking an immediate fix when dealing with our racial blindness and sin?

Chapter Five: THIS IS MY BODY, BROKEN

1. Jonathan opens this chapter with a story about porch sitting. What sorts of third spaces like this exist in your community? When have you been surprised by a neighbor's welcome?
2. Can the church be holy and broken at the same time? If so, how is that tension visible in faith communities you have known?
3. Thomas Dixon Jr.'s book, *The Clansman*, disturbingly construes white supremacy in the South as redemptive. What other narratives of redemption, healing, or salvation need to be questioned?
4. Jonathan believes the same voice that spoke to the Samaritan woman speaks to American Christians today: *a time is coming when we will worship across racial divides*. Do you agree? Do you see this beginning to happen? What gives you hope?

Chapter Six: A GILDED CROSS IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

1. Jonathan describes how whiteness cut him off from a whole community within his own town. Can you name other illusions of whiteness or privilege? What does it mean to be free of such illusions?
2. Ann Atwater teaches Jonathan a new way of working in the world, beginning with deep listening. What are the obstacles that make it difficult to hear and really listen to our neighbors?
3. In the 1960s, people of faith disagreed about how to change the world. How should the church discern when to work within the system for change and when to dismantle the system? How does the church awaken to its own systems of complicity and oppression?
4. How have you loved others in a way that causes disruption? How have you quarreled with the world for the sake of love?

Part II

THE CHRISTIANITY OF CHRIST

Chapter Seven: THE OTHER HALF OF HISTORY

1. How have you felt overwhelmed or depressed by reading stories of how faith has been abused? How do you hold on to hope without distancing yourself from the painful realities of our past and present?
2. How have you experienced prophetic and liberative Christianity in America? Where is the “holy ground” in your community where you can celebrate the faith-rooted freedom movement?
3. What steps have you taken to prepare yourself for pilgrimage? What steps might your community take?
4. What have you learned from John’s story about Nicodemus? Who are you in the story, and what role are you playing in Jesus’ movement?

Chapter Eight: MORAL REVIVAL

1. Accepting leadership from those most affected by an issue requires stepping aside to learn and see from another’s perspective. When have you practiced empathy and humility and learned something new?
2. Fusion politics maximizes coalition building in order to resist ways the power structure divides and conquers in order to maintain dominance. What experiences have you had with coalition building? How did this make your work more powerful?
3. What did Jonathan learn from moral-fusion organizing that he did not learn from the white evangelical church?
4. Are you ready to pick up the cross of Jesus and challenge the established order? Why or why not?

Chapter Nine: HAVING CHURCH

1. How has your church reinforced a society divided by race? How has it challenged a society divided by race?
2. What could your church do immediately to take a step closer to becoming a beloved community?
3. How has the Holy Spirit moved in your church to interrupt familiar and long-held patterns?
4. What are some characteristics of a church that has become a monument? What are some characteristics of a movement church?
5. What did your ancestors give up in order to become white?
6. When have you experienced the joy of diversity and beloved community? When have you felt the sin of divided community?

Chapter Ten: HEALING THE HEART

1. Jonathan writes, “Reconstructing the gospel can never only be about the individual.” Why are both community and personal work essential? Where are you on your journey, both individually and communally? What barriers do you experience along the way?
2. Why is it important to understand white supremacy as an inheritance versus a privilege? How do you understand your own inheritance?
3. Bob Zellner describes a malady he calls the “shriveled-heart syndrome,” which has become part of white people’s shared inheritance. How is this understanding helpful for your own soul work?
4. Discuss the monastic practices that Jonathan outlines as ways to heal: listening, staying put, and constantly reforming your life. How can you put these practices into action, both individually and communally?
5. White people “can’t just do something,” yet “must do something to respond faithfully.” This paradox can feel paralyzing, yet, like Bob Zellner urges, “You have to risk something.” What are you willing to risk? What are your next steps?

Epilogue: A LETTER TO MY GRANDFATHER AND MY SON

1. What do you think about the following statement: “Whiteness, I have learned, is a religion”?
2. How do you feel about this statement: “Even white people, I have seen, can be saved”?
3. What is the gift that Jonathan refers to when he says, “because I do not want to miss this gift”? How can we respond to this gift?

How to Use This Guide

The small group of black and white Christians who wrote this study guide suggest that a white congregation and a black congregation within the same community meet weekly to discuss *Reconstructing the Gospel*.

Music is an integral aspect of worship. If appropriate, you may choose to worship together using hymns or songs. An example of a hymn both congregations might be familiar with is, “Open My Eyes, That I May See.”

Open my eyes, that I may see
glimpses of truth thou hast for me;
place in my hands the wonderful key
that shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine!

Open my ears, that I may hear
voices of truth thou sendest clear;
and while the wave notes fall on my ear,
everything false will disappear.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my ears, illumine me,
Spirit divine!

Open my mouth, and let me bear
gladly the warm truth everywhere;
open my heart, and let me prepare
love with thy children thus to share.
Silently now I wait for thee,
ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my heart, illumine me,
Spirit divine!

Lyrics by Clara H. Scott (1841-1897)