

Book Analysis - Color of Compromise

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UR714: Leadership Development in the Urban Church

March 25, 2022

*The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism* is Jemar Tisby's overview analysis of the American Church's complicity and collaboration with racism, specifically focused on "the black-white racial divide," from the Colonial Era until shortly before the 2019 publication date.<sup>1</sup> Tisby's hope was that by writing this book, it would allow "reconciliation - robust, consistent, honest reconciliation [to] occur across racial lines" through truth.<sup>2</sup> Tisby states that "there can be no reconciliation without repentance. There can be no repentance without confession. And there can be no confession without truth."<sup>3</sup> Going era by era, Tisby looks honestly at some of the prominent people within the American church and history, calling his readers to "abandon complicit Christianity" throughout.<sup>4</sup>

*The Color of Compromise* is explicitly targeted at American Christians. That said, although it can be read by all Christians, Tisby's statements throughout, from discussing how "white Christians have often been the current" driving racism and racist policies in the United States, to statistics focusing on the friendship patterns of white people, to even Tisby's discussion of why his book may be difficult to read, seem to indicate that he specifically wants white American Christians to read the book.<sup>5</sup> Although Tisby comes primarily from a Protestant perspective, and spends most of his time on the Protestant Church and its figures, space is given for the Roman Catholic church's contributions as well.

Altogether, this is a strong book. Tisby is adept at synthesizing broad swathes of information into easily digestible, if not easily processed, chunks. His descriptions and narrative

1 Tisby, 15

2 Tisby, 18

3 Tisby, 15

4 Tisby, 24

5 Tisby, 17

are engaging, which is especially notable when many other surveys zoom out enough that they become dry and difficult to wade through. He keeps his stated goals in mind throughout, usually giving his readers a historical overview and then connecting to what the church did or did not do during the time he is discussing, although this pattern does break once he reaches more modern eras. A notable strength actually comes in his footnotes. Within them, he acknowledges possible shortcomings of his work, and more than once presents opposing viewpoints to the ones he is basing his arguments on. This makes it clear that he is not trying to hide anything to convince his readers of his points with any deception whatsoever.

That said, there are a couple of points on which the strength within his structure and footnotes lead to some potential downfalls. As stated above, chapters six through nine, which cover the Jim Crow era through the organization of the Religious Right do not follow the pattern of history then application that made the first chapters so strong. Because there is discussion of patterns that crossed eras, as well as prominent figures who were active across eras and thus show up in multiple chapters, at times Tisby shapes a narrative that seems as though it might be more cohesive if included in a different chapter. In source concern, Tisby cited a YouTube channel in his chapter on organizing the religious right. Although once the source was visited, it was clear that contained reputable material, it was an edited version of a documentary, and it might have been preferable to cite the original, if at all accessible, especially as it is difficult to find the real life identity of the person who owns the channel. One other small point of potential confusion is that when a term is used, occasionally instead of a solid definition, a more poetic one is used, such as with “the chattel principle” on pages 60-62. If a reader is unfamiliar with the idea, they might not be able to get the full picture from the book.

Overall the book is both valuable and useful for its intended audience. It is entirely possible that some will discount it, largely for the reasons Tisby addressed in chapter one on why the book may be hard to read. Some academic critiques regarding sources could also be leveraged, although they would likely not stand once the source was visited, as discussed above. This book would be the most useful for those who are already looking to hear truth and take action. Tisby's plethora of sources also offer opportunity for his readers to continue learning, and to dive deeper into places and ideas which he could only touch on, because of space constraints.

Oftentimes, people emulate the leadership that they observe, and are taught. In the American church, this means a leadership that has "a fixation on individual conversion without a corresponding focus on transforming the racist policies and practices of institutions," while simultaneously involving themselves in other social issues, such as abortion and evolution at the institutional level.<sup>6</sup> There is a need to examine the areas that your leaders or you in leadership find important versus those on which it is considered "best" to be silent. Another takeaway is the importance of narrative. Tisby makes it clear throughout that narrative drives perceived truths. What narrative is the church accepting? A last takeaway is the need to understand the presuppositions and misinformation that go into crafting theology that seems sound, but does not hold up under scrutiny.

The call to "stay and adapt to a new community reality" for churches struck home.<sup>7</sup> If "all the American church needs to do in terms of compromise is cooperate with already established and racially unequal social systems," then the church needs to be at the forefront of adapting and pushing for change.<sup>8</sup> Practically, this is something churches that are opening in gentrifying areas

<sup>6</sup> Tisby, 69, 161, 230

<sup>7</sup> Tisby, 128

<sup>8</sup> Tisby, 128

and those who attend them need to consider. Similarly, a concept Tisby introduces that I had not previously heard was that of “ecclesiastical reparations.”<sup>9</sup> This is something I would love to implement. Lastly, Tisby discusses the “devaluing of black theology.”<sup>10</sup> Although I have made an effort to read from diverse theologians, I know my tendency is to fall back on the theologians and theology that were taught to me growing up, which all too often are white Christian men and their theology. A renewed effort to diversify is called for.

9 Tisby, 199

10 Tisby, 202