



TWELVE
LIES

THAT
HOLD AMERICA
CAPTIVE

AND THE TRUTH

THAT SETS US FREE

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LIE 1

WE ARE A CHRISTIAN NATION

“LIFE, LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS,” as defined by the founders of America, are different from the promises of the living God. In fact, white American folk religion places life in America as preferred, even superior to the abundant life offered by Jesus.

I know this now, but I didn't know it in 2004. I arrived at Columbia University in the fall of 2004 from Brodnax, a small town in south-central Virginia. It lacked a stoplight, bank, and we had no supermarket—but there were a lot of churches. When I arrived at college, I was asked by friends if I was “Reformed” and had no idea what those in the “Christian Fellowship” were talking about. John Piper, Tim Keller, Mark Driscoll, TobyMac, and Dispatch had nothing to do with my Christianity. The Gospel Coalition, *Christianity Today*, and C. S. Lewis were not on my reading list. I had never been on a mission trip, visited a Young Life camp, or attended a church that used PowerPoint. I knew the Soul Stirrers and John P. Kee, and sang from hymnals to beats made by clapping hands and patting feet. InterVarsity, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, and many *Christian* spaces I sat in showed me a different Jesus from the one I grew up with. Over time, I started to believe that the Jesus introduced to me at Meherrin Baptist Church in Brodnax was less than ideal at best and heretical at worst. The pastors who baptized and disciplined me changed in my mind from committed men of God to *liberation theologians*, *prosperity preachers*, and *motivational speakers* who were light on doctrine. The women who taught from the pulpit went from prophetic leaders to disobedient females.¹

Of course, not everything I was taught in Sunday school was biblical, but I had never felt less than another believer, and that's what I felt sitting in InterVarsity's weekly worship service at Columbia. Black preachers were rare, the songs familiar to me were never sung, and inductive Bible study was a prized method for engaging Scripture. I came to believe that it wasn't that I worshiped *differently*, but that I worshiped *incorrectly*. The songs they sang were how we are *supposed* to sing. The way they prayed was how Christians are *supposed* to pray. "They," in this story, are my white American brothers and sisters, and the mostly international Chinese students that stood beside them. Being in a majority-white American and Chinese crowd, I felt alone, isolated, and demoralized, but I did my best to assimilate. There was one other non-Asian-specific campus ministry, so with only two choices, I went all-in. I behaved similarly in my classes but experienced a similar separateness. In a theater class there was an option to learn and perform "black preaching." Not only was the teaching I sat under as a child unbiblical, but also in this new culture it was entertainment.

Through my years at Columbia, issues of race and ethnicity boiled underneath the surface of our campus Christian fellowship. But at a retreat during my junior year, our campus minister invited a speaker to share God's vision for multiethnicity and invited us to lament, confess, repent, and practice genuine reconciliation with Christ at the center.

During a response time to the teaching that was presented, my best friend and I were made to sit on opposite sides of the room. We were reminded that in America we have racial assignments. In the United States I am black and he is white. Instead of being two people made in the image of God, navigating difference as best we can, we were thrust back into our boxes. This black-and-white divide was highlighted on campus but never this blatant. We were given the biblical mandate and social invitation to engage, which was the beginning of long nights and dialogues between us that continue to this day.

I'm grateful for the speaker's leadership, specifically her ability to guide all ethnic backgrounds through this tension and not over or around it. While I was having this hard but liberating experience, one of my white brothers was profoundly uncomfortable and openly asked for it to stop. I felt heartbroken and afraid of being pushed back to the margins. Thankfully, some continued to press in. I carry sadness to this day about the dissonance that experience caused in my heart and in the lives of those around me. There was a clear break between us, and we reflected the chasm between the two groups in our fellowship. There were those who embraced the privilege of moving on and those whose skin color and personal experience didn't afford them the same opportunity. Jesus came to break down the dividing walls of hostility, and he commissioned us to walk in that ministry. Some decided not to follow him that day. That disengagement is a part of WAFR.

Lament, confession, repentance, and reconciliation are clearly parts of Jesus' gospel and the disciples' lives, but they are not part of American Christian culture. What many practice and promote in America passes for genuine faith in Christ, but 80 percent of Christians don't read the Bible daily. Furthermore, only 1 percent of Christians in America believe we are doing discipleship well, as reported by the Barna Group.²

When we don't meet Christ in Scripture and are not regularly being disciplined by or discipling others, it is impossible to discern what being a Christian means or to cultivate a relationship with God. This lack of intimacy with Jesus and his people doesn't take into account those who claim to be Christians but see justice, reconciliation, and compassion as optional Christian activities. Nor does it capture the number of those who believe in Jesus' divinity or status as a "great teacher" but not exclusively as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Scripture, however, makes it clear that all of these are essential to the faith.

The first lie that holds America captive is that the United States is a Christian nation. This is false for many reasons. Chief among them

is that people who practice WAFR live incompatibly with biblical Christianity because WAFR is not rooted in a relationship with Jesus, compromises genuine witness to Jesus, and is void of faith in Christ. Moreover, WAFR requires the exchange of the kingdom of God for the United States of America. Jesus didn't come to earth to establish any nation as Christian—including the United States (Acts 1).

WHAT IS WHITE AMERICAN FOLK RELIGION (WAFR)?

By *white* I mean the system created to claim that those of darker skin color are inherently inferior. Over time, *white* included components of family, national background, or class. At its core, whiteness was created solely to subjugate one group of people and elevate the other. In Europe and the Americas, it is the subjugation of indigenous people, those descended from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as well as women, the materially poor, and social outcasts. *America* is the context where this ideology reigns most strongly. And *folk religion* is the common set of popular beliefs and practices under the guise of true religion but outside of the faith's official doctrines and practices. WAFR claims to be biblical Christianity.

In WAFR, early American leaders such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson are moved from mere leaders to forefathers, as if to make all Americans their descendants. Instead of being made in the image of God, we live in the shadow of the images on Mount Rushmore. The men are transformed into mythical figures. Our freedom then was not afforded by the blood of Jesus but by the blood of soldiers who took and defended our right to liberty. Our Father is not Yahweh but a nonspecific Creator, and the Bible is replaced by the Constitution. Instead of the Ten Commandments, we have the first ten Amendments, known as the Bill of Rights. The law and our leaders, not the Messiah, will set us free because we trust in our representatives and equate the president with our Savior. This narrative isn't just false, it's idolatrous; we center our identities on the accomplishments of men, not God and his will for all creation.

HOW TO PRACTICE WHITE AMERICAN FOLK RELIGION

WAFR not only deifies its leaders, but like every false ideology, it has a method of worship, praise, and sacrifice that reveal its followers' membership and level of dedication. WAFR has three key practices:

1. the regular tithe of time, money, and talent to pursue personal comfort and selfish ambition
2. covert and overt efforts to uphold a race-, gender-, and class-based hierarchy
3. corporate orientation and accountability around pleasure-seeking and consumption

These three tenets are implied in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

"Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" are promised by America and by God. But they are not the same in origin, practice, or motive. The goals and intentions of the Declaration of Independence sit in opposition to the gospel of Christ. The totality of Scripture does not endorse the marriage of God and country or the establishment, development, or practices of any country in the name of Jesus. The United States cannot be a Christian nation, because God's plan for redemption does not include a nation-state, and the beliefs and practices of WAFR are opposed to the arc of Scripture.

JESUS AND THE KU KLUX KLAN

Romans 12:1 states, "Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (NIV). And in Romans 13 we see that Jesus' followers are to remain subject to civil laws and ordinances, respecting leaders and officers. There is an inherent tension between the kingdom of God and the disorder of the world.

The early church exemplifies what it looks like to bear witness within this tension. In Acts 6, when Greek widows were overlooked in the daily distribution of food because of their ethnic/cultural identity (not Hebrew), class (widow, poor), and gender (female), the disciples went against the patterns of the day and did not judge them by the world's standards. The apostles appointed seven Greek men full of the Spirit and wisdom to take over the daily food distribution. Culturally, these powerful male leaders had every right to overlook and even cast out these widowed and impoverished Greek women, who had few, if any, rights. But according to the way of Christ, there is no basis to favor the wealthy and connected (James 2:1-13). Scripture mandates that Christians prioritize the poor and remain always in their company in loving service (Matthew 25:31-46; 26:11).

Moreover, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 is a crucial part of the apostle Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. This letter, like other narratives of the Acts church, sets up a system in opposition to the way their present world works. Paul says that followers of Christ are no longer to make assumptions and judgments based on the outward appearances of people and the standards of this world. Therefore, the founders of this country should not have sanctioned, promoted, and practiced slavery. They should not have ordained, participated in, or defended genocide and land theft. But that is precisely what happened. This heresy was not just practiced by authors of the Constitution but also by white pastors and leaders who filled the ranks of the Ku Klux Klan:

The goal of the United Northern and Southern Knights of the Ku Klux Klan is to unite White Christians through the bond of brotherhood and aid their awareness of the problems facing our country. We will show you how and when to take action (in a non violent way). The United Northern and Southern Knights of the Ku Klux Klan is a patriotic, fraternal and law abiding organization. We uphold Christian values this country was founded on. We protect these values from those who seek to remove them from our society. Our ideology is simple, self preservation and the advancement of White Christian America.³

Genesis 1:26-27 boldly states that every person is made in the image of God. And the two creation accounts in Genesis 1–2 expound on humanity’s mandate to flourish, work, rule, and create. Yet leaders of the United States, instead of being rooted in the patterns of God, instituted a pattern of life oriented around the Protestant work ethic—the view that a person’s duty is to achieve success through hard work and thrift, with such success being a sign that one has received salvation.⁴ This system, which linked human worthiness to productivity alongside a race- and class-based social hierarchy, became the measure of a person’s worth in our society. We internalize this value system and pass it on to those around us. And so it reigns to this day in the hearts of men and women, and in the institutions in which we operate and lead.

THE IDOLATRY OF WHITE AMERICAN FOLK RELIGION

The three key practices of WAFR mentioned earlier make it incompatible with biblical Christianity. These are not fringe practices or beliefs held only by a small group of people. George W. Bush famously invited Americans not to pray, give, or volunteer after the attacks on September 11, 2001, but to shop.⁵ Barack Obama, on the day of his inauguration, January 20, 2009, stated that “we will not change our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense.”⁶ These are not invitations to radical generosity and selflessness, but affirmations that we will do things the way we have always done them. The idols of materialism, militarism, racism, and sexuality will not be destroyed by the passing of time or the hard work of a few because the race-based meritocracy at work in America is central to our way of life; held together by taking Scripture out of context and applying it with no regard for what Jesus actually preached, practiced, and called us to be.

The most infamous example of this proof texting or text-jacking is the Ku Klux Klan, whose charters and members proclaim that the burning cross is simultaneously a symbol of purification of the white

race and Christ as the light of the world.⁷ Many early Klansmen were Southern Baptist preachers marrying white supremacy with their misinterpreted Bible. Religious manipulation has been present since America's formation; so has selfish ambition for personal comfort. They undergird America's brand of capitalism and pleasure-at-any-cost mentality, requiring an endless stream of financial resources and allocation of time and talent toward those ends.

Victor Lebow, an influential twentieth-century economist, said,

Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. . . . We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded at an ever increasing pace.⁸

In WAFR, wealth and power, not God's love, grace, and providence, give us identity, worth, and value. And American Catholics, Protestants, and evangelicals have absorbed, spread, and reinforced the values of WAFR and called them doctrine.

Greed, racialization, and comfort are opposed to Jesus' call to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. The unholy trinity of selfishness, racial animus, and pleasure-seeking is far from what the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit intend for humanity. But for this patently un-Christian pursuit of "life, liberty, and happiness" to continue, people must be held in a hierarchy where some are elevated and others subjugated, while the illusion of attainable equality and opportunity for progress is impeccably maintained. This social hierarchy is the structure that keeps one group protecting its power and resources while pushing the marginalized group to pursue the wealth and power it believes it must possess to belong.

Contrary to this worldview, the apostle Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new

things have come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Followers of Jesus do not love others because of an amendment, a Supreme Court decision, or an executive order; we see others through the redemptive blood of Jesus. Followers of WAFR cannot claim to hold fast to biblical teaching. Segregation by race, gender, location, and social class reveals an allegiance to the words of the American forefathers, not to the word of God through Paul.

Through Jesus, God redefines the models for family and relationships. In Christ, there is no “other” and no basis for *us* versus *them*. Through Jesus Christ, our Father made a way for all humans—his image bearers—to be sons and daughters.

Paul says,

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:26-29)

This is precisely where WAFR and its evangelists (e.g., Franklin Graham, Tony Perkins, Jerry Falwell Jr.) twist the Scriptures to pursue a false peace punctuated by the profound lack of lament, repentance, reconciliation, and justice. This false gospel, derived from popular, out-of-context interpretation, promotes unbiblical perspectives like colorblindness. *Colorblindness* is the well-intentioned, misinformed belief that by not acknowledging the present racial hierarchy we will finally be able to see one another as human and consequently live in harmony. Someone who values colorblindness might say “I don’t see color” or “Racism is a sin problem, not a skin problem.”

It would be profound and desirable if colorblindness automatically leveled the playing field, but it doesn’t. In fact, saying “I don’t see color” only makes matters worse. It strips all people, including those labeled “white,” of their God-given ethnic identity and keeps all people from

bringing their oppression and privilege to Jesus. Colorblindness is one way WAFR twists Scripture to force submission to the dominant culture, thus protecting white Jesus.

The Galatians and Corinthians passages are not endorsements of colorblindness or some amorphous goal that all people will arrive at when Jesus returns. They are a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven accessible now in Christ. These Scriptures, read alongside Revelation 7:9-10 and Revelation 21:1-8, give a glimpse of what the city of God is like.

Like a good symphony, Revelation 7:9-10 is layered with tension. There is a direct indictment against the reverse oppression that happens when an oppressed group wields power and chooses to subjugate those who violated them. In Revelation 7 we see “*all tribes and peoples and tongues,*” which must include the once powerful *and* the once powerless. In the kingdom of God, there is no oppressed or oppressor, because the power structures as we know them do not exist. The love of Christ has torn them down. All people live under the loving reign and rule of Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:18).

Followers of WAFR believe that the truths espoused in the Bill of Rights were divinely inspired and that the Declaration of Independence is what gives humanity a firm identity and inherent value. Ironically its authors did not value or extend the same rights to the poor, women, the indigenous, the enslaved, indentured servants, or certain immigrant groups. This system put in place by wealthy white males seeks to preserve their power. Their supposed powers include the ability to declare a person’s humanness, to determine who is worthy of rights, and to grant identity, belonging, and agency. This is idolatry. Any person or group claiming the ability to declare human value or worth takes the place of God. True leadership, according to Christ, entails leveraging one’s power and influence for the least of these, not for self-preservation or selfish gain.

Furthermore, to say America is a Christian nation admits a type of illiteracy and dismisses verifiable evidence that the purposes of God Almighty have been violated. To claim WAFR and biblical Christianity

are the same replaces the need for confession and repentance with a list of ways to achieve *whiteness*. This false righteousness does not include being reconciled with God through Christ!

WAFR scrubs the power of Christ-centered activism out of messages from prophetic leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to construct a motivational glass half-full progressivism in place of a vision of the kingdom of God accomplished through Christ. For example, in a 1965 speech, King said,

I believe it because somehow the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. We shall overcome because Carlyle is right: “No lie can live forever.” We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right: “Truth crushed to earth will rise again.” We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right: “Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne. Yet, that scaffold sways the future and behind the dim unknown standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.” With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to speed up the day.⁹

Regularly this quote is whittled down to “the moral arc of the universe bends towards justice” by those who speak of a manmade redemption in which Jesus is just another “good teacher”; they promise to identify and end injustices on human terms.

Let me note that those who seek the common good *are* doing valuable work. However, this oft-used quote is an example of those in power choosing to cherry-pick sermons, speeches, and prayers to maintain our culture’s present orientation around racism, materialism, militarism, and sexuality.

Conservative commentator Matt Lewis of the *Daily Beast* interviewed Michael Wear, who directed faith outreach for President

Obama's 2012 reelection. Wear says King's phrase has been used "to bless a whole range of political solutions." Lewis observes,

The famous line, Wear notes, was originally intended as a spiritual truth, not a political one. "It's very clear that, apart from Jesus Christ, the idea of a moral arc of the universe was inconceivable to King," Wear told me during a recent interview. "It only made sense within the context of a declarative faith statement."¹⁰

Martin Luther King was shot because he preached and practiced allegiance to a different kingdom and rigorously opposed our present system. The Declaration of Independence, exploitative capitalism, and the Civil Rights Act are *not* the good news of the gospel of Jesus. The idea that they are is a false gospel because it is good news for neither those on the margins of society nor those enshrined with power by this nation's founding documents.

THE GOOD NEWS OF THE GOSPEL

Contrary to WAFR, the apostle Paul says that the love and grace of God and adoption into his family is not conditioned on our gender, skin color, or citizenship, but on a right relationship with God in Christ. Therefore, confession and repentance are essential, requiring reflection on our own brokenness and acceptance that humans are incapable of righting our individual and collective wrongs by ourselves. The gospel of Jesus Christ places total trust in God, who adopts us into his family, regardless of our background. The power of Christ is evident in 2 Corinthians 5:19-20, where Paul emphasizes the redemptive role of Jesus, the profound grace extended to us, and our inability to make things right with God and others on our own.

This personal, relational, and social impact is of great importance when contrasting WAFR with biblical Christianity, because America's assorted brands of Jesus proclaim something other than the crucified King, the family he calls us to, and the kingdom that is coming. In Acts 1:8, women and men who follow Jesus are commissioned to be

witnesses filled with the Holy Spirit's power and sent to the ends of the earth. Per the Declaration of Independence, men are endowed with inalienable rights from an unnamed Creator to set up a government and pursue prosperity. The constitutional conventions and texts dictating the early formation of United States proclaim without reservation that white male landowners alone are commissioned into this new American reality. Thus the white American male becomes the ambassador of WAFR. Contrary to that decree, according to Christ, any repentant man, woman, or child reoriented to the risen Jesus becomes a son or daughter of the Most High God and an ambassador for his kingdom. These two missions and visions are not just incongruent, they are in opposition. With this vision at the core of the United States, it cannot be a Christian nation.

REPENTANCE AND RECONCILIATION

This became real to me as I sat in a Bible study reading 2 Corinthians 5. In December 2009, my wife, Priscilla, and I started dating, and the cultural narratives of our backgrounds were at play from our first meeting. On the surface I was black and she was Chinese and Korean. She was from the city; I was from a farm. She had gone south for college, and I came north for university. After college, she was immersed in Baltimore among people who looked like me, and my Christian fellowship and college experience was dominated by people who looked like her. The difference was that she was regularly willing to acknowledge and confess the places where she needed to learn and grow, and I was not. For years, when she pointed out my prejudice and bias, I dismissed her and became defensive. She could not reach me—but Jesus did one December day in 2016.

While engaging with this 2 Corinthians passage, I had to confess that when I sat with white and Asian people studying the Bible, I carried fear, suspicion, and judgment. When I sat in churches surrounded by those who didn't look like me, I was guarded in almost every way. I overexplained my thoughts because I feared being judged

and misunderstood. I made sure to state my reasons for being present and detailed my accomplishments and qualifications. My primary goal was not to fulfill what I judged to be their stereotypes of me: black, male, angry, dangerous, and uneducated.

Moreover, I was suspicious when they shared traditionally liberal or conservative views, wondering what was on their reading lists, what podcasts they listened to, and what leaders developed and influenced them. I questioned whether they're "really Christians." I judged every word they said, parsing phrases to discern if they understood not just personal sin and salvation but God's plan for systemic redemption through Christ. I struggled to feel seen or heard and to trust them no matter how honest they were.

Jesus convicted me that December day. I had to confess that I can't stand to read, see, or value the leadership of prominent pastors such as Franklin Graham and Bill Johnson, who endorse Donald Trump's policies and make bigoted comments about police brutality that dismiss my brothers and sisters of color. I harbored bitterness and rage, and the longer time passed, my desire to love Johnson, Graham, and those like them faded.

My fear of being prejudged and misunderstood turned outward, and I judged, criticized, and condemned my brothers and sisters instead of genuinely engaging with them as people made in the image of God. Instead of embodying what I longed for, I perpetuated the thoughts and deeds I detested.

Underneath my fear of being misunderstood and judged is my fear of rejection. So I rejected others first. This is false power. My destructive fear was that if I fully showed up, gifts and faults included, I would be marginalized by those with money and power. So I cast myself to the edges of society before they had the chance to. At least then *I* chose my place. This is the twisted logic that prevents me from being reconciled to others, because I'm not fully reconciled to myself. And that most certainly holds reconciliation with God at bay.

Continuing to press in, I realized this was not only true in predominantly white and Asian spaces but with black and brown people as well. When I sat in pews filled by those who shared my skin, I assumed poverty and lack of resources. I immediately moved into messiah mode and thought of all I had to offer “these people.” I took my internalized inferiority and projected it outward, crushing the image of God in my brothers and sisters because white supremacy crushed it in me. And instead of seeing God’s abundance, I saw scarcity.

With an agenda in mind, I engaged with each person who shared my skin color and tried to decipher what their agenda might be. I was there to give, teach, and save. I felt validated and valuable in this role. In “my” community I had a part and must play it because if I didn’t, I feared rejection again. So with each interaction there was an underlying question: *Is this an opportunity for us to move on up? To make it out?* When Jesus said of the religious leaders, “you blind guides” (Matthew 23:24), he is clearly talking about me. I criticized the American dream with one hand and offered it with the other. I spoke prophetically against exploitative capitalism out of one side of my mouth and tried to build my brand with the other. Jesus was the Savior for some, and the dollar was the messiah for others. I embodied the double-mindedness that broke my heart when I saw it at work in others.

Even more convicting than my pride and hypocrisy was that when I saw my non-Christian friends of any complexion or status, I kept up a wall of defense and silent judgment while waiting for a moment to invite them to Jesus. I was honest, but not too honest. I asked for input but didn’t really value their advice.

Jesus was a friend to sinners. Thus, he was a friend to me. So why did I build fences and say I can’t befriend those who don’t follow Jesus?

I came to understand that extending forgiveness and choosing to love as Christ did does not minimize or dismiss the passive and active sins of racism, abuse, violence, misogyny, land theft, greed, or exploitative capitalism perpetrated and perpetuated by others toward me and marginalized communities. Nor does it minimize or dismiss

the tragic trespasses committed against those in power. Confession and forgiveness is a proclamation that though people harm me, I will seek their health. Though they kill me, I will bless them. I will not yield to rage and wrath, but will be consumed by the ever-present love of God. Because those who are not yet reconciled to God know not the evil they do. So, as Jesus prayed for the soldier who pierced his side, I will pray for those who wish and do me harm. Not because their hatred doesn't matter, but because the love of God matters more. And because I have extended this grace, he extends grace and forgiveness to me (Matthew 6:14-15).

JESUS GOES FURTHER

This silent, personal confession to my personal Lord and Savior is where WAFR would have me stop. I would get a reward in the American church, but I am not complete in the kingdom until shalom reigns between me and those who have done me harm. Paul takes it up another level by pressing for the internal reorientation of our hearts, more commonly known as the repentance necessary to follow Jesus. Paul presses the external turns that transform our lives into windows for the kingdom of God and mirrors of Christ-likeness. Thus, I had to sit before my Chinese-Korean American wife and confess the judgment that I held over her and her family. After five years of marriage, I had to ask for forgiveness and be reconciled to my wife for the ways I viewed her friends, family, and brothers and sisters in Christ. She extended grace and modeled for me what reconciliation should look like. Seeking shalom with our families and friendships across race, class, and status is hard, complicated work—but it is possible in Christ.

In Acts 2, Peter proclaims that the miracle of speaking in tongues was not alcohol induced but instead was the fulfillment of God's promise to pour out his Spirit on all people, male and female—and this is precisely what happened as foretold by the prophet Joel. People from all nations heard the word proclaimed in their own languages

and were sent on mission for Jesus. In Acts 3 we read that Peter and the apostles continued to preach in power, heal the sick, and drive out demons. God's word went forth and did not return void but was accomplishing the purpose for which it was sent (Isaiah 55:11).

Jesus commissioned his followers to go forth and proclaim the good news, which was contrary to the mandate of Caesar and the Roman Empire. Historians of that day testified to what happened when the people of God responded not to the gods of the day but to Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Julian the Apostate, the last pagan emperor of Rome, highlighted the countercultural witness of early Christians:

These impious Galileans (Christians) not only feed their own, but ours also; welcoming them with their agape, they attract them, as children are attracted with cakes. . . . Whilst the pagan priests neglect the poor, the hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity, and by a display of false compassion have established and given effect to their pernicious errors. Such practice is common among them, and causes contempt for our gods (Epistle to Pagan High Priests).¹¹

Those in the early church lived in a conflicted but beloved covenant community in peaceful opposition to the militaristic, materialistic, racist, and sexualized culture of the Roman Empire. The church was distinct, noticeable, and uncompromising. This type of prayerful resistance and faithful witness is needed today.



Brandon and Faith Lee, who started Bird and Branch Coffee, are what faithful witnesses look like. When they sat down across from my wife and me, they had a dream to start a coffee shop that would serve as a place of refreshment and restoration. They wanted the planet, their employees, and all those who are a part of their supply chain, from producer to customer, to be better off because of their business.

It now exists for the flourishing of all, as God intended. They didn't hold the return on investment for their shareholders above the investment they were making in the laborers who harvest their beans, the baristas crafting each cup, or the planet's resources that make each drink and pastry possible. Brandon and Faith quit their jobs to ensure that those who lacked living wages and job training could have a shot at thriving in a society that says that they're unworthy because they once lived on the street, committed crimes, or were sexually exploited.

Brandon and Faith's parents did not come to America with the plan that their children would create jobs for the formerly homeless and incarcerated. That is not America's invitation and is certainly not the narrative for college-educated Chinese Americans living in New York City. But that is just one of the possibilities when two people fall in love with Jesus and choose the vision of the kingdom of God over the one offered by America. Their faithfulness is a reflection of a higher allegiance and an alternate citizenship that trumps the one that dominant culture and their family's history touts as superior.



Jesus' invitation into his redemptive life, death, and resurrection is at odds with pursuing pleasure at all costs. Even more apparent, a race-, class-, and gender-based hierarchy simply is not what Jesus preached. We discover in God's Word that selfish ambition for personal comfort and power is not the Great Commission. Living for oneself is not just inconsistent with Christianity, it's not Christian at all.

The lie that America is a Christian nation is dangerous because it distorts true Christian witness and the Great Commission to suit goals driven by idolatry. To claim that the United States is a Christian nation and that its citizens are by default Christian neutralizes the only population capable of sustaining a critique of empire—actual followers of Jesus. Because many self-proclaimed Christians exchange the mantle of truth and justice for the mantle of prosperity and political power, our hypocrisy compromises our

integrity. And thus our lives bear witness to the kingdom of the world and not the kingdom of God.

When we have been drawn out of WAFR, we must be disciplined into the new family of Jesus. We must draw distinct lines and make God's invitation crystal clear. The United States is rooted in genocide, land theft, institutionalized slave labor, and sexual exploitation. The kingdom of God is rooted in the sacrificial, transformative, and enduring love of God for all people. There are great promises and aspirations in the US Constitution, but it is neither a holy text nor does it describe the plan of God for the renewal of all creation and the restoration of shalom.

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION AND SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

- What were your dominant feelings as you read this chapter: fear, confusion, numbness, familiarity, distance, or something else?
- Where in this chapter were these feelings the strongest?
- What phrases, stories, or historical events resonated with you? Where did you say, *Yes, that's it!*
- What events or narratives mentioned were you unaware of? What did you learn?
- Where do you disagree or have concerns? What questions are you carrying?
- Looking at Brandon and Faith's story, what did you find encouraging about the steps they took because of Jesus? What dream or vision do you have because of who Jesus has called us to be that might not align with the plans your family or society has for you?

BIBLE STUDY

Read through Acts 4 and reflect on or discuss the following questions.

- What practices and habits marked the religious authorities (rulers, elders, the teachers of the law, etc.)?
- Who were the religious authorities listening to and following? What about the apostles?
- What are the goals of the apostles and religious authorities?
- How do their goals conflict?
- Were their goals achieved?
- What practices from this Acts community can you integrate into your personal life and the life of your community?

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