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Chains Shall He Break: A Vision for Reconciling Worship

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CHAINS SHALL HE BREAK
A VISION FOR RECONCILING WORSHIP

“Chains Shall He Break”

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SEATTLE PACIFIC SEMINARY

CHAINS SHALL HE BREAK: A VISION FOR RECONCILING WORSHIP

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A PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE REQUIREMENTS OF
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Abstract:

In the American evangelical church, there is a disparity between the worship of the church and a lack of care for the marginalized and oppressed in our society. The worship proclaims a freedom, but that freedom is grounded in personal, individual freedom and often conflated with nationalistic freedom of country and individual rights. There is also a disconnect between personal piety and justice for the disenfranchised that is not present in the biblical canon. The negative impacts of this theological framework are a loss of understanding of freedom in Christ - collective freedom, a lack of care for the disenfranchised and the least of these, and an elevation of the personal, individual relationship with Christ over the collective flourishing of the Imago Dei. Even the expression of the Imago Dei has come to mean an individual likeness of the person to that of God instead of the various collective and individual meanings that the theological term has held for centuries.

Because of these and other reasons, the American evangelical church has come to resemble something other than both its heritage and the Body of Christ described in scripture - collective, advocating, empowering, seeking justice, flourishing, reconciling. Instead, it has become a cloistered, segregated, echo chamber for those who agree on orthodoxy to retreat into and sense the warmth of their own beliefs reflected back to them in comfort and security. This is a far cry from the heart of the Father, and as I will show, this is evidenced throughout the canon. The American evangelical church largely not only refuses to see its complicity with injustice in this country, but it also does not advocate for reconciliation because it cannot accept that reconciliation is part of its biblical mandate.

Interestingly, I believe that some of the reason for these disconnects can be found within the themes of modern worship songs. As a worship pastor, I am acutely aware of the lyrics and themes presented within the songs and liturgy of the churches that these songs come from. What has been very interesting and disheartening over the last few years is to see these

megachurches support anti-biblical movements like Christian nationalism and the racism embedded within these movements, instead of advocating for biblical reconciliation within our society. Even when leaders of these movements do and say blatantly un-Christian things, these pastors stand beside them and their anti-Christian views of society and the kingdom writ large. Because of this, it is important to examine the liturgy and songs of these movements to understand how these theological disconnects continue to remain despite congregations attempting to seek God faithfully.

Importantly, the prophet Amos declares that God “hates” and “despises” the worship of the people of Israel because they do not seek the justice of the disenfranchised (Amos 5:21). This theology can and will be explored throughout the canon to show that God’s care for the marginalized cannot be severed from our worship, our sacrifice, to God. From Amos calling God’s condemnation on the Israelites, to Jesus flipping over the tables of the temple, care for the poor and our worship are inextricably linked in the biblical canon. As we are called not to forsake the gathering of ourselves together, we are called to care for the marginalized. God’s preference for the poor cannot be mistaken, and those that would call upon God while not caring for the poor are rebuked time and again.

As this same disconnect of worship and justice is highlighted in scripture, this thesis project will seek to explore these connections and offer another way by which the church may enter into worship and music that encourages biblical reconciliation, justice for the disenfranchised and corporate freedom in Christ over individual rights. To this end, it will be necessary to examine the current and historical worship and theology of the American evangelical church, showing both its roots in the abolitionist movement and its current connection to the perpetuation of systems that disenfranchise the marginalized. Secondly, this project will establish a theology of reconciliation that calls the church into a new way of being that stands with and for the disenfranchised, the marginalized and the “least of these.” Lastly, it will offer a theological framework and praxis by which the American evangelical church may

participate in the reconciling of all creation to God and to one another through its worship and through its actions in society.

Therefore, this research will offer a theological framework of worship for the American evangelical church, by which we may see our historical and current complicity with injustice in our society and participate in the spiritual action of reconciliation mandated in Scripture that justice may truly “roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24 NRSV). To accomplish this, this thesis project will seek to answer the question: *How can worship be used to help evangelical churches in America recognize and repent from their complicity with injustice in society and advocate for reconciliation in their local communities?*

Introduction:

The Disparity Between Evangelical Worship and Care for the Oppressed

As far as this project is concerned, it will focus on majority white Evangelical churches in the United States of America. This project will call this the *white Evangelical church*. Though there is not one ideology, theology, or even coherent identity of the white Evangelical church, there is a clear disparity between many white Evangelicals, who do not advocate for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed in American society. In studying the history of the white Evangelical church, it is important that we define the Evangelical movement in its modern theological understanding. The word evangelical comes from the Greek word used for the gospel: *evangelio*. Many of the reformation scholars in Europe, such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, believed in a need to rediscover the “gospel buried under the weight of traditionalism, hierarchy, and ignorance of the Scriptures.”¹ After centuries of strife within the Protestant church, another movement came that committed itself to social charity and compassion, called Pietism. Pietists believed in a need to refocus faith on a “less formal and more personal” plane. They also held charity and care for the oppressed in high regard. It was out of the Pietist movement’s successor, the Moravians, that John Wesley’s heart was “strangely warmed,” and he founded one of the earliest Evangelical traditions, the Methodist movement, in late 18th century America.² From this history, the authors of *Living Faith* note that modern Evangelicalism can be defined as having four coherent theological tenants:

1. *“The normative value of Scripture in Christian life*
2. *The necessity of conversion*
3. *The cruciality of the atoning work of Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity*
4. *The imperative of evangelism.”*³

¹ James K. Bruckner, Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, and Paul E. Koptak, *Living Faith: Reflections on Covenant Affirmations* (Chicago, IL: Covenant Publications, 2010), 17.

² Ibid, 17.

³ Ibid, 19.

It is interesting to note that the charity, care for the oppressed, and compassion that shaped the Pietist, Methodist, and other early Evangelical movements is missing in these tenants of modern Evangelicalism. However, that fact is not mere coincidence. Instead, there is an important history that brought the white Evangelical church to its current state.

The white Evangelical church writ large has shared a difficult and problematic history when it comes to advocating for the disenfranchised in our society. Whether it was siding with powerful political players or actively marginalizing and abusing enslaved Africans, non-white Americans, and the poor, the church has played a role in some of the darkest times of this nation's history. And yet, the Evangelical church emphasized a shared concern that its people felt the power of the Holy Spirit and the newness of being "born again" in Jesus. This shared orthopraxy was critical to the Evangelical experience, and the tent meetings and revivals were structured liturgically to reflect the importance of this emphasis on experiencing the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, early Evangelicals were called to a shared orthopraxy - namely that attendees who felt the call of the Holy Spirit to be "born again" would immediately be given the opportunity to sign the Abolition of slavery documents. Early Evangelical leaders such as Jonathan Blanchard were major proponents of the Abolitionist movement. Blanchard wrote that Evangelical Christians were "a poor despised set of abolitionists who were everywhere accused of 'uprooting society' to get rid of its evils."⁴ Blanchard founded several societies and held offices in the highest abolitionist movements.⁵ Likewise, Charles Finney, early 19th century Evangelical revival preacher and known as the "father of modern revivalism," would allow any person into his tent meetings, but said, "Where I have authority, I will exclude slaveholders from the Lord's Supper, and I will as long as I live."⁶ Therefore, this indicates that

⁴ Donald W. Dayton and Douglas M. Strong, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage: A Tradition and Trajectory of Integrating Piety and Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).60.

⁵ Ibid, 57.

⁶ Ibid, 60.

Evangelicals' beliefs about certain religious practices were secondary to their willingness to engage in setting slaves free. In addition, the liturgy and worship of their tent meetings seemed to reflect this genuine concern for the marginalized. This history of a socially-conscious "vital piety" that spanned denominational and orthodoxy concerns was at the heart of what the early mothers and fathers of Evangelicalism were most concerned with.⁷

However, this did not mean that many in the white Evangelical church were advocating for a just and equal society for all races. Lisa Allen notes that anti-slavery attitudes were consistent from the beginning in many denominations. She writes, "Certainly, antislavery feelings on the parts of sympathetic whites did not mean they desired a society where Black persons were fully integrated and equal; it simply meant they doubted or disagreed with the notion of enslavement."⁸ This exemplified a limited imagination of the white Evangelical church in that they could not see their brothers and sisters of color as equals. It would later be the work of the Black church in America to advocate for such a society that would live up to the promise of the Declaration of Independence that all are "created equal." This just society has still not been realized, as the white Church has played an active role in racial tensions in this country. In large part, the departure from its roots in vital piety and shared care for the marginalized have waylaid white Evangelical church from its calling.

In Robert Baird's *Religion in America*, he defined early Evangelicalism in the 19th century as having the main characteristics of a "consensus regarding the need for a decisive, affective conversion to Christ to be followed by holy living."⁹ However, Strong notes that the Evangelicalism that emerged in the early 20th century began to emphasize a different thread. These two threads became known as "fundamentalism" and "conservatism."¹⁰ The new

⁷ Donald W. Dayton and Douglas M. Strong, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage: A Tradition and Trajectory of Integrating Piety and Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 13.

⁸ Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice and Communal Righteousness*, 153.

⁹ Robert Baird, *Religion in America* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1844), 207

¹⁰ Donald W. Dayton and Douglas M. Strong, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage: A Tradition and Trajectory of Integrating Piety and Justice*, second ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 14.

fundamentalists or post-fundamentalists wanted to move away from the theological liberalism of mainline Protestantism and into “strict formulations of Biblical inerrancy, narrowly defined neo-Reformed or premillennialist doctrines, and extraneous defenses of the ‘American way of life’.”¹¹ In doing so, these new evangelicals began to emphasize doctrine and nationalism over the roots of the faith in shared emphasis on conversion and vital piety. There were two main causes noted Sandeen for this rise of fundamentalism and decline of evangelical involvement in social justice.¹²

Firstly, the post-civil war evangelicals began to emphasize a premillennial rapture that saved those born again in Christ from the destruction of the earth and its abandonment for heaven. This stood in stark contrast to the pre-civil war evangelicals who largely believed in a post-millennial eschatology. These views contrasted in that the early evangelicals believed in working for social justice toward ushering in a millennium in which God’s reign would be supreme and perfect before the judgement was to come. The outworking of this eschatology meant that early evangelicals saw real purpose and meaning in social action working toward a perfecting of our faith and bringing about the Reign of God here and now. The post-civil war evangelicals saw no need for this social action because their pre-millennial eschatology meant they would be raptured and spared from the judgment before the world collapsed. There was nothing to work toward socially because it would all burn anyway.

Secondly, the two divergent eschatologies were also aided by a new “Princeton Theology” that emphasized biblical inerrancy and a “biblical literalism”¹³. This emphasis on biblical inerrancy and orthodoxy superseded one’s right living and a shared sense of the Spirit’s movement. This also moved the fundamentalists into a pessimistic view of the world.

¹¹ Donald W. Dayton and Douglas M. Strong, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage: A Tradition and Trajectory of Integrating Piety and Justice*, second ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 15.

¹² Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 175.

¹³ Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 175.

Dayton also notes that as denominations were created in response to liberalism and revivalism, these denominations began to climb the social ladder and gained more economic and social clout. Due to this, the new “Princeton theology” could “function as an ‘ideology of the establishment’,” of which they had firmly become entrenched.¹⁴ Whatever the cause for the alignment of the fundamentalists with this new theology and eschatological views on the earth’s destruction, the result was an emphasis on fundamentalism, doctrine, and orthodoxy and a deemphasis on social justice and advocacy for the marginalized.

As the white Evangelical church has become more persuasive and powerful, it began to be aligned with the Republican Party in the late 20th century with the rise of the “Moral Majority” and other politically motivated and powerfully connected religious movements. Televangelists like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Jim Bakker used their massive audiences and influences to ward off their viewers from dangerously aligning “left-wing” social justice and calling them “back to” doctrinal orthodoxy.¹⁵ Jerry Falwell founded the “Moral Majority” in 1979 and emphasized personal morality and railed against modern-day moral injustices like homosexuality, abortion, school prayer, Christianity’s role in society, and other moral, social issues. These men began to use their authority and aligned with the Republican Party to solidify their power and codify their theology into a political movement. They also referred to themselves exclusively as evangelicals. The world at large began to see the association of their theology as the only strain of evangelical theology. This, in turn, led many socially conscious evangelicals to move away from the term entirely and into other socially-conscious denominations. Although Jimmy Carter was officially the first evangelical president and a Democrat, the Moral Majority and later the Religious Right came to define American evangelicalism and emphasized its association with American exceptionalism. This theology

¹⁴ Donald W. Dayton and Douglas M. Strong, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage: A Tradition and Trajectory of Integrating Piety and Justice*, second ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 178.

¹⁵ Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), 14.

affirmation of American exceptionalism would lead to an insidious and idolatrous new ideology: Christian Nationalism.¹⁶

Christian Nationalism, simply understood, is a “cultural framework - a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems - that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life.”¹⁷ This definition of Christianity represents something other than religion. It assumes “nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism.”¹⁸ Put succinctly, it is an insidious, idolatrous, bastardization of Christianity that seeks to proclaim and maintain America as a “Christian Nation” in its identity, history, symbolism, values, laws and public policies. Unfortunately, Christian Nationalism has invaded American Evangelicalism in a powerful and pervasive way. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the ways that Christian Nationalism and other idols display themselves in the American Evangelical church.

As Whitehead and Perry show in their exhaustive surveys taken over the last decade, 54.9% of Evangelicals embrace Christian Nationalism and would be considered “Ambassadors” of the ideology.¹⁹ They define Ambassadors as being, “wholly supportive of Christian nationalism.”²⁰ Within their data, the strongest correlation to racism, anti-immigrant stances, and far-right conservative ideologies is not a connection to Evangelicalism. Instead, the strongest correlation is of Christian Nationalists to these toxic ideologies. Therefore, one cannot simply conflate all of Evangelicalism with Christian Nationalism. The waywardness of the American Evangelical church lies in this distinction. Those churches, pastors, elders, bishops, and lay leaders who have believed and espoused the toxic ideology of Christian Nationalism are often the loudest and most strident voices and represent the image that has

¹⁶ Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), 24

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 10, 30.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 35.

been cultivated of the American Evangelical church in the late 20th century and especially as the 21st century has begun.

For many Christian Nationalists, this decades-long work to bring Christian nationalism to the highest offices of American government culminated in the election of the 45th President of the United States, Donald John Trump. Still, many evangelicals - and particularly people of color - were shocked and appalled that their brothers and sisters would vote for and support a man like Donald Trump, whose lack of integrity and moral fiber had become synonymous with his brand. Phrases like “you’re fired,” “Grab them by the p****,” “Lock her up,” and “Build the Wall” encapsulated Donald Trump’s brand of toxic masculinity chauvinism, ruthless consumerism, abuse of the poor, denigration of the immigrant, and other anti-biblical ideologies. Still, studies show that 81% of self-identified White Evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in 2016 compared to just 16% for Hillary Clinton.²¹ And yet, though only half of Evangelicals identified as Christian Nationalists, nearly 80% of White Evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in 2016. This shows that Christian Nationalism and other idolatrous ideologies like structural racism, patriarchy, white supremacy and others have embedded themselves deeply within many white Evangelical churches and communities via their political affiliations.

Beyond political affiliations and idolatrous ideologies, the white evangelical church shows a distinct lack of care for the poor within its stewardship. The Washington Post in connection with the Kaiser foundation released a survey in 2017, which showed some very compelling results. The survey showed that religion is a significant indicator of how an American person understands poverty.²² The survey showed that, “Christians, especially white evangelical Christians, are much more likely than non-Christians to view poverty as the result of individual failings.” As the white Evangelical church has aligned itself both with the

²¹ Jason Husser, “Why Trump Is Reliant on White Evangelicals,” Brookings (Brookings, March 9, 2022), <http://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/04/06/why-trump-is-reliant-on-white-evangelicals/>.

²² Julie Zauzmer, “Christians Are More than Twice as Likely to Blame a Person's Poverty on Lack of Effort,” The Washington Post (WP Company, October 27, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/03/christians-are-more-than-twice-as-likely-to-blame-a-persons-poverty-on-lack-of-effort/>.

Religious Right and its trickle-down economic theories as well as with the pre-millennial doctrine, it has become increasingly less concerned with the poor. The survey showed that 63% of Republicans blamed “lack of effort” on those in poverty, while just 26% of Democrats did. Though overall 40% of Christians blamed lack of effort, that number was 53% of white Evangelicals. The difference was even more stark when race was considered. Only 32% of black Christians blamed lack of effort, while 64% blamed circumstances. Clearly, the white Evangelical church does not see the mandate to care for the poor that we find in Scripture applying to itself. Historian, Helen Rhee, cited pre-millennial doctrine as a primary driver of this theology. Rhee told the Post that Evangelicals believe “the world is already lost. Things are going to get worse and worse ...You’ve got to just focus on what is important – that is, salvation of the soul.”²³

Likewise, a survey in Christianity Today shows that overall, Christians donate an annual average of 2.5% of their income. This is significantly lower than the biblical call to tithe 10%, but beyond this is, it is also lower than their non-Christian counterparts who averaged more than 5% giving annually. This indictment on the church becomes even more stark when we look at the Evangelical church. The data shows that 37% of evangelicals don’t give to church at all. However, the greatest indictment of this information is that American churches give away less than 1% on average to the poor.²⁴ The Pew Research Center conducted an exhaustive survey in 2011 that showed the connection of Evangelical beliefs and practices. In their research, Evangelical beliefs and practices clearly align with the data from Christianity Today and the Washington Post.²⁵

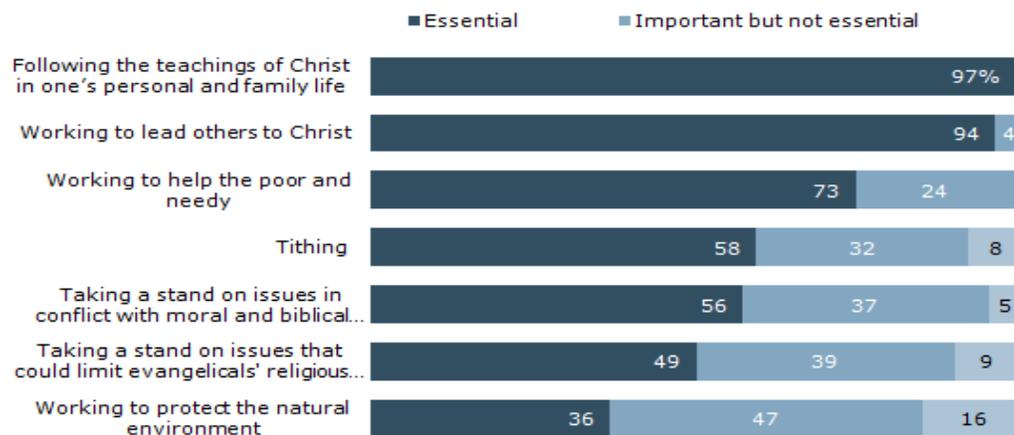
²³ Julie Zauzmer, “Christians Are More than Twice as Likely to Blame a Person's Poverty on Lack of Effort,” The Washington Post (WP Company, October 27, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/03/christians-are-more-than-twice-as-likely-to-blame-a-persons-poverty-on-lack-of-effort/>.

²⁴ John Lee, “Who Are the Most Generous? Not Who You'd Expect,,” ChristianityToday.com (Christianity Today, August 13, 2020), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/august-web-only/most-generous-not-who-you-expect-vertical-generosity.html/>.

²⁵“Evangelical Beliefs and Practices,” Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, May 31, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/06/22/global-survey-beliefs/>.

As the chart below indicates, there is widespread agreement among Evangelicals in caring for the poor, but tithing, which is so often the vehicle for accomplishing this, is only emphasized by 58% of Evangelicals. In comparing the beliefs with the giving data, we see that Evangelicals do not “put their money where their mouth is” when it comes to caring for the poor and needy. The chart also shows the lasting effects of pre-millennial doctrine in not being concerned with protecting the natural environment that will just “burn anyway.” Also, not caring for the environment disproportionately impacts the poor, who live in vulnerable areas and are significantly more likely to experience the effects of climate change.

What Does it Take to Be a Good Evangelical?



Q17a-g. No answer responses not shown.

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Beyond just an association with the Republican party and aligning with premillennial doctrine, the church, and particularly the white Evangelical church has a large problem with charity, and this data shows that. This problem with charity is part of the way that the church is complicit with injustice by both opposing political measures that would support the poor and not giving of their personal funds. As this and other surveys demonstrate, both the doctrine of pre-millennialism and aligning with the Republican party's politics have made the white Evangelical church lose sight of its call to care for the oppressed and become complicit in injustice in America.

As we explored, the white Evangelical church displays a lack of care for the oppressed by aligning with white racial supremacy. However, this is not a new concept within the church in the United States. The white church's complicity with racial prejudice and structural racism needs to be further investigated to understand this connection. Part of this complicity can be understood because of a distorted theological imagination as Dr. Willie James Jennings describes.²⁶ He writes, "Indeed, I argue here that Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination." Jennings is arguing that the Christian imagination is diseased because of the "soil" that it was planted in and that it "continues to find its deeper social nutrients." This soil is that of a colonial, racialized society "in which the Christian theological imagination was woven into processes of colonial dominance." This history still permeates our theology, history, and imagination, as well as the social constructions of race, nationalism, and individualism. The white Evangelical church is no different in this respect, in that it has not endeavored to extricate itself from this same distorted theological imagination.²⁷ Instead, it has identified itself and more closely aligned with these idols by espousing ideologies like Christian Nationalism, which is a natural outflowing of white supremacy and racism.

Understanding the white Evangelical church's complicity with injustice cannot be complete without exploring its connection to racism in America. During a now famous 1960 "Meet the Press" interview, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. declared, "I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning is

²⁶ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), 7-9

²⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 88-91. Here, Copeland agrees with Jennings description of the distorted Western theological imagination. Copeland shows how the Enlightenment impacted the theological imagination and writes, "The Enlightenment era's 'turn to the subject' coincided with the dynamics of domination. From that period forward, human being-in-the-world literally has been identical with the white male bourgeois European being-in-the-world." The "embodied presence" of the white male European "usurped the position of God in an anthropological no to life for all others." Here, Copeland agrees with Jennings in that the "soil" of our theological imaginations as westerners has been seeded within racialized societies by mostly white, European, male theologians and considering the same as the subject of theology from which we embark.

one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours in Christian America.”²⁸ Clearly, racism is deeply embedded in the soil of our country and our collective psyche, as Jennings referred to it. Sociologist Beverly Daniel Tatum defines racism as “a system of advantage based on race.”²⁹ Tatum separates racial prejudice, which all people hold in some form, from racism in defining racism thusly. This means that, although prejudice can be pan-racial, racism in a White-privileged society cannot be committed individually by those whom the system is set against.³⁰ As Ta-Nehisi Coates noted, “Race is the child of racism, not the father.”³¹ Race as a social construct has never existed outside of racism because the structure of race is inherently racist. By collectively categorizing people groups not by God-given, breathed and blessed ethnicity, and instead by physical characteristics, race hijacks the diversity of ethnicity and replaces it with a ranked order of people groups. Coates writes:

“Americans believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism... inevitably follows from this inalterable condition. In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake.”³²

This is the same for the white Evangelical church. The white Evangelical church deplores racism as a natural consequence of the world and from our individualized brokenness. For the white church, racism is separate from race, which is inconsequential and therefore, the answer is to push back on racism in individualized ways instead of corporate, structural ways. Often, the white Evangelical church will appeal to minimization of difference and “color-blind identity.”³³ Instead, racism and race are a collective legacy of this country and the early white church fathers as well. This can be seen in the white Evangelical church’s

²⁸ Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition. (New York: Basic Books, 2017), xvi.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 89-91.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 89-91.

³¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 2020), 7.

³² *Ibid*, 7.

³³ Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson, *The Heart of Racial Justice*, Expanded Edition. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 87-88.

support of modern movements like “All Lives Matter” and its direct opposition of “Black Lives Matter” and other people-of-color centric movements that advocate for specific responses to long-standing effects of structural racism. Instead, the white Evangelical church wants to look at these movements through the lens of individual prejudice, which does not allow them to identify with the suffering and oppressed in American society. The authors of “Do All Lives Matter?” write:

“In American Culture, it ought to be, as the Declaration’s signers put it, ‘self-evident,’ that All Lives Matter. But the use of the slogan as a response to Black Lives Matter dilutes the meaning and significance of the BLM movement. It does so by suggesting there is no need for a movement or dialogue focused specifically on the challenges African American people face in our country. This subtly suggests that black people are treated the same as everyone else.”³⁴

The University of Chicago conducts a study on prejudice in America regularly, and it is not surprising that the researchers find the same thing each time: “the darker your skin color, the more you will be the victim of discrimination.”³⁵ There are mountains of data that support this quote. This illustrates exactly why the white Evangelical church espousing this color-blind identity and aligning with the “All Lives Matter” movement makes the church complicit with the injustices that people of color face in our society.

As evidenced in this chapter, there are many factors - historical, theological, and ideological - that show how the white Evangelical church has perpetuated injustice both historically and currently in American society. This chapter has examined the disparity of the white Evangelical church’s disconnection from care for the oppressed via its historical and current political representation and its modern connection to Christian Nationalism. The white Evangelical church’s finances were examined to show this disparity. Finally, the white Evangelical church’s connection to ideologies like structural racism, colonialism, and distorted theological imagination were explored to show this same dichotomy, proclaiming freedom in

³⁴ Wayne Gordon, *Do All Lives Matter?: The Issues We Can No Longer Ignore and the Solutions We All Long For* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 22.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 41.

Christ, justice, and God's provision while not actively caring for the poor, marginalized, or oppressed in American society. As we have seen, these are some of the ways that the white Evangelical church is complicit with injustice in American society.

These ideologies become self-performative and ingrained within the liturgies and music of white Evangelical congregations. The worship songs of these congregations display a particular theology and belief structure around the exceptionalism of America, overemphasis on the spiritual over the physical, individual freedom, and other quasi-Christian themes that depart from the historic roots of American Evangelicalism. Still, this project contends that the way forward for the white Evangelical Church will be transformation and reconciliation by the work of the Spirit. As the following chapter will demonstrate, only God can take the white Evangelical church's eyes off the idols of politics, power, American freedom, greed, Christian Nationalism, and American Exceptionalism that has diminished the witness of the church in modern society.

Chapter 2

A Theology of Worship and Reconciliation

As the previous chapter showed, the white Evangelical Church has lost its way amidst idolatrous ideologies and is complicit with systemic injustice. However, there is a way forward for the white Evangelical church, despite the church's alignment with these idols. Though much of the white Evangelical church has strayed from the call of Christ to set the captives free, its history shows that it can stand with the oppressed. Therefore, the way forward for the church exists in the Scriptural connection of worship and justice and the theological underpinnings of reconciliation theology. This offers a theological framework of worship and reconciliation by which the white Evangelical church may find its way forward into what God is calling it to be for the world today.

In Scripture, there are many indications of the priority God places on His people's worship and its connection to their care for the oppressed and disenfranchised. These examples include Jesus flipping tables at the temple when the religious leaders are taking advantage of the poor and parables like the rich, young ruler and Zacchaeus in the New Testament. However, there is a passage that speaks clearly to the connection of worship and God's reconciliation found in Amos, Chapter 5. It is important that this text be analyzed to understand the connection between the church's worship and reconciliation. In this Scripture, God speaks through Amos to the northern tribes of Israel in verses 21-24 saying:

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. ²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”¹

This Scripture text communicates many important theological insights from the prophetic laments of the Old Testament. Amos was one of two prophets to the Northern

¹ The Harper Collins Study Bible, *New Revised Standard Version* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009).

Kingdom of Israel in the midst of the divided Monarchy. At this time, the Northern Kingdom was a relatively affluent community, and Amos alludes to this by stating that Israel has houses of “hewn stone” and “vineyards.” These were affluent luxuries in the ancient world. A house made of stone cut and shaped by craftsmen was incredibly luxurious. However, because they “trample on the poor,” Israel shall not live in these houses. Amos is declaring God’s dissatisfaction with his people and the fact that their lives do not align with God’s care for the oppressed and the least of these.

However, God’s anger is most expressed in his dissatisfaction with their worship. Most importantly, the church’s worship and devotion to God cannot be divorced from its righteousness or commitment to justice. God “hates” and “despises” their songs, worship, and festivals, because they “take advantage” of the poor and they do not “establish justice in the gate.” Though this may be lost on modern readers, the gate of an ancient fortification was where trials were adjudicated by a judge. Judges would hear cases at the gate of the city. God is angered with His people because they are not caring for the poor and marginalized. Instead, they are perverting justice in society, taking bribes, and pushing aside the needy, especially in the court system. This clearly demonstrates that God cares deeply about the justice and righteousness of His people and their society.

Since the words justice and righteousness are repeated nine times throughout the relatively short chapter, these words must be investigated to further underscore what God is pointing to through Amos. The words are often used in tandem and are used to describe the actions and the demeanor of the upright and those that obey God’s commands. Justice in Amos chapter 5 is translated from the Hebrew “*mispat*,”² which is defined in the as “judgment” or “one’s legal right.”³ The Dictionary of OT Theology and Exegesis says the

² "Lexicon :: Strong's H4941 - Mishpat," Blue Letter Bible, accessed March 5, 2023, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H4941&t=RSV>.

³ *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, ed. Francis Brown et al. (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2006), 1048-1049.

following of *mispat*: “The most frequent use of *mispat* is in the prophetic literature. The topic is often a breach of justice suffered by the Israelites at the hands of their corrupt leaders.”⁴

This is part of the justice that Amos is referring to. He castigates those that “turn justice to wormwood” (5:7).

Likewise, “righteousness” in Amos is translated from the Hebrew “*tsedaqah*,”⁵ which is defined in the Brown Driver Briggs Lexicon as “right doing,” or “righteous as truthfulness or as ethically right.”⁶ The Dictionary of OT Theology and Exegesis notes that the prophets’ use of *tsedaqah* revolves around “the maintenance of right relationship between God and people.”⁷ Amos relates *tsedaqah* to issues of social justice.

The Dictionary of OT Theology and Exegesis contends that Amos is using the two words together to advocate for a just society in which people live in right relationship with God and others, which promotes justice for all. It says of *tsedaqah* and *mispat*:

“Since the pair forms a hendiadys, precise and distinct meanings for each of the partners should not be sought. Rather, together they represent the ideal of social justice, an ideal lauded by the Queen of Sheba concerning Solomon’s kingship in 1 Kgs 10:9, forming part of the excellence of his impressive administration.”⁸

This is a key element of the use of the two words in Amos. Together, they connote a greater meaning about a just society, representing God’s law in relationship to one another. As one seeks *tsedaqah* and *mispat*, they seek right relationship with God, others and self along with God’s justice in society. The two words affirm and build upon one another.

⁴ *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol 2, ed. Willem VanGemeren. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1997), 1144.

⁵ "Lexicon :: Strong's H6666 - Tzedaqah," Blue Letter Bible, accessed March 5, 2023, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?t=kjv&strongs=h6666>

⁶ *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, ed. Francis Brown et al. (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2006), 842,1109.

⁷ *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol 3, ed. Willem VanGemeren. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1997), 763.

⁸ *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol 3, ed. Willem VanGemeren. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1997), 749-750.

Still, the greatest reproach that God has of His people is not their lack of care for the marginalized and their perversion of justice; it is their worship. God says to seek him and live, but do not seek me at Bethel or Gilgal. For the Northern Kingdom, their temples of worship were located in these places. God “hates” and “despises” their festivals, the “noise” of their songs, and discourages them from seeking Him at the Temple. God is despising the worship of His people because they do not live in alignment with God’s commands to care for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the poor, and the oppressed. Because of this, their worship is rejected by God.

Theologically, the church can glean from this passage that God deeply desires that its people live rightly in their personal lives in accordance with God’s justice in society, even more than God desires the church’s fervent worship. This necessitates that Christians advocate for the oppressed in society and include them in their personal lives. God desires His people’s worship, but along with that, God desires their righteousness, which in turn partners with and promotes God’s justice in their lives and in society.

As God’s Church, this text urges the white Evangelical church to believe that righteousness and justice - the ideal of God’s justice in society - are to be sought alongside and possibly even more than worship. It urges the church to believe that as they partner with God’s justice, they will see more of the reign of God in their lives and societies. This text urges the church to do the work of justice in society and to live according to God’s laws for the mutual flourishing and the blessing of those the church connects with. If the church supports or benefits from empire at the expense of the marginalized, it is complicit, and its worship is hated and despised. If America’s courts are unjust toward people of color and the church does not speak against it, it is complicit, and its worship is despised. Lastly, this text urges Christians to advocate for the oppressed, the poor, the needy and the marginalized. For the white Evangelical Church, this should urge the church to grieve, mourn, and to lament its complicities with the history of this country that systematically exterminated Native peoples,

enslaved African peoples, and built systems that continue to disenfranchise people of color. This should urge the church to examine its worship in accordance with its work for justice and righteousness in God's Kingdom.

Plainly, there is a biblical mandate to align the church's worship with God's reconciliation, but to articulate a theology of worship and reconciliation, the terms and their theological tenants must be defined. The word worship comes from an Old English word, and means "to attribute worth, suggesting that to worship God is to ascribe to him supreme worth."⁹ There are two types of worship portrayed in the biblical canon: "common worship" and "personal devotions."¹⁰ Personal devotions are separate from the faith community and generally individual or small group expressions. Common worship "is the worship offered by the gathered congregation, the Christian assembly."¹¹ Constance Cherry offers this definition of worship, "Christian worship is a God-instituted gift to the church for nurturing our relationship with God and others. Worship is above all *to God with God and for God.*"¹² Common worship is then ordered by liturgy. Liturgy comes from the Greek *Leitourgia*, meaning the "work of the people."¹³ Though there are many definitions of liturgy, Simon Chan articulates liturgy as "embodied worship."¹⁴ He writes, "Liturgy is worship expressed through a certain visible order or structure (thus the phrase, 'order of service')."¹⁵ As an embodiment, liturgy must faithfully reflect and teach that which Christians are meant to live out and that which God has initiated in worship. Therefore, liturgy may be understood in this way: the embodiment of God-initiated relationship in worship through faithful, communal action.

⁹ David Peterson, *Engaging with God a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 29.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 29.

¹² Constance Cherry, *The Worship Architect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), xii.

¹³ David Peterson, *Engaging with God a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 18.

¹⁴ Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 62.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 62.

As these definitions of worship and liturgy suggest, common worship through liturgy is meant to shape and form God's people into the Christ-like image via faithful, communal participation. Worship through liturgy that does not form God's people into alignment with God's Kingdom - God's righteous and just society - is "worthless" to God. Worship and justice are inextricably linked in Scripture. Melva Costen writes, "In true and authentic worship of God, there is a dialectical relationship rather than a dichotomy between faith and practice, justice and ritual action (liturgy and justice), theological talk and doxological living, and sanctification and human liberation."¹⁶ Lisa Allen agrees, "Indeed, liturgy and ethics are not separate, autonomous entities, but liturgy, which is everything the church offers to God in the name of Jesus, is authentic only when exemplified in lives lived in harmony with the ethical commands God gives and Jesus affirms."¹⁷ Therefore, it is not possible to honor God with worship through liturgy if people's lives do not reflect God's Kingdom ethics and justice. This should urge the white Evangelical church to participate in setting the captives free, dismantling structural racism, repairing the breach, and aligning its worship with God's reconciliation to participate in Christ-like formation and ultimately transformation.

Setting the captives free is rooted in an understanding that God desires reconciliation for all of God's creation - humanity included. Reconciliation is a word that can mean so many things to so many people. It is not easily defined, and there are many definitions that exist. To some, it may mean extending forgiveness. To others, it may mean social justice to the disenfranchised. To others still, it may mean confession and repentance, and there may be countless other things suggested. Although there is no one definition of reconciliation, there is a clear mandate and call to the work of reconciliation for all followers of the crucified and resurrected Christ within the Word of God. To live in solidarity with the risen Christ means that Christians live in solidarity with the oppressed, the marginalized, and the suffering. It

¹⁶ Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 133.

¹⁷ Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 32.

means that people partner with God's work of reconciliation to bring about the Kingdom of God in every facet of created life: relationships, nature, ethics, systems, politics, ecology, education, economics, etc. To live as a follower of Jesus necessitates a response to the question, "How now do we live?"

Though many in the white Evangelical Church have responded to this question with personal piety, righteousness, sanctity, personal devotions, and even harmful theologies that lead to segregation and other systemic evils, I posit that the answer to this question is reconciliation. Christians respond to what Jesus has done for them by living out the call to reconciliation portrayed in the life of Jesus. This begins in the cultural mandate offered in Genesis 1:28, which says, "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.'" ¹⁸ By saying this, God not only blessed humanity's stewardship of the earth, but also blessed the diverse expression of the Imago Dei through the formation of different cultures, languages and societies. ¹⁹ This is known as the "cultural mandate." ²⁰ Indeed, God created and blessed diversity, and it is good. One day, we shall see every tribe, every tongue, and every nation worshiping at the throne of the King together, reconciled to one another, the King and the Kingdom. Even still, it is the church's call to live the now and the not yet and to partner with God's redeeming work of reconciliation in word and deed. Therefore, I offer my definition of reconciliation to guide this way forward by which all things, including the white Evangelical Church, may be made new:

Reconciliation is a continual and spiritual process involving forgiveness, justice and truth that redeems broken relationships, heals wounded memories, repairs systemic injustice, and leads to the flourishing of diverse expressions of the Imago Dei in individuals, communities, societies, and systems around the world.

¹⁸ Harper Bibles, *NRSV Standard Bible* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009).

¹⁹ Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson, *The Heart of Racial Justice*, Expanded Edition. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 34-35.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 35.

Along with the cultural mandate, this definition considers humanity's inherent worth as beings created in the *Imago Dei*.²¹ Likewise, it is ingrained in the belief that "reconciliation is work of God, who initiates and completes in us reconciliation through Christ."²² As we partner with God's reconciliation of all things, we are transformed, and our memories are healed through the process of forgiveness. It is also important to note that this process of healing and transformation is a spirituality that takes people to a "new place, a new creation."²³ In this process, people are given a new narrative to replace the "narrative of the lie" that is violence and suffering, which attempts to rob us of our human dignity.²⁴ The process is also continual because it recognizes that as particular theologies and selves encounter other selves, they must adapt to include these stories and humanity into their own stories.²⁵ This particularity creates a necessary plurality of diverse expressions of the *Imago Dei*. That is, every creed, color, tribe, tongue, and ethnicity is not just desired but needed for humanity to reflect the Image of God faithfully and honor God's command to be "fruitful and multiply." This definition also notes that systemic injustices must be addressed and repaired in societies and systems around the world for people to be liberated and for reconciliation to occur.²⁶ This is because "liberation is not an alternative to reconciliation; it is the prerequisite for it."²⁷ My personal definition of reconciliation includes the phrase "repairs systemic injustice" specifically because of the work of Jennifer Harvey and Robert Schreiter that outlined a reparation and liberation paradigm as a prerequisite for reconciliation to occur. Just as Willie James Jennings said, our theological imagination is diseased by the soil it has

²¹ Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2009), 125.

²² Robert J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation; Spirituality and Strategies*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 14.

²³ Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Cambridge: Orbis Books, 1992), 60.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 34.

²⁵ Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2009), 137.

²⁶ Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation (Prophetic Christianity Series (PC))* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 189.

²⁷ Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Cambridge: Orbis Books, 1992), 22.

grown in; it is the repairing of that same soil which allows the fruit to grow - God's reconciliation and transformation.

As this definition and the theology underpinning it show, God's work of reconciliation by the Spirit, with which we partner, is the way forward for the white Evangelical Church. Yet, a definition alone cannot propel the church toward repentance with systems of injustice and repairing the breach. That is why worship and reconciliation are so inextricably linked. Both worship and reconciliation are initiated in God. Each is a spirituality in that people trust God to work mystically by the Spirit to accomplish what they cannot do in worship or in reconciliation by themselves. God's reconciliation will bring about the flourishing of all creation by the Spirit and by "the work of the people," the liturgy. But this liturgy cannot be segregated into church services. It must be embodied and lived out. Likewise, reconciliation cannot simply be a disembodied theological concept. Instead, the white Evangelical church must become reconcilers, agents of God's reconciliation of all creation to one another and to Godself. This necessitates embodying reconciliation in specific, tangible ways, and this, in turn, necessitates embodying worship in specific, tangible ways. This theology of worship and reconciliation offers a framework by which the White Evangelical church may be guided toward offering worship that aligns with God's reconciliation, God's Kingdom, and the heart of the Father. The following chapter will examine the liturgy, worship, and songs of the white Evangelical church to understand the ways in which its worship is unfaithful to God's just and righteous Kingdom.

Chapter 3: Examining the Songs and Liturgy of Evangelical Worship

As the white Evangelical Church has become further complicit with systemic injustice in American society, it paradoxically proclaims themes such as freedom from injustice and setting the captives free within its worship songs and liturgy. This powerful dichotomy must be further explored to understand the church's unwillingness to engage in God's call to social justice exhibited in the biblical text. In the church, worship through liturgy forms and shapes God's people. As G.K Beale writes, "We become what we worship." Part of the way forward for the white Evangelical church will be in reshaping its worship to better reflect God's mission for reconciliation. Therefore, it is important that this project defines what worship means to many in the Evangelical church, explores the lyrics of its most popular songs and worship anthems, and shows the role that the church's worship and music play in supporting and engraining these limited theological viewpoints.

As a worship pastor and worship leader in the white Evangelical church for 25 years, I am acutely aware of the lyrics and themes presented within the songs and liturgies of the churches that these songs come from. One noticeable particularity of the white Evangelical church is its very definition of worship. Worship in the Evangelical church is paramount, as many of the most popular and often utilized worship songs, bands, and artists have arisen from Evangelical churches. Examples of this include Bethel Church in Redding, California, Hillsong Church in Australia, and Elevation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. There are countless others, but all these churches share a value for production to their worship experiences and utilize teams of hundreds of paid employees, camera people, creative directors, audio/visual directors, unpaid volunteers, and worship artists to execute weekend services to their exacting standards. Each worship service is a massive production meant to

make the most excellent presentation of music for both in-person and online audiences to engage with.

As a member of Evangelical congregations for over 30 years, I would note that my own understanding of worship was shaped in and by these types of churches and experiences. As a trained liturgist and worship director for thousands of Evangelical services, I have myriad experiences with Evangelical worship. Based on this, I would posit that many members, attenders, and lay people of white Evangelical churches in America would define worship thusly:

Worship is a time of music, praise and adoration meant to connect one more deeply to God's presence and/or Spirit, cleanse from worldly influences, and set the worshiper free to focus on God's heart so that they might know Jesus, God the Father, and the Spirit more intimately.

Though I know that many Evangelical clergy, ministers, and theologians would disagree with this definition of worship, I am speaking from my experience leading in the white Evangelical church. For most congregants, the goal of worship is individual connection with God that reorients them back to the heart of the Father and cleanses them from worldly influences and sins. After leading worship nights I have personally heard people say things like, "Wow, I needed that.," or "I really felt God moving," and "I needed to be filled up," etc. Therefore, I contend that this definition would encapsulate many Evangelical worshipers, and not ministers or theologians. Within this understanding of worship are several key distinctives that influence the outworking of the church's theology.

Firstly, this definition shows that worship and worship music are synonymous to many Evangelicals. Bethel Church in Redding, California, has produced more popular worship music on the CCLI Top 100 than any other church to date.¹ Bethel Music offers this purpose statement: "Bethel Music is a worship movement that exists to lead people's hearts into

¹ "Songselect by CCLI," Chords, Lyrics and Sheet Music | SongSelect®, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://songselect.ccli.com/Search/Results?List=top100&CurrentPage=1>.

profound experiences with God's presence that fuels personal, regional and global revival."² This purpose statement shows how the Evangelical definition of worship is limited to people's "hearts" and not their entire beings or souls. It betrays a spirit/body duality, in that spiritual experiences are elevated over physical embodiment of the liturgy. Also, this purpose statement focuses on musical experiences doing the work for worshippers. If one engages in the music, then one is engaging in the worship. Bethel music does not offer anything but musical worship experiences, yet they call themselves a "worship movement." This would suggest that conflating worship with music is common in the Evangelical church.

When Evangelicals use language that conflates worship and music, their songs also display an eschatological image of a giant worship service where saints join in worship through music as one. This is Scriptural imagery of worship in heaven. Revelation 7:9 describes what worship in heaven will look like: "every nation, tribe, and tongue" worshipping God before the throne, crying out, "Salvation belongs to our God."³ This is a beautiful image, but it is incomplete when considering reconciliation theology and other biblical eschatological views. In one of the most popular Evangelical worship anthems of the last 25 years, *I Can Only Imagine*, the artists, *MercyMe*, reflect on their experience of heaven:⁴

"I can only imagine when that day comes, and I find myself standing in the Son. I can only imagine when all I will do is forever, forever worship You. Surrounded by Your glory, what will my heart feel? Will I dance for you Jesus or in awe of You be still? Will I stand in your presence or to my knees, will I fall? Will I sing hallelujah? Will I be able to speak at all?"⁵

Though this is certainly a poetic and beautiful picture of standing in awe of God in worship, this song is the most popular Evangelical worship anthem ever and continues to influence the Evangelical eschatological imagination. Having sold more than 3 million digital

² Bethel Music, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://bethelmusic.com/>.

³ The Harper Collins Study Bible, *New Revised Standard Version* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009).

⁴ Aaron Earls, "13 Things You May Not Have Imagined about 'I Can Only Imagine'," Lifeway Research, March 16, 2018, <https://research.lifeway.com/2018/03/16/13-things-you-may-not-have-imagined-about-i-can-only-imagine/#:~:text=I%20Can%20Only%20Imagine%20crossed,52%20on%20Country%20Airplay.>

⁵ Ibid.

copies, *I Can Only Imagine* is the only song in the Christian music genre to ever receive triple platinum certification, meaning it sold more than 3,000,000 copies nationwide.⁶ This song demonstrates a limited eschatological view of heaven as a place Christians are taken or raptured to from this world to “worship” God forever through music. Though this is in keeping with much of Evangelical theology, it displays several shortcomings.

First, it has no view of the Kingdom’s immediacy as both “now” and “not yet.” It is only the “not yet” that they are waiting for God to save them from this current hellscape. As a result, it is easy to set aside the “now,” and not consider how one’s actions impact the planet, creation care, or stewardship of resources. This theology is the legacy of the post-civil war evangelicals, who began to emphasize a premillennial rapture that saved those born again in Christ from the destruction of the earth and its abandonment for heaven.

In sharp contrast, Dr. AJ Swoboda, a Pentecostal Ecologist, offers a different perspective and important insight through the lens of creation care. In a lecture at Seattle Pacific University entitled, “Green Jesus: Embracing a Sustainable Faith,” he explained how and why creation care is intricately connected to the heart of the creator God.⁷ Dr. Swoboda stated, “To care for the planet is a mark of the worshiper.”⁸ He pointed to the command in Genesis to “care” for the earth and noted that this word in Hebrew is the same word used for “worship” in and throughout the Old Testament.⁹ Therefore, Christians are called to creation care in the way that they worship, which is the way they live their lives to represent and glorify God as an act of worship. This is not merely synonymous with worship music. It is in the very doing and living that Christians worship God. It is in the caring, the cultivating, and the

⁶ Aaron Earls, “13 Things You May Not Have Imagined about ‘I Can Only Imagine,’” Lifeway Research, March 16, 2018, <https://research.lifeway.com/2018/03/16/13-things-you-may-not-have-imagined-about-i-can-only-imagine/#:~:text=I%20Can%20Only%20Imagine%20crossed,52%20on%20Country%20Airplay>.

⁷ A.J. Swoboda, “Green Jesus: Embracing a Sustainable Faith” (lecture, Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, WA, October 17, 2018).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

stewardship. The departure between these two definitions of worship is most evident in how they are lived out. If one's act of worship is engaging in a worship service, singing, praying, dancing, or standing in awe, there is no mandate in worship to care for creation, the poor, or see justice carried out in society. Instead, there is an invitation to experience being spiritually transported from this earth, to transcend one's current situation, and to picture oneself in that glorious eternity worshiping God forever.

When considering these definitions of worship and liturgy, and the way those definitions influence eschatology, it is not difficult to see why many Evangelicals are climate-deniers and refuse to believe that the earth is suffering a man-made extinction that could lead to the very hellscape from which they wish to escape. Currently, humans are in the midst of a sixth extinction, but by near-complete scientific agreement, this is not a natural extinction.¹⁰ It is an extinction caused by the rapid burning of fossil fuels causing excessive amounts of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere coupled with the deforestation of the earth. This has resulted in a rapid acceleration and change of the earth's climates, which has caused dangerous and significant temperature rises in the global temperature. Aside from more creatures going extinct in an untimely way, those humans who will be affected by this the most will be among the poorest of us. Therefore, Dr. Swoboda shows that Christians cannot do with the earth just as they see fit because they are called to cultivate it in a way that causes it to flourish. This answers God's creative call in creaturely, creative responses to continually return all of creation to the shalom/reign of God it was created for.

Likewise, this limited eschatology displays an incomplete understanding of reconciliation theology. Swoboda said, "Any gospel that does not include love for the world is a fake gospel".¹¹ His final point of his lecture: "Creation is being reconciled," made clear that

¹⁰ Mike Langford and Eric Long, "From Good to Groaning" (lecture, Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, WA, October 25, 2018).

¹¹ A.J. Swoboda, "Green Jesus: Embracing a Sustainable Faith" (lecture, Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, WA, October 17, 2018).

“God is taking all the parts of creation and putting them back together.”¹² This shows that reconciliation is for all of creation and not just human relationships. Swoboda noted that Isaiah 11:6 says, “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.”¹³ These creatures, that are normally not safe together, will be reconciled within God’s reconciled creation. However, the Evangelical church’s eschatology displays a world/spirit duality whereby humanity needs saving from worldly influences. Worship’s role in this is to cleanse humanity from their interactions with the world and give a foretaste of what is to come in heaven. In this view, there is no need to consider creation and the earth in God’s reconciliation mission. Instead, reconciliation is confined solely to human and spiritual interactions, and worship helps facilitate that.

In a 2022 Pew Research survey, most white Evangelicals do not recognize this biblical call to creation care.¹⁴ The authors write:

“Most members of non-Christian religions (72%), religious “nones” (70%) and members of historically Black Protestant churches (68%) view global climate change as an extremely or very serious problem...Evangelical Protestants, meanwhile, are the least likely to view global climate change as extremely or very serious (34%) and the most likely to say it is not a serious problem (38%).”¹⁵

Evangelical Protestants among the least likely to view global climate change as a serious problem

% who say global climate change is a ...

	NET Extremely/ very serious problem	Extremely serious problem	Very serious problem	Somewhat serious problem	NET Not too serious/ not a problem
	%	%	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	57	31	26	22	20
Christian	50	25	25	24	25
Protestant	46	21	25	26	28
<i>Evangelical</i>	34	14	20	28	38
<i>Mainline</i>	55	28	27	22	22
<i>Historically Black</i>	68	32	36	24	8
Catholic	57	31	25	23	21
Other religion	72	45	27	17	11
Religiously unaffiliated	70	43	27	19	11
Atheist	88	64	24	8	4
Agnostic	80	54	26	9	11
Nothing in particular	61	34	28	25	14

¹² A.J. Swoboda, “Green Jesus: Embracing a Sustainable Faith” (lecture, Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, WA, October 17, 2018).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Reem Nadeem, “Religious Groups’ Views on Climate Change,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, November 17, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/11/17/religious-groups-views-on-climate-change/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

This study shows how the Evangelical imagination and particularly the white Evangelical church's imagination has been stunted by its limited eschatology, its lack of proximity to the poor, and its connection to right-wing politics and Christian Nationalism.

In addition, the Evangelical understanding of worship is limited in that it focuses worship solely on what happens in a worship service and even more narrowly to that which happens with or through music. In *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, Tish Harrison Warren offers a daily, minute-by-minute connections of the Sunday liturgy with the work of the people in everyday life. She compares mundane experiences and shows how these are indeed worshipful. She writes, "We move in patterns that we have set over time, day by day. These habits and practices shape our loves, our desires, and ultimately who we are and what we worship."¹⁶ This mirrors Simon Chan's definition of liturgy as "embodied worship."¹⁷ Within Harrison Warren's understanding of worship, anything we do can be an act of worship to God. She goes on to explore each simple action - making the bed, waking up, brushing teeth, etc. - as an example of worship in our daily liturgy. This contrasts heavily with the Evangelical definition of worship. There is no music. These experiences are worldly and do not cleanse from the world. There is no spiritual experience to connect one more intimately with God's presence. In contrast, Harrison Warren shows it is in the how, what and why Christians do what they do that is truly worshipful to God as they embody a worshipful posture in daily liturgy, work, and God's Kingdom.

Likewise, Evangelical worship songs are mostly individualistic. As a liturgist, one of the biggest hurdles to using modern Evangelical worship songs corporately, in comparison to hymns and historic worship music, is that most (90+% of the current CCLI Top 100 worship

¹⁶ Warren, T. H. (2016). *Liturgy of the Ordinary: sacred practices in everyday life*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 30.

¹⁷ Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 62.

songs) are written from an individual perspective.¹⁸ The songs display a self-focus that has some unforeseen consequences theologically for the Evangelical church. One such consequence is that there is a blending of personal devotions and common worship. Many songs are written and produced for radio and headphones, where people engage in worship through music as an individual, praising and worshiping God alone. Instead, common worship is meant to bring Christians together, to proclaim God's goodness over all creation, reflect glory back to God, and to be formed together by the practices and habits that Christians have established long before.

Using ancient creeds, liturgies, and other historical practices is increasingly rare in white Evangelical churches, and this leads further to an individualized, segregated theology and spirituality. This type of individualized worship is not deeply integrated with how Christians do the work of the building the Kingdom, repairing the breach, and breaking down systemic injustice. By almost always writing songs from an individual perspective and using these songs in corporate worship, the white Evangelical church makes worship about an individual's connection with God, rather than the community's pursuit of the *Missio Dei* via God's desire for justice, advocacy, and communal discernment of the Spirit.

Further, there is an emphasis on freedom, breaking chains, and setting the captives free in Evangelical worship by drawing close to God's presence, again particularly found individually through musical worship. A recently popular worship anthem from Bethel Church, *No Longer Slaves* (currently #48 on the CCLI Top 100), offers keen insight into the Evangelical lens on freedom in Christ.¹⁹ The song begins, "You unravel me with a melody. You surround me with a song of deliverance from my enemies till all my fears are gone."²⁰ Here, it is very

¹⁸"Songselect by CCLI," Chords, Lyrics and Sheet Music | SongSelect®, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://songselect.ccli.com/Search/Results?List=top100&CurrentPage=1>.

¹⁹ "Ibid.

²⁰ *No Longer Slaves*, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://songselect.ccli.com/Songs/7030123/no-longer-slaves/viewlyrics>.

clear that God “unravels” or cleanses the individual with a “melody” or music. God then surrounds the individual with a “song of deliverance” until all fear has been overcome.

In this view, worship music is an essential part of God setting the individual free from bondage to sin and death. The chorus states, “I’m no longer a slave to fear. I am a child of God.” This metaphor of bondage and human slavery is used to exemplify God setting Christians, who are “captives” or “slaves,” free. In the bridge, this metaphor is even more clearly tied to human slavery and particular the Hebrew people’s enslavement in Egypt. The authors write, “You split the sea so I could walk right through it. My fears were drowned in perfect love. You rescued me so I could stand and sing: I am a child of God.” Fear is cast out through worship music, so the worshiper is more able to know God’s presence or Spirit more intimately and engage back in musical worship more fully. It has a cyclical pattern where the worshiper worships to worship more freely. This shows the eschatological image of heaven being the ultimate worship service. Another song that exhibits this is, *Freedom*, and begins:

“You came to set the captives free. You came to bring us liberty. My sin and my rejection met Your blood and my acceptance. Now I’m alive to bring You praise. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Every chain is broken through You, Jesus. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”²¹

This view of musical worship is not inherently sinful or heretical, but it overemphasizes the work of musical worship and deemphasizes the work of partnering with the *Missio Dei* as the community of faith. Likewise, this understanding of freedom is almost always twofold: spiritual and individual. The worshiper is set free spiritually to encounter God’s presence more fully and more deeply. This freedom from captivity, chains and bondage is almost exclusively spiritual freedom from spiritual evils for the individual.

If this is contrasted with one of the oldest hymns of the Evangelical church, *O Holy Night*, which was translated to English by abolitionist John Sullivan Dwight in 1855, it

²¹ Freedom, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://songselect.ccli.com/Songs/6341105/freedom/viewlyrics>.

becomes obvious that the freedom that many of the early Evangelicals were declaring was communal freedom from physical, structural, and systemic injustice. Verse three says:

“Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother, and in His name, all oppression shall cease. Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we. Let all within us praise His holy name. Christ is the Lord. Oh praise his name forever. His power and glory evermore proclaim.”

In this verse and chorus, freedom is not only spiritual and eternal – “His power and glory evermore proclaim,” – but it is also corporate, communal, and physical freedom from the sinful and barbaric practice of slavery and physical oppression that was being perpetrated against African Americans in the United States. The chains that the Evangelical abolitionists wanted to break were primarily physical chains of the enslaved so that they might be physically as well as spiritually free. This freedom is grounded in a collective “Ubuntu” understanding of freedom as Archbishop Desmond Tutu has described it. “Ubuntu” freedom seeks the best of the collective. It says, “I am not me without you, and I cannot be free if you are in chains.”²² This freedom could best be reflected theologically as Freedom in Christ. Freedom in Christ is that which makes way for the other, that which upholds the oppressed and sets the captives free. This is a very different freedom than the modern white Evangelical understanding of spiritual freedom for the individual.

Within the white Evangelical church’s liturgy, the portion of the time dedicated to worship through music is significant. Examining Bethel Church’s recent services, the church routinely devotes 40+ minutes of time within its liturgy for worship through music in a service that lasts 1.5 hours.²³ This is often more than the sermon, and it can encompass the largest portion of the liturgy. In my experience, this is not out of the ordinary for white Evangelical churches. The liturgy of these mega-churches can be quite similar. It begins with a welcome time or non-scripted Call to Worship. This will then transition to worship through music. The

²² Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2009), 125.

²³ “Bethel Church Service | Kris Vallotton Sermon | Worship with Paul and Hannah McClure,” YouTube (YouTube, March 12, 2023), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8U8_JGYo6Ak.

songs will be mostly individual-centered. They will move from high energy “praise” songs to low energy “adoration” songs. This, then, will transition to offering, testimony, or some special community time that is announcing an initiative or gathering of the church. After this, the service usually moves to the message or sermon. Finally, the liturgy ends with a time of invitation to prayer and to fellowship. For charismatic churches like Bethel, a special “ministry time” where people are prayed for publicly and some gifts of the Spirit are utilized like prophecy and praying in tongues is often found in this “response” to God’s Word preached.

Although this modern liturgy is quite common in the white Evangelical church, its limitations are plain considering definitions of worship and reconciliation. Besides the possible topic of the message or themes of the songs, this liturgy does not invite congregants into care for the poor. It also does not engage congregants in active relationship with their fellow congregants. This liturgy creates space for people to engage directly with God and align their hearts with God’s. This liturgy does not ask congregants to confess or to lament their complicity in the current or historical injustices of society. It does not challenge the congregation to make space for those whose voices have not been heard. It does not encourage public, communal confession for generational sins of their predecessors. It does not encourage creation care or reconciliation with God’s creation.

This liturgy is not inherently damaging, but when examining Evangelical beliefs and practices, it is not difficult to see how Evangelical worshipers are being negatively formed by it. The theology found within Evangelicalism’s worship songs and liturgies indicates a narrow understanding of theological principles such as eschatology, freedom in Christ, individualism over communal engagement, spiritual-physical duality, creation care, and many others. This formation has stunted the church’s imagination of what the fullness of the Kingdom of God might look like: physical chains of systemic injustice being broken in the “now,” creation being redeemed and cared for to reflect God’s glory, connection to a history and a legacy of the saints who have gone before, and much more. Because of this, the following chapter will

endeavor to offer practices, spiritualities, disciplines, songs, and liturgy whereby the white Evangelical church may discover its call to participate in the reconciliation of all creation back to Godself.

Chapter 4: A Framework for Reconciling Worship

The white Evangelical church's worship is a particular lens to view its lack of engagement in reconciliation, social justice, and partnership with the *Missio Dei*. Worship and liturgy have formed the church into passive, comfortable, homogenous, and powerful echo chambers, where congregants are not challenged by their privilege or power. Still, Scripture clearly indicates that God is not satisfied with His people's worship if it does not produce fruit that establishes justice in society, cares for the poor, and makes space for the least of these. However, there exists a way forward for the church to discover its complicity with social injustice, to repent from its partnership with systemic and structural racism, and to form its people into those who embody worship and reconciliation in meaningful and transformational ways. Part of this way forward for the white Evangelical church will be in reshaping its worship to better reflect God's mission for reconciliation. Therefore, the following chapter will offer practices, spiritualities, disciplines, liturgy, and music whereby the white Evangelical church may discover its complicity with injustice, collectively repent of this, and heed its call to engage in the spiritual process of reconciliation.

As the church considers how to engage reconciliation, Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil's *Roadmap to Reconciliation* offers a process that individuals and communities engage as they move toward reconciliation, transformation, and flourishing. Part of the reason for this roadmap is specifically to move from individual engagement to community engagement. Salter McNeil writes, "The goals of reconciliation need to shift from interpersonal acceptance to building reconciling communities of racial, ethnic, class, and gender diversity."¹ It is critical

¹ Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities Into Unity, Wholeness and Justice* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016), 35.

for the white Evangelical church that it does not simply focus on reconciliation and transformation individually but engages in the healing of prolonged social and systemic injustices corporately. For the white Evangelical church to engage in reconciliation, it must find itself and its members in this process and partner with it towards creating reconciling communities where the diverse expression of the Imago Dei flourishes.

Within this model, there must be “Realization” of the ways that the church has been complicit with the structural inequities that are present in American society.² Salter McNeil writes that Realization requites “Reorientation” - “It requires us to grapple with the facts in a way that makes us acknowledge that we and our people have played a part in the problem. We have to reorient ourselves.”³ For the white Evangelical church, it must recognize its historical and current complicity with systemic injustice for people of color and native people in America. Firstly, its leaders must be honest with itself about the ways that its history has “bent” it toward false identities so that they can repent of them and allow God to heal their identity.⁴ Humility, or rightly knowing oneself, requires honest self-assessment, and reconciliation requires humility. Secondly, the church must honestly speak the history of marginalization that has committed over and against people of color to help restore their human dignity. Robert Schreiter writes, “To trivialize and ignore memory is to trivialize and ignore human identity, and to trivialize and ignore human identity is to trivialize and ignore human dignity.”⁵ It requires honesty to speak about these atrocities and expose the narrative of the lie that has been carried forward by the white Evangelical church for generations. Instead, the white Evangelical church has moved into “Isolation” and “Preservation” in Dr.

² Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities Into Unity, Wholeness and Justice* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016), 36.

³ *Ibid.*, 59

⁴ Brenda Salter McNeil, *A Credible Witness: Reflections on Power, Evangelism, and Race* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 75.

⁵ Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Cambridge: Orbis Books, 1992), 19.

Salter McNeil's roadmap, refusing to recognize itself and its history in connection with these atrocities.⁶

In Andy Crouch's *Strong and Weak: Embracing A Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing*, he suggests that simultaneous vulnerability and authority is the call of all image-bearers of God to live in what Crouch describes as flourishing.⁷ Crouch shows that operating in authority and vulnerability, being both strong and weak, is flourishing as is found in the example of Jesus.⁸ The other three quadrants of Crouch's model are labeled: "suffering," "exploiting," and "withdrawing."⁹ The white Evangelical church has had numerous "catalytic events" that it could have heard to move into this process. Instead, the majority retreated into Crouch's "withdrawing" quadrant. The white Evangelical church is powerful, rich, and influential. It has high authority in many areas, yet it shows little to no vulnerability. The church is mostly affluent, insular, and not diverse. It does not reflect the beautiful *Imago Dei* in the Cultural Mandate.

Therefore, the church has only 2 options in Crouch's model. It can either use its high authority and low vulnerability to bludgeon its foes and fortify its walls in the "exploiting" quadrant, or it can lay down its authority and retreat into the "withdrawing" quadrant. Most white Evangelicals have operated in these 2 quadrants, and this is a large part of the problem. Crouch defines vulnerability as "meaningful exposure to risk."¹⁰ He writes, "To be vulnerable is to be exposed to the possibility of loss - and not just loss of things or possessions, but loss of our self. *Vulnerable* at its root means *woundable*."¹¹ The way forward for the church must

⁶ Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities Into Unity, Wholeness and Justice* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016), 42-43.

⁷ Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016, 161.

⁸ *Ibid*, 34.

⁹ Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016,, 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 40.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 41.

include the church following Jesus' example and using its influence and authority for those who do not have access to it, making itself vulnerable for the "least of these." Only then will the White Evangelical church find itself participating in God's reconciliation mission and the mutual flourishing of all God's people.

Part of how the white Evangelical church will do this work of making itself vulnerable will be through identifying itself racially as white and naming its privilege in its worship. In *The Heart of Racial Justice*, Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson write, "We will never be fully used to help bring about the healing of people and of nations until we understand that God's purpose and plan includes our racial and ethnic identity."¹² For the church to recognize its own ethnic and racial identity and the ways that plays into its privilege and lack of vulnerability, pastors and ministers need to be equipped to preach about these honest topics to the white community. In *Rediscipling the White Church*, David Swanson notes that the Word preached is a critical part of how the white church may understand its own privilege, so that it can repent and participate in reconciliation. He writes, "In majority white settings, community members should regularly reflect on who they are. That is, they can reflect on the fact that their community is white."¹³ He then shows how the Old Testament prophets did not speak generically but specifically to its people.¹⁴ Preaching in the white Evangelical church will need this specificity for its people to understand their complicity with systemic injustice.

In naming a specific audience as white, the congregation is also able to better recognize its privilege within society. Dominique Gilliard's *Subversive Witness* defines 5 forms of privilege - "status, class, race, gender, and citizenship."¹⁵ If the white Evangelical church

¹² Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson, *The Heart of Racial Justice*, Expanded Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 43.

¹³ David W. Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church: From Cheap Diversity to True Solidarity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 92.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 92.

¹⁵ Dominique DuBois Gilliard, *Subversive Witness: Scripture's Call to Leverage Privilege* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 6.

can better name itself as white and serve out of that beloved identity and not its “bentness,” it must reflect on what privileges it has operated in as it learns to “leverage” these privileges for reconciliation. Most in the White Evangelical church do not realize that they hold the same 5 privileges that the United States declared for its first citizens – white, affluent, land-owning, free men. These were the only people endowed with citizenship when the United States was founded. Preaching the Word to the community and naming that community as white in worship is one way to acknowledge the privilege that comes with. David Swanson notes that white privilege is emotionally immature because it does not recognize its own advantages and tries to diminish its benefits. He writes, “A sign of a mature faith is a strong memory about my sinful need and God’s abundant provision. But these elements are what white privilege diminishes.”¹⁶ Therefore, it is important that pastors and preachers of the white Evangelical church address their churches as white in worship to name this privilege and allow their congregants to identify with this.

Another part of identification involves being in relationship with those who do not resemble most of their own church. Dr. John Perkins life is an incredible witness to the work of reconciliation, and part of his theology includes his three R’s: “Relocation, Reconciliation, and Redistribution.”¹⁷ Perkins says that to serve the poor, the church must relocate itself to where the poor are. “By becoming a neighbor to the poor, the community’s needs become my needs.”¹⁸ This is critical for the White Evangelical church to find its way forward. It must be in proximity and relationship with those who are different from it. It must be in proximity and solidarity with the poor, with people of color, and with people who have different worldviews. If liturgy is embodied worship, then planning liturgy that engages people who are different from the community in these ways requires dislocation. The white Evangelical church cannot

¹⁶ David W. Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church: From Cheap Diversity to True Solidarity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 92.

¹⁷ C. Rene Padilla, *What Is Integral Mission?* (Oxford, UK: Regnum Book International, 2021), 58.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 58.

host all its worship, conferences, and liturgies in its safe, secure, and comfortable buildings. It must relocate itself to be in proximity with the people that are not currently part of its congregations. This does not mean that the church simply does mission trips, where it engages cross-culturally in a safe and secure fashion. The church must place itself in proximity through its liturgy. This means that hosting Sunday morning services or worship nights outside the church and in proximity to those in need would become an important part of the community's ethos. Instead of renting out the largest church in the white, suburban area for a worship night, what if Bethel Music hosted its event near Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles? What if a church relocated into a "dangerous" area of town? This would necessitate the church making itself vulnerable or woundable to the same dangers that the poor in that neighborhood face. For the white Evangelical church to leverage its privilege, it must dislocate itself from its affluent neighborhoods and place itself in proximity to the vulnerable.

Although proximity is necessary, reciprocal relationship is also crucial to honor the dignity of the people in these neighborhoods. Jennifer Harvey's *Dear White Christians* shows how white Christians have a unique responsibility to advocate for a "reparations paradigm" and mutual transformation and flourishing.¹⁹ Harvey also discusses becoming "repairers of the breach" as stated in Isaiah chapter 58.²⁰ She notes the healing that can only be found in owning, repenting of, and making restitution for collective sins in association with Whiteness. Using the biblical model of Zacchaeus, Harvey shows that restitution was part of his reconciliation journey after systematically taking advantage of his people. This view affects the identity of the white evangelical church and therefore affects its embodiment of reconciliation in how it relates to people of color.

¹⁹ Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation (Prophetic Christianity Series (PC))* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 211.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 241.

Likewise, Archbishop Desmond Tutu's *Ubuntu* theology offers an important perspective into relationship cross-culturally. In response to Apartheid South Africa, Bishop Tutu offered his *Ubuntu* theology, which is rooted in a theology of inherent and equal human dignity and worth based in the *Imago Dei*. Tutu espoused a necessary pluralism of theology perspectives that added to the whole picture. Tutu proposed, "There must be a plurality of theologies... It makes mandatory our need for one another because our partial theologies will of necessity require to be corrected by other more or less partial theologies. It reinforces the motif of inter-dependence."²¹ This motif is inherent to Tutu's *Ubuntu* theology. Theology is never done in isolation but in community. This is because humans are not complete without one another. As the white church moves into proximity with people of different races, cultures, and ethnicities, it must have theological humility and open itself up to learning in reciprocal relationship.

For the white church to name its complicity with injustice and systemic racism, liturgy offers several tools that worship leaders and liturgists need to become comfortable with to engage this process. The disciplines of communal lament and public confession are key to exposing the lie of innocence that persists among the white Evangelical church. Just as the Psalmists cried out to God, saying "Where are you Lord?," the church must learn to lament its historic and current sinfulness and the way that has played out in the world. Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice write, "Lament is a directed to God. It is the cry of those who see the truth of the world's deep wounds and the cost of seeking peace. It is prayer of those who are deeply disturbed by the way things are."²² The authors suggest that participating in the discipline of communal lament involves unlearning "speed, distance, and innocence."²³ In unlearning speed, the church must sit with the realization that this is slow, methodical work.

²¹ Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2009), 33.

²² Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 78.

²³ *Ibid*, 99.

Actively supporting and creating systems that have disenfranchised people of color for generations will not be undone quickly. Likewise, unlearning distance requires proximity to problems that have been generations in the making. As Perkins agreed, proximity is key to the church identifying with the problems of the poor and marginalized. In the “Identification” phase of Salter McNeil’s roadmap, she writes, “your people become my people,” and we begin to “identify with and relate to other people who are experiencing the same thing.”²⁴ By practicing lament, Christians identify with the marginalized. Katongole and Rice suggest, “The practice of *public confession* is a way of unlearning innocence.”²⁵ In this way, white Evangelicals may recognize their own complicity with generational injustice. They write, “Learning lament involves not only seeing the church as broken but also seeing our own complicity, how ‘I’ am also part of the problem.”²⁶ Liturgy, lament and public confession allow congregants to embody worship that leads to reconciliation by unlearning the innocence that comes with white privilege, unlearning the distance from poverty that the white Evangelical church has fostered, and learning to slow down the process of healing and reconciliation.

In addition, there is a legacy of communal faith that is contained within the historic creeds and affirmations of the church that is necessary for the white Evangelical church. Evangelical worship’s individualism needs practices that point to the communal dimensions of faith for it to focus common worship back on the community and away from the individual. Tish Harrison Warren shows how the Anglican church uses the Book of Common Worship as well as creeds and affirmations in its liturgy. She writes, “God has loved us and sought us – not only as individuals, but corporately ... As we learn the words, practices, and rhythms of faith

²⁴ Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities Into Unity, Wholeness and Justice* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016), 66.

²⁵ Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 92.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 86.

hewn by our brothers and sisters throughout history, we learn to live our days in worship.”²⁷

By utilizing the vast history of creeds, affirmations, and written liturgies found in church history, the white Evangelical church could depart from the self-focused worship that it currently espouses and instead point its congregants to corporate, common worship.

Likewise, another practice that has been significantly diminished in worship in the white Evangelical church is the sacraments. Harrison Warren notes that this is another byproduct of the individual, subjective nature of Evangelical worship. She writes:

“Instead of the focus of worship being that which nourishes us, namely Word and sacrament, the focus became that which sells: excitement, adventure, a sizzling or shocking spiritual experience. An individual’s own experience of worship, a subjective notion of his or her encounter with God, became the centerpiece of Christian life.”

However, the sacraments have been the centerpiece of Christian liturgy since the inception of the church. If the white Evangelical church is going to be able to move away from experiential, individualized worship and toward corporate liturgy that promotes common worship, it will need to engage in the sacraments in new and profound ways, both practicing and teaching its people to sustain their lives on the Word of God and the bread of life. Since reconciliation is God’s work with which people partner and as Dr. Salter McNeil and Schreiter agree, “more a spirituality than a strategy,” embodiment necessitates an active and receptive spiritual posture toward the Spirit’s movement in the world.^{28 29} Individually, this means that people will need to actively engage in the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, lament, silence, solitude, and others. Corporately, this means that the church must engage in liturgy and worship, in the sacraments, and actively pursue the *comunitas* of the Church. Archbishop Desmond Tutu stated, “I want to stress the centrality of the spiritual, and I will hope we can

²⁷ Warren, T. H. (2016). *Liturgy of the Ordinary: sacred practices in everyday life*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 31.

²⁸ Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Cambridge.: Orbis Books, 1992), 60.

²⁹ Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities Into Unity, Wholeness and Justice* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2016), 22-28.

help to develop in all parishes, daily Eucharist, Bible Study, and prayer groups, for our resources are ultimately spiritual.”³⁰ Since reconciliation is a spirituality and its resources are spiritual, these practices need to be offered and guided in common worship as well as individual disciplines so that one’s well of resources will be overflowing. It is by these spiritual practices that the church will be transformed more fully into the people God has created them to be and given the spiritual resources to partner with God’s mission of reconciliation.

Finally, the white Evangelical church’s music and lyrics need to be addressed. Since 90+% of the current CCLI Top 100 worship songs are written from an individual perspective, Evangelical worship songs are written from an individualistic perspective, this naturally leads to an individualized experience of worship through music.³¹ However, reconciliation theology shows how important communal identification, confession, engagement, recitation, and worship forms people into the Body of Christ collectively. Therefore, songs used in common worship should be written or rewritten to reflect the communal aspect of worship. This is not to say that every song needs to be from a communal perspective, but most worship songs used in liturgy should be communal. To accomplish this, worship leaders and liturgists should write new songs and re-write songs or portions of songs to reflect the communal nature of the worship liturgy. For example, *I Love You Lord* by Laurie Klein is a famous worship anthem of the white Evangelical church that has been used in liturgy for decades. The song simply states, “I love you Lord, and I lift my voice to worship you. O my soul, rejoice. Take joy my king in what you hear. May it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear.”³² The song focuses on the individual’s experience and gives priority to the music that is being created for God. It does not call the worshiper to community, to justice, or to repentance. The song is not inherently

³⁰ Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2009), 92.

³¹“Songselect by CCLI,” Chords, Lyrics and Sheet Music | SongSelect®, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://songselect.ccli.com/Search/Results?List=top100&CurrentPage=1>.

³² Laurie Klein, “I Love You, Lord,” Hymnary.org, accessed March 13, 2023, https://hymnary.org/text/i_love_you_lord_and_i_lift_my_voice#tune.

damaging and is genuinely beautiful but rewriting it would allow for a better common worship experience to form worshipers into reconcilers. To help this song more fully engage the corporate connection of worship and reconciliation in Scripture, as well as humanity's call to creation care and care for the poor, I have rewritten the song's lyrics including additional verses of my own:

I love you Lord, and I lift my voice
To worship you, O my soul, rejoice
Take joy, my king, in what you hear
May it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear

We love you Lord, and therefore we speak
About your grace and your mercy seat
Take joy our King in what we say
May our witness be credible all of our days

We love you Lord and obey your Word
To care for those that have not been heard
Take you joy our King in what you see
May it be a sweet, sweet sight in your eyes.

We love you Lord, so we care for earth
To honor you and magnify your work
Take joy our King in the flourishing
May all of creation reflect your glory

We love you Lord, and so we confess
Our sins to you, so we may repent
Forgive us Lord, and hear our lament
May it teach us that
we are not innocent

We love you Lord, so we lift our hands
To set free those enslaved and trapped
Take joy our King in what we do
May aromas of your shalom rise to you ³³

We love you Lord, so we live for you
In righteousness, justice and truth
Take joy our King in what you hear
May it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear.

Words and Music: Laurie Klein, Addl. Lyrics: Kyle Harmon ©1978 House of Mercy Music

In rewriting these lyrics, I have pushed back on many of the theological errancies that are highlighted in Evangelical worship music. The lyrics are corporate using "we" instead of "I." The verses each have a separate call to reconciliation theology that build upon each other. The original song is now verse 1 of 7 stanzas. Verse 2 calls Christians to care the marginalized as is found in Scripture. There is a call to corporate lament, confession, and "unlearning innocence" as Katongole and Rice suggested in verse 3. In verse 4, righteousness, justice, and worship are connected in how Christians embody worship through liturgy. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil explores Evangelical credibility, and this is referenced in verse 5. Salter McNeil writes,

³³ Laurie Klein, "I Love You, Lord," Hymnary.org, accessed March 13, 2023, https://hymnary.org/text/i_love_you_lord_and_i_lift_my_voice#tune.

“If we are going to regain our evangelistic credibility, we must recognize our need for people who are different from us and invite them into our lives.”³⁴ Again, proximity is necessary for real reconciliation and transformation. Christians’ call to care for creation in accordance with worship in Scripture is the theme of verse 6. Verse 7 points to setting the enslaved free in the “now” instead of only spiritual freedom. Each verse emphasizes a particular aspect of Christians’ call to embody worship while forming the congregation as reconcilers.

Although this is just one song, imagine the impact on the white Evangelical church if its many thousands of song writers, worship leaders, and other artists aimed their collective talents at writing music for worship that inspired reconciliation. Though not every song is as theologically detailed as this one, simply changing songs from an individual perspective to a communal perspective would do a vast amount of work in corporate worship to push the paradigm of individual worshipers to community worship. Clearly, there is significant work to be done for the lyrics of the church’s many songs to reflect the connection of worship and reconciliation. However, if “We become what we worship,” it is incredibly important that the liturgy and the lyrics of the songs encourage the white Evangelical church to discover its complicity with injustice, collectively repent of this, and heed its call to engage in the spiritual process of reconciliation.

³⁴ Brenda Salter McNeil. *A Credible Witness: Reflections on Power, Evangelism, and Race* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 72.

Conclusion:

A Vision for the Future of Worship

Just as the people who make up the Church are broken, so the Church in the world is also broken. Still, God desires to use His people and His Church to accomplish the *Missio Dei* and build God's Kingdom. God desires that the Church would form and transform people through its worship, services, and liturgy into agents of God's reconciliation. The Evangelical church's worship services are beautiful, artistic, and powerful. The lyrics declare God's faithfulness and Jesus' victory over sin and death, among many other biblical themes. There is a palpable sense of the Spirit's immediacy and presence that is proclaimed. Spiritual freedom from oppression and powers and principalities of this world are cast out in Jesus' name. The church's music stretches across the globe, and its' songs are translated into myriad languages for countless Christians to use in their liturgies worldwide. Truly, God is at work through this music in shaping His people into worshipers, who adore and stand in awe of the Father.

However, the brokenness of the white Evangelical church is evident in that its music and worship have minute connection to its embodied partnership with the *Missio Dei* and God's spiritual process of reconciliation. Many early Evangelicals in America advocated for the freedom of enslaved peoples in the abolitionist movement. They sang worship songs that spoke of actual chains being broken and not just spiritual freedom. Yet, this legacy was lost as the church became aligned with the powerful and stopped advocating for the oppressed in society. Now, the church does little for the poor by not giving of its many resources to support them and partnering with policies and politicians that actively disenfranchise the poor. The church does not welcome the foreigner and even disdains them by supporting building walls and deporting migrants who are trying to escape violence, poverty, and squalor. The church has been waylaid by insidious ideologies like Christian nationalism and conflated the Kingdom of God with the United States. It does not make itself vulnerable for the least of

these. It is content to worship God from its safe, comfortable, modern-day temples of austerity.

Nevertheless, Scripture indicates an inseparable connection between worship, justice, and righteousness. In Amos chapter 5, God “hates” and “despises” the worship of His people because they “trample the poor” and do not “establish justice” in their society.¹ In Matthew chapter 21, Jesus drives out those at the temple who are taking advantage of the poor because “they are making it a den of robbers.”² There are many more examples, but the common theme is clear: there is a deep connection between how God’s people worship and how they work to establish God’s Kingdom in their society, particularly for the “least of these.” God wants His people to partner with His just and righteous Kingdom in the “now,” and He also desires their fervent worship. Many early Evangelicals in America understood this and advocated for the freedom of enslaved peoples in the abolitionist movement. Yet, this legacy was lost as the church became more powerful and stopped advocating for the oppressed in society.

This project began with the question: *How can worship be used to help evangelical churches in America recognize and repent from their complicity with injustice in society and advocate for reconciliation in their local communities?* I assert that the answer to this question lies in reconnecting the broken linkage between worship and reconciliation. If “we become what worship,” the white Evangelical church must sing songs that declare actual freedom from societal, systemic injustice. The church needs to write and rewrite songs that reconnect this broken bond of worship and justice. It must sing songs that accentuate corporate participation in common worship, connect souls with bodies, and emphasize congregants’ partnership with the *Missio Dei*. It has to lament its complicity with white privilege and white

¹ The Harper Collins Study Bible, *New Revised Standard Version* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009).

² Ibid.

supremacy. It must lament its historical ties to racism, chattel slavery, and manifest destiny. The white Evangelical church needs to repudiate its support of the “doctrine of discovery” that erased native peoples heritage and dignity on this stolen land. It must corporately confess its complicity with Christian nationalism and unlearn the innocence it has believed about itself.

If the white Evangelical church desires to advocate for reconciliation in its local communities, it must place itself in proximity to those communities in need. It has to learn how to foster reciprocal relationship with people who are not represented within its congregations. It must include their voices, their experiences, and their history as it embodies worship. The church must dislocate itself from safety and comfort and make itself truly vulnerable and woundable as Jesus did. It does not need another capital campaign for a larger sanctuary in another suburb, another “house of hewn stone.” It needs to learn a posture of pilgrimage to people in its own community and not another overseas mission trip. The church must identify with its race, culture, and heritage to learn how to minister from that beloved, God-blessed identity. It must incorporate the sacraments to nourish its people with spiritual resources for the process of reconciliation is ultimately spiritual.

There is a way forward for the white Evangelical church to recognize and repent from its complicity with systemic injustice and advocate for reconciliation in its local communities. A new vision for its worship is that way forward. If the church desires true reconciliation as many of its leaders profess, then it will need to learn to embody reconciliation in the ways that it embodies worship. Then it will see its people formed and transformed into agents of reconciliation, embodying worship, embodying reconciliation, and building God’s Kingdom in their lives and in God’s just society. If the white Evangelical church can reshape and refashion its worship and liturgy to reflect God’s desire for fervent worship and justice, then and only then, will it see “justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

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