

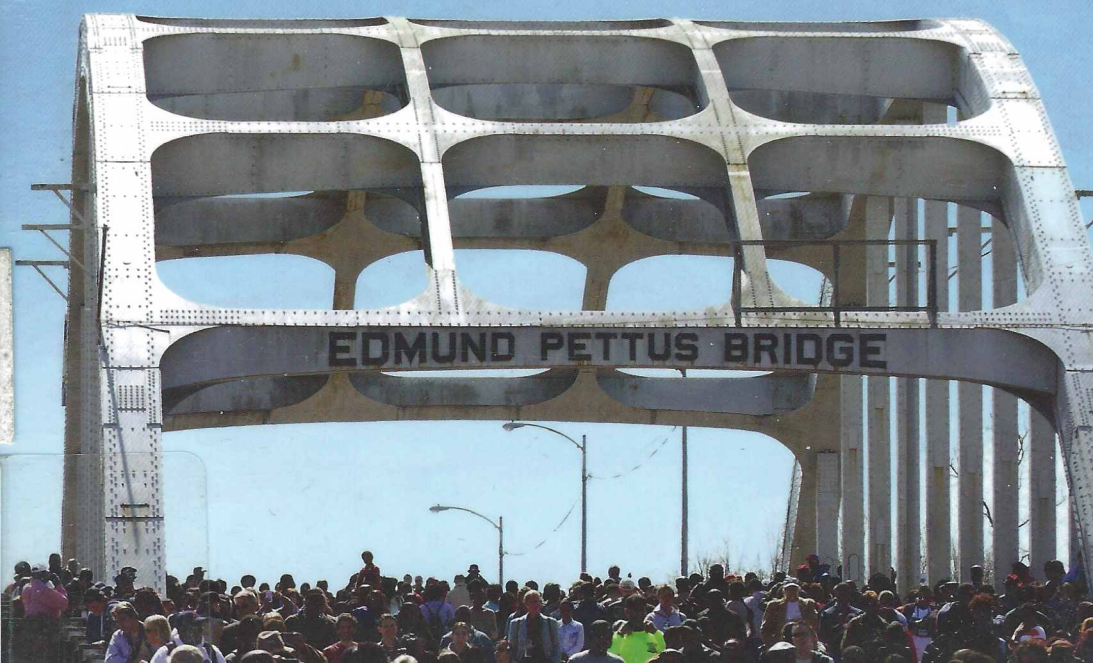
*New York Times* Bestselling Author

JIM WALLIS

Foreword by BRYAN STEVENSON

AMERICA'S  
ORIGINAL  
SIN

Racism, White Privilege,  
and the  
Bridge to a New America



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# Contents

Foreword by Bryan Stevenson   xi

Preface: June 17   xv

Introduction: You Will Know the Truth, and the Truth  
Will Set You Free   xix

1. Race Is a Story   1
2. The Parables of Ferguson and Baltimore   11
3. The Original Sin and Its Legacy   33
4. Repentance Means More Than Just Saying You're Sorry   57
5. Dying to Whiteness   73
6. A Segregated Church or a Beloved Community?   97
7. From Warriors to Guardians   127
8. The New Jim Crow and Restorative Justice   155
9. Welcoming the Stranger   167
10. Crossing the Bridge to a New America   187

Afterword   221

Acknowledgments   227

Index   233

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## 4 | Repentance Means More Than Just Saying You're Sorry

When it comes to a sin with the magnitude of America's original sin of white racism, the only adequate response prompts the deepest meaning of *repentance*—and only in the fullest magnitude of that transforming word. Yet few religious words have been more misunderstood, misinterpreted, and minimized—especially in the churches.

If the near genocide and historic oppression of America's Native American peoples and the enslavement and debasing of African peoples for profit were both sins—America's original sin—how can we possibly respond today? And if the consequences of those sins still linger in the many ways we have been discussing, what do we do now?

Spiritually and theologically, the necessary response to sins, large and small, is always repentance. But what does that mean, especially for a sin as big as racism?

Repentance, clearly, is more than just saying you're sorry, or even just feeling guilty—which are popular misconceptions of the word. The biblical meaning of repentance is far more challenging than that, and the true meaning of the word is often not well understood. Repentance is not just

expressing sorrow or admitting guilt; it is about turning completely around and going in a whole new direction.

In Scripture, repentance means literally to stop, make a radical turn-around, and take an entirely new path. It means a change of mind and heart and is demonstrated by nothing less than transformed behavior. Repentance means we now have to think, act, and live differently than we did before, when we were still under sin.

## The Biblical Meaning of Repentance

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, the word for repentance is *sub*. *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* says, "Two requisites of repentance included in *sub* are to turn from evil, and to turn to the good."<sup>1</sup> Here is the central idea of turning away from evil, turning around, and turning (returning) to God. The article points to the prophet Ezekiel's call from God to the children of Israel and to the demands and invitations of many other biblical prophets:

"Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!" ([Ezek.] 14:6); "Repent! Turn away from all your offenses" ([Ezek.] 18:30); "Turn! Turn from your evil ways" ([Ezek.] 33:11). Such a call was characteristic of the prophets (see, e.g., Isa. 45:22; 55:7; Joel 2:12–13). The Septuagint underlines this idea by usually translating *sub* by *epi (apo-)strepho* (to turn about, or to turn away from). To be abandoned are both evil intentions and evil deeds, and both motive and conduct are to be radically changed. A striking example is found in Isaiah 1:16–17: "Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow."<sup>2</sup>

Words, like intentions, deeds, and practices, are critical here. "Conduct" is to be "radically changed." And the biblical language isn't as nuanced as ours normally is about sin, especially big sins such as racism. Evil is named, as is doing "wrong," and repentance is about learning to do "right." And justice for the oppressed is named as a fruit of repentance.

1. Walter M. Dunnnett, "Repentance," in *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/repentance.html>.

2. Ibid.

We need to apply these clear prophetic commands to America's original sin of racism: from 246 years of slavery to 100 years of racial discrimination in the Jim Crow system; and from the incredibly violent white resistance to the civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s—and to every black attempt to change systematic racism to today's structural racial injustice in criminal justice, economics, education, housing, and politics, including the racial gerrymandering of voting districts and the attempted suppression of black voting rights as recently as the last election.

These “evil intentions and evil deeds” have been upheld not just by culture and politics but also by the legal systems of the United States—including the brutal enforcement of slavery, the violent application of segregation laws, the long history of racialized policing, and the racially disproportionate exercise of mass incarceration and the death penalty. Clearly, Isaiah's call to “stop doing wrong” by seeking justice and encouraging the oppressed remains as relevant today as ever.

In the New Testament, the primary word for repentance in the Greek is *metanoia*. It's such a wonderful and rich word, whose roots are also in our word “metamorphosis,” meaning a *transformation*. Repentance is what leads to conversion. Repentance “turns us from sin, selfishness, idols, habits, bondages, and demons, both private and public.”<sup>3</sup> The repentance of stopping our present path in the wrong direction and turning completely around is what opens the door to conversion.

“Repentance leads to conversion,” and “deeds consistent with repentance” are to follow.<sup>4</sup> Repentance, remember, was the first proclamation of the sermons of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. Jesus began his own ministry with the call to repent in Matthew 4:17: “From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (ESV).

A whole new order called the kingdom of God is about to break into the world, Jesus is saying here, and if you want to be part of it, to join it and him, you must go through a transformation so fundamental that Jesus would later refer to it as a “new birth” (John 3:3–8). Old things will pass away, new things will come, and a whole new community will be created.

3. Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion: Why Faith Is Always Personal but Never Private*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 5.

4. “Repentance.”



From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus led his disciples to people outside their traditional boundaries. He lifted up a “good Samaritan” from a different ethnic group as his best example of what it means to be a good neighbor and fulfill the laws of God. And, of course, one of the fundamental tasks of the early church was the establishment of a new community with both Jews and Gentiles at the center—opening up and inviting every race of God’s children to join the new community called the body of Christ. So from the beginning of the call to repentance and the beginning of the church, responding to God also meant responding in a new way to different racial groups. That is very important.

The English expression closest to the word *metanoia* is “a change of mind.” Nineteenth-century commentator Treadwell Walden wrote that *metanoia* is a change

not of essence, of course, but of consciousness. We understand by a change of place the occupation of another place; a change of condition, another condition; a change of form, another form. We can imagine the otherwise unchangeable man undergoing, in like manner, a “Change of Mind.” . . . The Mind, when placed in a new situation, thinks new thoughts, receives new impressions, forms new tastes, inclinations, purposes, develops new aptitudes.<sup>5</sup>

James Glentworth Butler, in his 1897 *Topical Analysis of the Bible*, wrote that the word *metanoia* occurs more than fifty times in the New Testament and “is one of the most significant and vital words of Inspiration; one of immense breadth in its meaning and in its relations.”<sup>6</sup> According to Butler, in the originally intended meaning of *metanoia*,

there is absolutely no trace of sorrow or regret, no single element contained in the word Repentance. Hence its translation by that word has been, from the first until now, an utter *mistranslation*. For the perpetuation of this grave error the sole excuse of the Revisers is that no other single word can fully or rightly interpret *Metanoia*. *Literally, the word signifies Change of Mind*, a change in the trend and action of the whole inner nature, intellectual, affectional and moral, of the man, a reversal of his controlling estimates and judgments, desires and

5. Treadwell Walden, *The Great Meaning of Metanoia: An Underdeveloped Chapter in the Life and Teaching of Christ* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1896), 4–5.

6. James Glentworth Butler, *Topical Analysis of the Bible: A Re-Statement of Its Moral and Spiritual Truths, Drawn Directly from the Inspired Text* (New York: Butler Bible Work Company, 1897), 443.



affections, choices and pursuits, involving a radical revolution in his **supreme** life aims, purposes and objects.<sup>7</sup>

This “change of mind,” which is central in all the commentaries **always** leads to a “change of direction.” The more one studies about and **reflects** on the word *metanoia*, the deeper it becomes in terms of transformation: turning from the old to the new. It’s like finding a new path with a new moral compass. Christ becomes the new starting point, and his new order, called the kingdom of God, will now set a different trajectory for one’s life in the world. And it is indeed a “revolution” of thought, life, values, and behavior.

What does it mean to apply that deeper understanding of *metanoia* to our cultural, economic, and political acceptance of racism, in all its historical and present-day manifestations? The need for repentance for these sins is especially acute for white churches, which have accepted them for a very long time. Repentance is the beginning of conversion for white churches on the matter of white racism.

### What Repentance Means and Doesn't Mean

New Testament scholar N. T. Wright writes about repentance and how it ultimately relates to our very humanity before God. “When we see ourselves in the light of Jesus’ type of kingdom,” Wright says, “and realize the extent to which we have been living by a different code altogether, we realize, perhaps for the first time, how far we have fallen short of what we were made to be.”<sup>8</sup>

Wright is known for bringing churches back to Jesus’s preaching and teaching of the “kingdom of God,” and not just more recent and narrowly privatized notions of individual salvation. Wright directly relates Jesus’s proclamation of the kingdom to the real meaning of repentance: “This realization is what we call ‘repentance,’ a serious turning away from patterns of life which deface and distort our genuine humanness. It isn’t just a matter of feeling sorry for particular failings, though that will often be true as well. It is the recognition that the living God has

7. Ibid., emphasis original.

8. N. T. Wright, “Believing and Belonging,” [http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Believing\\_Belonging.htm](http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Believing_Belonging.htm).

made us humans to reflect his image into his world, and that we haven't done so."<sup>9</sup>

This gets to the definition of "sin," which has been personalized and privatized by so many contemporary churches. Wright says,

The technical term for [failing to reflect God's image in the world] is "sin," whose primary meaning is not "breaking the rules" but "missing the mark," failing to hit the target of complete, genuine, glorious humanness. Once again, the gospel itself, the very message which announces that Jesus is Lord and calls us to obedience, contains the remedy: forgiveness, unearned and freely given, because of his cross. All we can say is, "Thank you."<sup>10</sup>

Too often, in many of our churches, especially evangelical churches like the one I grew up in, repentance was more related to an acceptance of doctrine than to a change of behavior. Often only internal sins—mostly private and sexual sins—were involved. What was missed is how the biblical texts on repentance focus on both a personal and a public change in attitudes, actions, directions, and purpose. I gained little knowledge from my home church in Detroit about how my Christian faith leads me to behave in the world (other than to abstain from sex). Repentance would never have been applied to the racism and racial conflicts going on in Detroit that the whole world would learn about in the Detroit "riots" of 1967. To that momentous social uprising, my church was clueless about our response as Christians, so it just reacted in the ways that most white Detroiters did—with fear, condemnation, and a complete lack of empathy.

Wright comments on the tendency to focus on personal sins—so starkly exhibited by my church as I was growing up—and explains the broader perspective that Christians need to have:

Jesus invited his hearers to "repent and believe the gospel." In our world, telling people to repent and believe is likely to be heard as a summons to give up personal sins and accept a body of dogma or a scheme of religious salvation. This is a classic occasion where we have to unlearn our normal readings (including our faith readings) of first-century texts. As we see in Josephus [a first-century Jewish historian], the phrase means, basically, "Give up your agendas and trust me for mine." This is not to say that Jesus did not give this challenge what we would call a religious or spiritual dimension. It is to insist that we cannot use

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

that to screen out *the practical and political challenge* that the words would convey . . . to give up [our] agendas and trust him for his way . . . of bringing the kingdom, his kingdom agenda.<sup>11</sup>

## Cheap Grace on Racism

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the brilliant German theologian whose influence is on the rise again in our time, speaks directly to this issue of *naming the sins* from which we must repent. For publically addressing and naming the sins of National Socialism and of Nazism, and for leading other pastors to form the “Confessing Church” in the midst of the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer was executed by Adolf Hitler.

In his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer speaks of the problem of “cheap grace” and the realities of repentance, faith, and sin. That kind of “cheap” grace—rather than the “costly” grace that Jesus invites us into—is exactly what I encountered from the evangelical church in which I was raised, especially when they ignored and denied America’s sins of racism.

Bonhoeffer writes,

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is . . . the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.<sup>12</sup>

The martyred German faith leader explains that “costly grace” means a genuine repentance from sin that is historically and specifically named. Bonhoeffer insists that “the preaching of forgiveness must always go hand-in-hand with the preaching of repentance.”<sup>13</sup>

If the Church refuses to face the stern reality of sin, it will gain no credence when it talks of forgiveness. . . . It is an unholy Church, squandering the precious

11. N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 38 (emphasis added).

12. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), Google eBook edition, 44–45.

13. Ibid., 287.

treasure of the Lord's forgiveness. Nor is it enough simply to deplore in general terms that the sinfulness of man infects even his good works. It is necessary to point out concrete sins, and to punish and condemn them.<sup>14</sup>

Unless the sins we repent of are not just "general" but "concrete," writes Bonhoeffer, genuine forgiveness is "squandered." When the church "refuses to face the *stern reality of sin*," it will have no credibility when it talks about its faith, forgiveness, and salvation. Indeed, the white churches in America lost their credence when they failed to face the "stern" realities of racism in the United States.

One wonders if that lack of credibility of America's white churches was on Bonhoeffer's mind as one example of what he was trying to say. His involvement with Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church while he was studying at Union Theological Seminary in New York City gave him a perspective on American Christianity different from that of most visiting international students in those days. I have tried to imagine what was going through the mind of likely one of the few white people listening to the sermons each Sunday at Abyssinian.

I had the privilege of writing the foreword to *A Year with Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Daily Meditations from His Letters, Writings, and Sermons*, in which I said this:

It was Bonhoeffer's radical allegiance to Jesus Christ that engendered his criticism of the narrow and false religion of his day. For him, the religious demands of German nationalism gave way to the lordship of Christ. During a stint at Union Seminary in New York City, Bonhoeffer's response to theological liberalism was tepid, but he became inspired by his involvement with the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Meeting the black church in America showed the young Bonhoeffer again that the real Christ was critical of the majority culture.<sup>15</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, faith had to be lived out in the everyday world, what he called "living in the full this-worldliness of life."<sup>16</sup> Repentance must be practically applied to the life of the world, and not just the spiritual inner life. He writes:

14. Ibid., 287–88.

15. Jim Wallis, foreword to *A Year with Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Daily Meditations from His Letters, Writings, and Sermons*, ed. Carla Barnhill (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), ix.

16. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), Google eBook edition, 486.

One throws oneself completely into the arms of God, and this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities—then one takes seriously no longer one's own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane. And I think this is faith; this is *metanoia*. And this is how one becomes a human being, a Christian.<sup>17</sup>

## Repentance from Oppression

In the years since then, some of our best black liberation theology has come from Union Theological Seminary. The great theologian James Cone writes this about repentance in his classic *God of the Oppressed*:

There can be no forgiveness of sins without repentance, and no repentance without the gift of faith to struggle with and for the freedom of the oppressed. When whites undergo the true experience of conversion wherein they die to whiteness and are reborn anew in order to struggle against white oppression and for the liberation of the oppressed, there is a place for them in the black struggle of freedom. Here reconciliation becomes God's gift of blackness through the oppressed of the land.<sup>18</sup>

For Cone, we cannot “separate love from justice and reconciliation from liberation.”<sup>19</sup> The powerful thing Cone is saying here is that participation in the struggle to overcome racism is less about skin color and more about repentance. In order for white people to join the struggle, they need to “die to whiteness” and be “reborn.” That again is the biblical language of repentance and conversion. This also means that the foundation of genuine racial reconciliation becomes the acts of true white repentance from racism.

In his 2011 book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone compares the cross of Christ to the lynching tree for black Americans and describes how the former could transform the latter into “triumphant beauty.” But that depends on the repentance of white Christians and churches from the “great sin” of white racism. Repentance and reparation provide the hope to redeem this tragedy. Writes Cone: “Yet, God took the evil of the cross and the lynching tree and transformed them both into the triumphant

17. Ibid.

18. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 222.

19. Ibid.

beauty of the divine. If America has the courage to confront the great sin and ongoing legacy of white supremacy with repentance and reparation there is hope 'beyond tragedy.'"<sup>20</sup>

One of the greatest modern experiments with repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process in South Africa, which followed the beginning of democracy in that country with the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994. The TRC "created a unique space for perpetrators of violence and their victims to meet, share their stories, and confess wrongdoing. In many cases victims forgave their perpetrators, so that healing was the outcome for both perpetrator and victim."<sup>21</sup> The church also played an important role in that process, as Julie Clawson has argued: "It was only through the church working directly with the state . . . that healing was able to begin. The church as a prophetic voice had to call the state (and its own members) to justice and at the same time grant healing through the transformative power of Jesus Christ."<sup>22</sup>

Under the apartheid regime, there were so many horrendous acts by whites against blacks that it would have been impossible to identify and prosecute all those past crimes. But something substantial and creative had to be found to begin to heal the nation's wounds and lay the groundwork for a more unified society. The grand, ambitious project of the TRC had both successes and flaws and is still morally, politically, and economically uncompleted. But it opened up a new and dynamic global conversation on truth and forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation. With the direct and crucial support of President Mandela, who believed in reconciliation over retribution, the TRC was in effect led by the only moral leader in the country with the credibility to do so: Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Here is what Tutu said about the theology involved:

Theology reminded me that, however diabolical the act, it did not turn the perpetrator into a demon. We had to distinguish between the deed and the perpetrator, between the sinner and the sin, to hate and condemn the sin while being filled with compassion for the sinner. The point is that if perpetrators

20. James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 166.

21. Nontando Hadebe, "Truth and Reconciliation," *God's Politics* (blog), *Sojourners*, September 9, 2009, <http://sojo.net/blogs/2009/09/09/truth-and-reconciliation-zimbabwe>.

22. Julie Clawson, "The Church Must Retain a Prophetic Voice," *God's Politics* (blog), *Sojourners*, October 1, 2010, <http://sojo.net/blogs/2010/10/01/church-must-retain-prophetic-voice>.

were to be despaired of as monsters and demons, then we were thereby letting accountability go out the window because we were then declaring that they were not moral agents to be held responsible for the deeds they had committed. Much more importantly, it meant that we abandoned all hope of their being able to change for the better. *Theology said they still, despite the awfulness of their deeds, remained children of God with the capacity to repent, to be able to change.*<sup>23</sup>

Tutu said that the TRC was “operating on the premise that people could change, could recognize and acknowledge the error of their ways and so experience contrition or, at the very least, remorse, and would at some point be constrained to confess their dastardly conduct and ask for forgiveness.”<sup>24</sup> This is a crucial concept for our own dealing with America’s past. It is impossible to identify and prosecute all the previous acts of brutality over the course of America’s history of white racism, but we need clear admission of those sins and an asking for forgiveness on the part of white Americans, followed by deeds and behaviors that signify real change.

If racism is a sin, the reactions to it can also be sins, and those reactions can come from all sides, even from the victims. Perpetrators or beneficiaries of such sin can be redeemed from it only by way of genuine truth, honesty, and repentance. And the potentially sinful and violent reactions to the sin of racism, by its many victims, can also be redeemed in the process of truth and reconciliation. That is what Tutu and the other South African leaders believed.

But one critical mistake that can be made in the conversation about repentance concerns the time frame of change and the fraudulent assumption that changing our responses to sin is somehow inevitable. Martin Luther King Jr. struggled with these issues of sin, guilt, repentance, and change—perhaps as much as any American leader has—and offers us some important warnings:

Let nobody give you the impression that the problem of racial injustice will work itself out. Let nobody give you the impression that only time will solve the problem. That is a myth, and it is a myth because time is neutral. It can be used either constructively or destructively. And I’m absolutely convinced that the people of ill will in our nation—the extreme rightists—the forces committed to

23. Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Crown, 2009), Google eBook edition, 95 (emphasis added).

24. Ibid.



negative ends—have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation, not merely for the vitriolic works and violent actions of the bad people who bomb a church in Birmingham, Alabama, or shoot down a civil rights worker in Selma, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, “Wait on time.” *Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals.* Without this hard work, time becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always right to do right.<sup>25</sup>

## The Hard Work of Repentance

Repentance requires action, and it is hard work. That hard work often requires a leap of faith. In his book *The Early Preaching of Karl Barth*, William Willimon, a professor of theology at Duke Divinity School, explains that Barth believed that only those who truly are willing to turn themselves over to God will ever understand the true meaning of repentance. Barth, a leading German theologian who opposed Hitler, wrote:

Those who can truly say, “The Lord is my shepherd,” have made that leap [of repentance]. They have not resisted God, who judges the world, but thrown themselves into God’s arms and become God’s captives. They have not swum with the current of opinion in the world, but against it. In them something has turned from the idols to God; they have submitted to judgment; they have let the truth rule in their hearts. . . . They have begun at least to think differently, to look in a different direction. . . . But for us it is not simply and immediately true, for it is not simply and immediately certain that we are and want to be participants in this process of transformation.<sup>26</sup>

Barth summarized the challenge of repentance: “Repentance is turning around to that which is nearest and which we always overlook; to the center of life which we always miss; to the simplest which is still too high and hard for us.”<sup>27</sup>

25. Martin Luther King Jr., “Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution” (commencement address to Oberlin College, June 1965), <http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/BlackHistoryMonth/MLK/CommAddress.html> (emphasis added).

26. Karl Barth, *The Early Preaching of Karl Barth: Fourteen Sermons with Commentary by William H. Willimon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), Google eBook edition, 91–92.

27. Karl Barth, *Come Holy Spirit: Sermons* (New York: Round Table, 1933), 67.

Sometimes the church's opposition to genuine repentance is at the heart of the problem, as it has been with white churches' lack of response, frequent denial, general conformity, and even direct support of white racism. Barth contrasts such disobedience to the call of Christ. "The call of Jesus resounds despite the church. But the church is a great, perhaps the greatest, hindrance to repentance. If we wish to hear the call of Jesus, then we must hear it despite the church."<sup>28</sup> "Despite the church" has too often painfully been my experience of working for racial and economic justice in America. But imagine how powerful it would be if white and multicultural churches could now join in helping to lead the way to repentance at a new moment in American racial history, remembering how black churches led the nation during the civil rights movement.

Reinhold Niebuhr, who was teaching at Union when Bonhoeffer was there, made clear the central meaning of repentance. "In classical Christianity," Niebuhr wrote, "it is suggested again and again that repentance is the beginning of redemption, even that it is synonymous with redemption."<sup>29</sup>

All this suggests that repentance isn't possible until we name the sin to be repented of. Admitting, naming, and confessing sin is the first step in repentance. The sin of white racism must be named, directly and publicly, especially by white people, for the process of genuine repentance to begin. Just saying we are sorry won't be enough.

The new generation of young leaders from all racial backgrounds that is calling on society to reverse the sins of a racialized criminal justice system could embody the true repentance that we so critically need.

## A Weekend of Resistance and Repentance

In November 2014, thousands of young people from around the country came to Ferguson, Missouri, for a "weekend of resistance." For many of us faith leaders, it was also a weekend of *repentance*.

I went to Ferguson as a faith leader—but in particular as a white faith leader, because challenging the fundamental injustices in our criminal justice system must not be left only to black and brown faith leaders. It

28. Ibid., 71.

29. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 70.

is indeed time for us white Christians to repent—to turn around and go in a new direction. The tragic events in Ferguson offered an opportunity to express that repentance.

In the case of Ferguson, repentance had to mean more than merely acknowledging the tragic death of Michael Brown. It also means more than lamenting the loss of another young black man or being sympathetic to his grieving mother. True repentance means *changing* the direction of the *practices* and *policies* that led to his death and to so many others. But we had seen little evidence that public officials in Ferguson and St. Louis County had the courage to alter their behavior and the systemic treatment of young men and women of color in their communities.

Several faith leaders came to participate in the process of repentance. We began with ourselves. Many black and brown young people have been left alone, subject to educational failures and economic forces that have marginalized them, a judicial system that disproportionately punishes them, and police departments that regularly brutalize them. They have either left the churches or were never there in the first place, and few of our churches had reached out to them. Some of the clergy in Ferguson were repenting of that now and promised to change that reality. Mike Kinman, dean of Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis, went even further, saying that the faith leaders not only need to go out and meet the young people but that those young people have a message to teach the faith leaders. He said:

John the Baptist is alive in the young women and men who are protesting on the streets of Ferguson every night. The call is the same. The question is—will we go out and see them. Will we heed the call to change our life, the life we all live together? Will we as the church lead our people out to this new Jordan River? Will we lead our people into bearing fruit worthy of a common life changed?<sup>30</sup>

After much confessing, praying, and singing in a Ferguson church, we marched to the Ferguson police station that had been the headquarters for much of the brutality against the black people in their community. Two hundred of us walked to police headquarters, where we were met by the Ferguson police.

30. "Local Religious Leaders Respond to Ferguson," *Religion & Politics*, December 1, 2014, <http://religionandpolitics.org/2014/12/01/local-religious-leaders-respond-to-ferguson/>.

A young black man lay down on the ground in front of the police station, and chalk was drawn around him. When he got up, a dramatic picture remained—a memorial to Mike Brown and to others who have been shot and killed. Many of their names were read in a painful but powerful liturgy, which brought many tears to those present who had lost family members, loved ones, and young friends to police violence. Together we repented those losses in the presence of Ferguson police officers, whom many wanted to hold accountable for moving in new directions.

Then, one by one, clergy approached the police officers who were blocking our path to the police station, and we began to speak quietly and personally to them face-to-face, asking them to become part of this repentance too. In my previous arrests in acts of nonviolent civil disobedience, I had never asked a police officer to join in repentance. The officer facing me was a thirty-six-year veteran of the police force. He admitted he was a Christian, too, and said the last two months had been the hardest in his almost four decades of service. “I didn’t want it to end like this,” he told me. “What would you like to see happen now?” I asked him. The officer said he hoped all this could “end peacefully.” I suggested that would take a lot of big changes. He nodded his head.

We then asked to see the Ferguson chief of police and began to move forward to do so. That’s when we were arrested. We had decided to accept the consequences of prayerful, nonviolent civil disobedience. Twenty national and local faith leaders spent the next five hours in police custody being processed in Ferguson, and then we were taken to the county courthouse in St. Louis. We had the opportunity to speak to many police officers. Several, especially some of the African American officers in St. Louis, admitted there were some real racial problems in local police departments and said they would be praying for change. Some of them even thanked us as we left.

As faith leaders we were, of course, treated very well—in sharp contrast to the ways young black men are often treated in those same facilities. We were eventually released without bond or bail, while young black men and women sometimes have to pay hundreds of dollars to get out of jail. But the action, as intended, did bring more national attention to the issues of Ferguson.

As we have discussed in this chapter, racism must be clearly named as a sin—against young black men and women, and against fairness and justice

in our law enforcement system. From a religious perspective, racism is also a sin against God, who requires fairness and justice for all God's children, and even against oneself, as it is contrary to the image of God in which we are created and hinders us from becoming fully human, conformed to the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). Quite simply, this American sin must be repented of and turned from; and the American faith community cannot rest until that repentance is done.

We marched together with young leaders in Ferguson, whose calling, as many of them put it to me, is making sure the world knows that black lives matter and ensuring that all lives are treated equally in our criminal justice system. We were arrested together—for an act of repentance.

and Asian American churches, across our own cities' racial dividing lines. is often a first and necessary step. Visiting one another's churches. hearing one another's preachers, singing with one another's choirs all be perspective- and life-changing experiences. Pastors must make racial reconciliation and justice a *regular pulpit topic* in their own churches. But all this is more than just creating "Kumbaya" moments of emotional fellowship. It's also about setting the stage for the new talks we need to have together about the changes in policy and practices we need in our country. Only with deliberate efforts and energy to build cross-racial relationships between churches can we create the "safe spaces" we need for the hard but necessary conversations we must have in order to build a bridge to a new America.

Churches can also play a crucial role in convening and hosting public conversations and problem solving in the community—gathering together believers and nonbelievers alike. I vividly remember one such conversation I attended in Spokane, Washington.

I had been invited to go to Spokane for two days, first to speak at a Christian college, Whitworth University, and the next day to help moderate an event hosted by a local church with young people from the streets of Spokane—where there had been growing crime. The increasing violence in the city had made the whole community fearful, and some of the churches in the area were trying to respond by focusing on how to help the young people involved. Several youth workers from the church had made connections on the street and persuaded many of the street youth to show up for the day at the church.

Because of the crime crisis, many leaders from the Spokane community also showed up: educational leaders, business leaders, the police chief, the chief official charged with drug policies and enforcement, several other local pastors, and many concerned citizens.

The final session of the day was dramatic. In the front of the sanctuary, a whole row of young people from the streets sat facing the crowd and were invited to *tell their stories*. And they did. One young man, who was a clear leader, spoke of how his mother was a drug addict and her welfare check was gone each month after a few days, so he had to support all his siblings. McDonald's didn't pay enough for that, he told us, so he began dealing drugs himself and now was supporting dozens of people, including his whole extended family. Another said that he

always wanted to attend college but had no money, so he joined a gang and kept studying on his own. A young woman spoke of being sexually abused at home by her stepfather, so she ran away and went to a gang for protection, but then had to become a gang girl. I listened to the stories, one after another, and watched the audience as community fears turned into community tears. Both the young street youth and gang members up front, and the audience listening to them, were multiracial—black, Hispanic, Asian, and white.

During an emotional question-and answer period, one pastor asked what those in the meeting could do to help. A young man replied with his version of what the pastors in the room knew was really an “altar call.” He said, “I don’t know, man, why don’t you just do what you do best, and throw that in here!” Then, in a succession of responses, I saw the community respond to the altar call given by the young man. The president of Whitworth stood up. “After Jim Wallis spoke in our chapel yesterday I felt I needed to come today. Now I know why. I heard many of you say you always wanted to go to college. Well, if you can meet me next week, I will give you a personal tour of our university and, if you just pass your GED [high school equivalency], and we will help with that, you can come to Whitworth for free.” A business owner was next. “Clearly some of you have some extraordinary entrepreneurial skills; I may just disagree with your personnel policies! But I have got some jobs for talented young people like you.” The new pastor of a big downtown mainline church was next. He said, “I have just arrived in town to a big church with no people inside. I heard many of you say you had no safe place to go after school and even do your homework. Well, starting tomorrow, our church will be open to you.” My favorite response came from a middle-aged woman who said, “I am not a university president, don’t own a business, or pastor a church. But I work at the McDonald’s right downtown and get a fifteen-minute break in the morning and one again in the afternoon. Some of you said you don’t ever have anybody to talk to. Well, come by McDonald’s and I will talk to you and even buy you a Big Mac.”

Time and time again, in communities around the country, I have seen congregations become gathering places for “town meetings” about things that have to be solved in their cities or regions. At our best, congregations can become “safe spaces” for those vital discussions, not about religious doctrine but about the *common good*.



The young man on the panel of urban kids asked for the right thing: “Just do what you do best, and throw that in here!” Just offer what you have. And that is the right question to ask in every neighborhood with the problems we have examined in this book. What do you have to offer and how can you offer it? That is an “altar call” for all of us.

What makes for a genuine multiracial life experience is what happens in the most personal places in one’s life. Who are our friends, neighbors, and coworkers? Who comes over for dinner? Whose homes do we go to for dinner? Which kids are over at our house, and what houses do our kids go to? Who is at our kids’ birthday parties, and whom do they have play-dates with?

Who do we have long talks with—parent to parent—about our plans and hopes for our children’s futures? Whose pictures are up in our houses, and what public figures are honored and admired in our homes and in our dinner-time conversations? What kind of art is on the walls of our homes, and what music is heard and discussed? What shows do we watch on television, and who are the role models our children see? What sports do we play and watch, and which athletes do we most talk about? What movies or plays do we see, and who are some of our favorite actors, musicians, and cultural performers? What congregations do we go to: are they mostly people of our own race, or are they as diverse as the children of God? And, very important, what is the talk in our households about race and the public events happening around the country over issues of race?

### Walking While We Talk

But of course, talking isn’t enough. We need to *talk while we walk over the bridge to a new America*. That means *doing and not just talking*. What I would like to suggest is that we “talk” while we are “doing.” There are some very critical racial justice issues that we have already discussed that require real action as well as better talking.

We have laid out what is wrong with our policing and criminal justice systems and made some clear recommendations for how to repair them. This should be a bipartisan issue and a cause around which people of different views on other issues could unite. Community policing, fair and unbiased procedures in arrests and prosecutions, commonsense sentencing