

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

by Duke L. Kwon and Gregory Thompson (2021)

See study guide for book groups at [www.reparationsproject.com](http://www.reparationsproject.com)

### **How has white supremacy stolen Black wealth?**

White supremacy has systematically stolen wealth from African Americans in two ways: through the extraction of wealth and through the obstruction of wealth. (p. 86) After the Civil War, the federal government allowed former slave owners to “reclaim all their former wealth and **paid them reparations** for the financial loss of their enslaved “property.” (p. 91)

This obstruction of wealth continued through

- The systematic refusal of banks to lend money or extend credit to African Americans, and the refusal of White landowners to sell to them.
- White riots targeting Black communities occurred in cities all over the country: New Orleans and Memphis (1866), Pittsburgh (1886), Denver (1887), Omaha (1891), Wilmington (1898), Little Rock and Atlanta (1906), East St . Louis, Lexington, and Philadelphia (1917), Chicago, Baltimore, Omaha, Charleston and Knoxville (1919)— to name but a few. Though varied in proximate cause, each of these. (p. 93)
- Due to southern political resistance, African Americans were excluded from much of the New Deal, including both wage standardization and labor unions, While Whites received federally subsidized, low - cost loans for home ownership, African Americans were excluded.
- In a practice that can only be called “White affirmative action, “between 1934 and 1968, 98 percent of federally subsidized mortgage loans were given to White Americans” (p. 94)

Understanding each of these forms of theft is crucial, not only because it helps us see the truth about White supremacy but also because it shows us the work that must be done if we are to finally repair the damage wrought by its centuries of plunder. (p. 95)

### **The effects of White supremacy**

Theft—the compound “thefts of truth, power, and wealth”—is the central effect of White supremacy on the lives of African Americans. “At the heart of our case for reparations lies the claim that White supremacy is best understood as a massive, multigenerational project of cultural theft. In the name of White supremacy, America stole Black bodies from their homes, stole the labor from those bodies, stole the fruit of that labor, stole the wealth from that fruit, and in the end stole the very memory of those it victimized from the annals of the earth....

Without this insight, the work of reparations will continue to be marginal to the work of racial healing. (p. 74)

“The most important truths about African Americans were simply erased from the story. Erased were the truths of the dignity of their humanity. The crime of their abduction. The violence of their subjugation. The endlessness of their captivity. The rape of their bodies. The significance of their labor. The sale of their children. The desperation of their resistance. The courage of their

flight. The resilience of their communities. The shrewdness of their institutions. The brilliance of their art. The power of their religion. The legitimacy of their demands. The triumph of their mere survival.... White Americans cloaked Blackness in the guise of inhumanity, why it hid Black labor behind walls, directed them to hidden staircases, banished them to separate restrooms and schools, zoned them in different neighborhoods, excluded them from children's textbooks, and buried them in unmarked fields. (p. 81)

### **Why should historically white churches engage in reparations?**

“One of the glories of the Christian church is that, even in the midst of its deep brokenness, it takes the work of love seriously....This love expresses itself as the burden, in the words of Jesus, to “proclaim good news to the poor” and “liberty to the captives” (Luke 4:18). The church is a community that, by its very nature, exists to address harms like those done by White supremacy.

The church's history of commitment to the “ethic of culpability and restitution, embodied most clearly in the story of Zacchaeus, is a crucial element of any Christian vision of reparations.” The “ethic of restoration, seen clearly in the story of the good Samaritan, is a crucial element of the Christian vision of reparations. These two ethical responses to theft — restitution where we are culpable and restoration even where we are not — provide a broad foundation for a Christian account of reparations....Reparations is best understood as the deliberate repair of White supremacy's cultural theft through restitution (returning what one wrongfully took) and restoration (restoring the wronged to wholeness) (p. 17).

“To view White supremacy as a theft of not only wealth but also truth and power...is also a more accurate account of White supremacy's devastating cultural reach. To frame the harm done by American White supremacy in exclusively economic terms is actually to obscure the nature and magnitude of that harm. In our view, this broadened perspective reminds us that the true imperative of reparations is not simply for a debt to be repaid but for an entire world to be repaired” (p. 20).

The United States government should but is unlikely to take up the work of reparations in the foreseeable future. “Because of this, we believe that churches can and should play an important role in catalyzing and demonstrating the power of reparations in our communities. Indeed, the church's complicated history, moral tradition, committed membership, considerable resources, local knowledge, collaborative potential, and divine power render it the perfect context for the work of reparations (p. 20).

### **How might those who contribute towards reparations be transformed?**

Kwon and Thompson describe American racism not primarily in terms of personal prejudice but in terms of relational division. (p. 34) “Our hope for ourselves is that the call to reparations will continue to change us, to shape our imaginations, our loves, and our labors. We hope to become people whose lives are inexorably bound to the vocation of repair. (p. 27) Our hope for

the church is that the work of reparations, the work to repair our communities from the ravages of White supremacy, will become central to its mission. (p. 28)

### **The call for White churches to pay towards reparations**

On the morning of May 4, 1969, James Forman dramatically interrupted the eleven o'clock service of New York City's historic Riverside Church. As Riverside's choir and congregation finished singing "When Morning Gilds the Skies," Forman strode down the center aisle, ascended the chancel steps, and read the "Black Manifesto," authored by Forman and adopted by the National Black Economic Development Conference (NBEDC). Forman declared that White churches owed reparations for their centuries of complicity in the racist plunder of African Americans and demanded that white Christian churches and Jewish synagogues pay reparations to black people in America as "the true test of their faith and belief in the Cross and the words of the prophets." (p. 98)

Today, over fifty years later, that call still awaits a robust response from the American church.

- First, the church's fundamental mission should compel God's people to become agents of repair in a world ravaged by theft.
- Second, the church's complicated history, which tells of both its faithfulness and its failure in the face of White supremacy, demands an honest reckoning and furnishes the church with both hope and humiliation before the call to repair.
- Third, the church's moral tradition, particularly its ethics of restitution and restoration, equips it with the spiritual resources with which to address this history and to begin the work of repair. (p. 101)

### **Why cash payment vs. scholarships, youth programs, housing loans, etc.?**

"Reparations are not primarily given in light of a hoped - for future; they are given in light of an actual past. Consider an analogy. Imagine that someone steals your car and, one year later, the thief is caught and a judge orders your car returned. Now, imagine that the thief protests this return on the grounds that walking seems to have done you good and, further, that you might get into an accident if you begin to drive again. You would, of course, realize that the thief's concerns about the potential consequences of returning the stolen car are completely beside the point. The point is that the car is not his, that it never was his, and that his role is simply to return what he stole and let you get on with your life. The terms of the return, in other words, are not his to dictate. The concern regarding entitlement often falls into the thief's error, and in this respect gets the matter exactly backward. (p. 25)

### **Becoming a People of Repair through Listening to African American Leaders**

Kwon and Thompson interviewed African American leaders in order to center their voices and advice on a comprehensive process of reparations. They share the wisdom of Anasa Troutman (Historic Clayborn Temple, Memphis), Taj James (Full Spectrum Capital Partners,, David Bailey (Arrabon and Urban Doxology, Richmond VA), Justin Merrick (Center for Transforming

Communities in Memphis), and Nwamaka Agbo (Restorative Economies Fund). Kwon and Thompson organize their informants' advice around four spiritual commitments:

1. **The vulnerability of community.** Taj James stressed that it is only in community that we “can experience the spiritual transformation of release from the lies of separation and supremacy.” Churches have a “moral responsibility and a missional opportunity to create structures – liturgical sacramental, educational, recreational, convivial – that seek directly and deliberately to overcome the estrangements of White supremacy through a renewal of Christian community” (p. 190)
2. **The humiliation of truth.** White churches must cultivate humility in re-examining the painful truths of “our identities, our histories, and our aspirations. David Bailey noted, “This is hard work because a lot of Christian communities don’t have the tools to handle the emotional challenges that come from facing the truth....[Reparations cannot happen until we are “spiritually formed and emotionally transformed into people who embrace the truth.” We need to create “contexts for truth,” including preaching, worship, and education. (pp. 190-192)
3. **The renunciation of control.** “The essence of reparations is giving up [white] control” (Taj James). This requires churches to interrogate “our models of leadership, about our processes of decision making, about the people who we include or exclude in these spaces, and about the missiological import of sharing power...” Justin Merrick stated bluntly that white “political, business, philanthropic, and ecclesial leaders...who exert enormous influence over historically Black communities...have to share power” (pp. 192-194).
4. **The revaluation of wealth.** Nwamaka Agbo calls for a “we economy of restorative economics” that shifts “from extraction to regeneration and from accumulation to shared prosperity.” Churches must prioritize the needs of “communities most impacted by economic disinvestment and political disenfranchisement” and give in ways that “deliberately target the damage wrought by White supremacy.” Taj James warns that “unless we become the kind of people who understand that giving wealth is a spiritual practice, we will never be a people of repair” ((pp. 194-195).

Note: “*Becoming a people of repair and engaging the practices of repair are to be done simultaneously*” (p. 196). Anasa Troutman urges, “Taking care of other people can’t simply wait on personal growth; we can’t sit by and allow people to starve and die while we sit in our book clubs. Self-transformation and service are parallel to one another” (p. 196).

