

**Theologies for Pastoral Ministry: Pastoral Epistle**  
**Antiracist Witness and the Mission of the Church**

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Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Grace, mercy, and peace to you in your calling as pastor to a large, urban, mainline church in these challenging and changing times.

As I write these words, our country is in the midst of continued reckoning with its long history of racial inequity. It goes without saying, or at least it should, that this inequity—along with the fear, poverty, and injustice it produces—is contrary to the commonwealth of God proclaimed by our Lord in the Gospels. Jesus announced the coming of a world where everyone has enough and no one needs to be afraid.

You will recall the words of Jesus in John 20:21, “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’” Here the disciples, representing the church, are sent into the world by Jesus after the pattern by which the Father sent the Son. In short, they are called to continue his work. In the same way, faithful churches are called to continue the mission of the Son in the world.

The community you lead is a movement sent into the world by God through Jesus Christ to live out the gift of God’s peace in the midst of the world. Your congregation is not simply to proclaim the good news of the gospel, but to bear in its own life the reality of that good news in the midst of the present world. In other words, the mission of the church encompasses the character of its internal communal life as well as its external activities in the world. We are summoned by Jesus not merely to *believe* the gospel but to *become* the gospel. In this way, we participate in and bear witness to the intentions of God for the world.

From this perspective, the gospel is both a message to be proclaimed and a way of life. It is the good news that, in Jesus Christ, God is liberating the world from the powers of sin and death and reconciling human beings with God, each other, and the whole of creation in order to establish *shalom* in the cosmos. And it is a way of life in the world that provisionally demonstrates this announced reality in the present even as it anticipates its coming eschatological fullness. The church is the gathered community of intentional followers of Jesus Christ who believe in this good news and are prepared to live by it.

As you are well aware, the church has all too often failed in its calling to bear such witness and is particularly challenged in our current culture with respect to racism. In a recent book, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*, Robert Jones lays bare the deep and longstanding connections between White supremacy and the church. The book makes for deeply uncomfortable reading for those of us in traditionally White churches. Doubtless, many in our congregations would be shocked and profoundly troubled to learn how racist attitudes have become embedded in White Christian identity. For many, this will come as new information.

However, the effects of White supremacy have long been the subject of Black theology. The late James Cone began writing on the significance of White supremacy for Black people and the Black church in the late sixties. In his work, he provides a detailed account of the challenge of articulating Christian faith from the perspective of the Black experience in the midst of a Christian tradition deeply formed by, and committed to, the dominant power structures of White supremacy and cultural privilege.

Professor Cone writes, “White theologians, because of their identity with the dominant power structure, are largely boxed within their own cultural identity.” In other words, it’s not that

White theologians simply *intended* to serve the interests of their own particular constituency; rather, they have interpreted the gospel, theology, and church in terms of their own outlooks and interests because they have too readily assumed that *their* cultural assumptions and interpretations of Christian faith provided *the* cultural assumptions and interpretations of Christian faith. In this procedure, the gospel is not only domesticated by the conventions and perspectives of assumed White supremacy, but it is unwittingly and perversely turned into an instrument of oppression against other social, ethnic, and cultural people groups who do not participate in the social, political, and ideological intuitions and assumptions of the dominant culture.

Theologies, liturgical practices, and ecclesial structures are not universal. They are always a particular interpretation of revelation, scripture, and tradition that reflects the goals, aspirations, and beliefs of a particular people, a particular community. As such, they cannot speak for all. When we insist that they do so, and when this insistence is coupled with cultural and societal power, they become oppressive to those who do not share the presumed values and outlooks. In this situation, those who do not conform to the dominant structures and assumptions are often left painfully disenfranchised.

In this way, the dominant theologies, liturgical practices, and ecclesial structures of the North American church have contributed to the racism that permeates society. They did not arise from the experiences and social realities of BIPOC people (black, indigenous, people of color). Rather, their character was determined by those who were so committed to its European and Enlightenment presumptions that they failed to question its conclusions of cultural supremacy that led to the colonization, extermination, and slavery of BIPOC people.

White American theologians across the ideological spectrum interpreted the gospel and the Christian faith from the perspective of the dominant cultural group. They did theology in support of the political and social status quo, in spite of the voices crying out for more just and equitable treatment. They neglected these voices because of their deeply held beliefs and convictions that took for granted the normativity of the White experience. They failed to recognize that other people, specifically BIPOC people, also had thoughts about God, Jesus, and the Bible that mattered.

A recent review of *White Too Long* in *The New York Times* concludes that the book “seems to present a stark choice: Hold onto white Christianity or hold onto Jesus. It cannot be both.” BIPOC thinkers have been making this point forcefully for over a century. It’s long past time we listened to them and acted on their message.

If the church is to fulfill its obligation to bear an antiracist witness in the world, we must begin by surrendering the pretensions of universally normative conceptions of Christianity and adopt a pluralist conception of Christian faith and witness. If we are reluctant or unwilling to do this, we will intentionally or unintentionally propagate forms of cultural, ethnic, and racial imperialism under the guise of Christian religion. The failure to surrender these pretensions will continually undermine attempts at a truly antiracist witness in the church. This is because Christian faith and practice will continue to be defined in ways that are governed by the outlooks characteristic of the White experience and its cultural dominance. Antiracist witness cannot be achieved on these terms.

If a faithfully antiracist witness is to take hold and flourish in the church, we must be willing to subject the theological traditions and assumptions of the White church to thoughtful and concentrated critical scrutiny for the purpose of intentionally decentering them in the life of

the church. Only in this way will we be in a position to take seriously the voices and experiences of others who have been marginalized for far too long.

This work of decentering can begin in numerous ways. Be intentional about sharing it and promoting it among the leaders of the church and with the congregation. Establish groups or committees who are tasked with addressing this work, and follow through on their recommendations. Read and promote books and resources from outside the White Christian tradition, taking on the task of becoming a multi-lensed leader. Intentionally decenter your own voice by regularly sharing the pulpit with others, particularly those who bring different perspectives. Prioritize the hiring of BIPOC persons to positions of leadership, regularly inviting them to share in the preaching and teaching ministries of the church. Of course, lasting change will take time and persistence, but with prayer, patience, and pastoral care, these actions will begin to bear fruit in the life of your congregation.

While this task of decentering Whiteness will be difficult and even painful to those of us who have been formed and privileged by it, such a process is necessary for the antiracist witness of the church. For the sake of the gospel and the community that is called to bear living witness to it, we must in humility consider the interests and concerns of others before our own in keeping with the example of the Lord of the Church, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Phil. 2:6-8).

May God guide and sustain you in this work.