

Collective Forgiveness, Racism, and Patriarchy: The Challenge for US White Baptist Congregations

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Abstract

In his chapter on forgiveness, David Gushee asks, ‘can collective groups forgive?’ The difficulty of collective forgiveness is the focus of this article, which asks, ‘What aspects of collective forgiveness need to be learned by white Baptist congregations in the process of forgiveness for the past sins of slavery?’ The article investigates ecclesial practices and examines the ecclesial challenges needed for the offender in the harmed relationship to practise forgiveness. I first establish why white Baptist churches have not engaged with the notion of collective forgiveness. Second, I propose dismantling soft patriarchy to open the possibility for white churches to become places that can engage in collective forgiveness. In conclusion, I evaluate egalitarian feminism as a way forward for ecclesial communities to practise collective forgiveness. I also offer two first-steps for these Baptist congregations: hiring and electing an equal number of woman in leadership roles and changing theological language.

Keywords

Forgiveness; patriarchy; racism; Baptist

Introduction

In his book, *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today*, white American David Gushee illuminates the challenges of forgiveness for both the offender and the offended. Gushee focuses on forgiveness mainly in individual relationships while also asking the question ‘can collective groups forgive?’¹ He concludes that it is possible yet very difficult. The difficulty of collective forgiveness is the focus of this article as I seek answers to the question, What aspects of collective

¹ David P. Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today* (Canton, MI: Front Edge, 2022), p. 151.

forgiveness can be learned by white Baptist congregations for their past sins of slavery in the United States?

In their research, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith investigate the role of white Christians and racial injustice in the United States. They conclude that ‘the collective wounds over race run deep. They need to be healed. And for healing to take place, there will have to be forgiveness.’² I suggest that the collective wounds of racism can be healed by the practice of collective forgiveness. However, in recognising the different dimensions of difficulty for collective forgiveness, I propose that pre-work, specifically the interrogation of patriarchal power norms, must first be undertaken by the offending group. As a framework for this article, I engage three chapters from Gushee’s book: ‘Forgiveness’, ‘Ending Patriarchy Once and For All’, and ‘Repenting White Christian Supremacism’. The following section briefly defines key terms before I give a short overview of the current racialised climate in the United States of America and the sense of urgency for white Baptist congregations to address this and for restorative work on racism. Next, I introduce and illuminate how soft patriarchy hinders the offender — white Baptist congregations — from practising collective forgiveness. Finally, I offer an egalitarian feminism model as a challenge to soft patriarchy and a way forward for collective forgiveness in white ecclesial communities.

Key Terms

This section offers brief definitions and clarification for key terms used throughout the article. Forgiveness is a relational act practised by humans ‘in which we completely give up any claim on one who has wronged us to pay the moral debt they incurred’.³ *Collective forgiveness* can be learned in ecclesial communities for the purpose of racial reconciliation between white Baptist Congregations and American

² Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 170.

³ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 144.

Descendants of Slavery (ADOS).⁴ ADOS is a recent term developed in the United States that describes individuals and communities who identify as predominantly black or African American. *White Baptist congregations* are ecclesial communities considered predominately white even though they may include ADOS and other people of colour. These congregations are classified as white and Baptist because they have roots in Southern Baptist traditions and are led by individuals who self-identify as white or Caucasian.

Forgiveness is a practice of repairing broken social relationships. According to Donald Shriver and his work *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*, ‘forgiveness has to be learned in a community’.⁵ Forgiveness is learned in community for both the offender and the offended. The offenders, the white Baptist Church, must do their own restorative work if they want to practise collective forgiveness. This restorative work requires the challenge of collectively acknowledging the communal sins of racism that transcend an individual’s lifetime. *Racism* is the dehumanising response to human difference that occurs out of the social construction of identifying people in terms of race and often involves ‘a hierarchical classification system based on the invented racial categories’.⁶ However, racism is often viewed only as an individualised or interpersonal relationship that comes with prejudice or violence. This view of racism can and still does occur. This article approaches racism in the systemic or structural sense. Over time these collective sinful practices of racism that are part of the legacy of past generations become embedded and fall under a type of category of racism called structural racism. Candis Watts Smith’s research on racism emphasises how structural racism is about ‘white racial dominance and racial power’ found within US politics and religion that ‘perpetuate and maintain the hierarchy of a racialized social system’.⁷ Structural racism is at the root

⁴ The concept and movement of ADOS began as a social media campaign created by Yvette Carnell and Antonio Moore and mainly focuses on reparations for American descendants of slaves. See <https://adosfoundation.org> [accessed 10 November 2022].

⁵ Donald W. Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 35.

⁶ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 183.

⁷ Candis Watts Smith, *Black Mosaic: The Politics of Black Pan-Ethnic Diversity* (New York: New York University Press 2014), p. 61.

of the sin of slavery. I explain in more detail the connection between the sin of slavery and southern Baptist congregations.

Liberation ethics is an effort to end injustice from below, from outside the power dynamic structure of a community. Liberation ethics is an extension of Christian ethics and connected to communitarian ethics. Communitarian ethics asks, ‘how do we develop communities of people, that are morally sound, good, and just?’⁸ Developing a Christian community requires the practice of collective forgiveness that stretches soft patriarchal communities to see beyond their top-down power structure. Many white Baptist churches come out of the Southern Baptist tradition and are historically rooted in patriarchy, the belief that God created the order of the world with a ‘systemic male power over females’.⁹

I, like Gushee, utilise the term *soft patriarchy* to describe many white Baptist congregations who are taking an alternative, less intense approach to patriarchal leadership structures and male power. Liberation ethics, like Christian ethics, is a critical foundation for ecclesial communities working to end injustice. I propose that these white congregations can learn how to listen to voices and perspectives of those most mistreated, those pushed to the outside of the power structures. With this said, this article addresses only the work needed from the side of the white church and not the role of ADOS communities in collective forgiveness. I focus on white ecclesial communities in a way that Martin Berger encourages white academics to focus on white people. Berger’s concern is that ‘white academics who focus on representations of nonwhite peoples [...] may use the mantle of “racial justice” as a respectable cover for indulging in our long-standing fascination with the other’.¹⁰ For this reason, as a white academic, I examine my own racial representation by means of the role white Baptist congregations have in collective forgiveness. The following section illuminates the urgency for restorative work on racism in the United States.

⁸ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 9.

⁹ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 170.

¹⁰ Martin A. Berger, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 4.

Urgency for Restorative Work

In recent years, Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter movements have ignited an urgent call for the work of forgiveness in ecclesial communities. White churches, particularly those who are Southern Baptist or come from Southern Baptist traditions have a unique responsibility to practise collective forgiveness concerning the past sin of slavery. In his book *White Too Long*, Robert Jones explores the history of Southern Baptists and the sin of slavery, pointing out that ‘Southern white Christians, particularly Baptists, played a critical role in justifying a particularly southern way of life, including what they sometimes referred to as the “peculiar institution” of slavery’.¹¹ Today, white Christians are having challenging conversations concerning their role in racial reconciliation and collective forgiveness in relation to ADOS communities. According to the research conducted by Emerson and Smith in 2020, eighty percent of white Christians believe that the top priority of living out their faith should be solving racism.¹² However, when asked about finding solutions to racism, forgiveness was not considered as part of racial reconciliation. Their research concludes that ‘a Christian solution ought adequately to account for the complex factors that generate and perpetuate the problems, and then faithfully, humbly, carefully and cooperatively work against them’.¹³

Finding a Christian solution that does not create additional problems is the current challenge of racial reconciliation. Liberation ethics offers Christian communities a new lens, a process of seeing from the bottom-up new ways of imagining solutions to challenging problems such as racism. Liberation ethics illuminates non-white voices, perspectives that have historically been overlooked and ignored. Willie Jennings, an African American theologian, offers insights into how the problem in finding a solution could be caused by a ‘diseased social imagination’.¹⁴ Jennings states with conviction, ‘I think most Christians sense that something about Christians’ social imaginations is ill, but the

¹¹ Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), p. 35.

¹² Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, p. 120.

¹³ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, p.172.

¹⁴ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2010), p. 6.

analyses of this condition often don't get to the heart of the constellation of generative forces that have rendered people's social performances of the Christian life collectively anemic.¹⁵ Reimagining how the Christian faith can both help and hinder the restorative work of racial reconciliation is critical. Gushee adds that 'there is no evidence that white U.S Christians as a group have ever repented of their morally damaged faith'.¹⁶ For that matter, Christians have not repented from many communal past sins such as the crusades which opened a gaping window towards Christian nationalism and structural racism. Richard Dyer explores racism in connection to the history of Christianity. Dyer expands upon the way the crusades created a surge of Christian nationalistic practices and beliefs, a 'struggle of Christianity against the non-Christian [...] a tradition of black/white moral dualism to bear on the enemy that could itself be perceived as black'.¹⁷ Christianity has a long history of abusing power and creating hierarchal systems that cause communal sinful practices generation after generation.

For the above reasons, I emphasise the importance of white Baptist congregations taking steps towards restorative work to learn how to practice collective forgiveness for the past sin of slavery. The next section addresses the problems of soft patriarchy and how they hinder the process of collective forgiveness.

The Problems of Soft Patriarchy

In the early stages of forgiveness, the offender must do their own work in the process of restoration by first acknowledging the sin 'without evasion'.¹⁸ There are layers of work for the individual person, or in this case the individual congregation, should the offended party be willing to participate in the process of interpersonal restoration. This work includes confessing to God the wrong done and changing attitudes and behaviour. Confession is the acknowledgement of the sin, openly and

¹⁵ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 196.

¹⁷ Richard Dyer, *White*, twentieth anniversary edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017) p. 67.

¹⁸ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 148.

honestly with oneself and the community. The act of acknowledgement is the first hurdle that can arise with soft patriarchy.

As stated earlier, patriarchy is a power system where men hold power over woman. Currently there are conversations in US conservative congregations about Christian patriarchy — women submitting to their husbands — being different from pagan patriarchy — women submitting to all men. Allison Beth Barr uncovers how US conservative church leaders, many of whom are Southern Baptists, argue for Christian patriarchy but do not support pagan patriarchy. However, Barr says, ‘patriarchy is patriarchy’ and rejects this notion that Christian patriarchy can be separate from pagan patriarchy and maintains that it cannot be confined just within Christian homes.¹⁹ The power dynamic of patriarchy is the root of the problem which keeps Baptist congregations from practising collective forgiveness for the sin of slavery. Because there has been a recent movement by conservative congregations to soften the patriarchal approach in their communities, a new term, soft patriarchy, has arisen. Gushee uses this term, even though he agrees with Barr that patriarchy, whether soft or hard, is still patriarchy.²⁰

Soft patriarchy is a common practice in white Baptist congregations today. With this in view, I return to the problem of acknowledging the injustice occurring in the ADOS communities. ADOS communities come from generations of enslaved Africans who were told to submit to white male power. Following the Civil War in the United States, these beliefs and practices still existed in white Baptist congregations. Long explains how ‘holding racist views is nearly four times as predictive of white evangelical Protestant identity among frequent church attenders as among infrequent church attenders’.²¹ Acknowledging the racism that still exists means white Baptist congregations ‘own up to white supremacism’s religious dimension’.²² So how can white congregations acknowledge and begin the restorative

¹⁹ Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021), p. 18.

²⁰ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 172.

²¹ Jones, *White Too Long*, p. 146.

²² Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 184.

work of collective forgiveness? Acknowledging the sinful behaviours of slavery that led to racial injustices today is a very difficult first step that white Baptist congregations need to take towards learning how to practise collective forgiveness. This raises the bigger question of what hinders these white congregations from taking that first step?

Gushee argues that soft patriarchy creates ‘moral-perception blind spots’ that can hinder the perspective of those at the top of the power structure, in this case the ecclesial leadership, from acknowledging or seeing injustice.²³ The issue of blindness keeps many white Baptist congregations from acknowledging the sin of slavery. Colonial Christianity, upheld by Southern Baptists, is rooted in white male power, and this power dynamic can create problems of blindness in terms of the critical practice of collective forgiveness. Below I indicate in more detail how some of the particular aspects of soft patriarchy prevent white Baptist congregations from seeing the injustice caused by the sin of slavery.

One problem within in these soft patriarchal communities is that their ecclesial leadership is shaped like a pyramid, a top-down decision-making model. At the top of the pyramid sits the pastor, deacons, or elder boards who discern the spiritual direction and ecclesial ministries for the congregation. These are power positions of discernment or ‘seeing’ on behalf of the ecclesial community. These individuals who hold the ‘seeing’ positions often self-identify with societal and religious norms, that is as white, heterosexual, and male. These power holders live on the inside of society, existing within the status quo. In their research on racialisation and evangelical religion, Emerson and Smith highlight how the racial practices that create racial divides are invisible to most white people.²⁴ People who live inside the norms of society, the white, straight men, are often blind to seeing the injustice caused by colonial Christianity. Because these power positions are held by those who naturally fit into the norms of society, the ability of the ecclesial community to acknowledge racial injustice and communal sinful behaviours becomes increasingly difficult, thus hindering the practice of communal repentance and collective forgiveness.

²³ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 177.

²⁴ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, p. 9.

The problem with soft patriarchy and, for that matter, any hierarchal model of community, is naming the power issue that places people in dominant or subordinate positions. Barr addresses the power dynamics of patriarchal systems stating how they ‘place power in the hands of men and take power away from women’.²⁵ Those who exercise this model believe that God designed creation, specifically humanity, to co-exist in this power scarce model. Soft patriarchy creates power distinctions between people based upon gender, sex, and race. Those on top are considered to have the right God-given qualifications, anatomically and racially, to be the head, the dominate figure, the leader and decision maker for the community. Those who are not on the top, namely women, children, and people of colour, fall into many sub-levels within the hierarchal structure. Those in the sub-sections of humanity are considered soft, weaker by design, created to fill a ‘helper’ role for those on top. Soft patriarchy believes that those who do not qualify to be on top by God’s patriarchy are supposed to take a submissive, passive role. Although all people are equal in the eyes of God, this stance is based upon certain beliefs about manhood and womanhood. Because soft patriarchy aligns with a tier system that places people according to a conservative view of masculinity and femininity, individuals and groups of people find themselves disappearing into different tiers within the community.

In the historical US context, anyone who was not considered a white man fell into a subordinate and silent role in society. Women and others deemed weaker or softer, such as people of colour, needed white men to have value and place in society. Women needed a father, older brother, and eventually a husband for financial, social, and spiritual security. Likewise, slaves and Africans needed a white master to have purpose and salvation in society. For centuries, power has been and continues to be at the core of the role that white men assume in the US patriarchal system. According to this theological and ideological belief, white men are supposed to protect, govern, and save, in both the social and spiritual realms, those who were created submissive to them. Whiteness is rooted in patriarchy, placing all power in the hands of white men. This power dynamic causes a bias or obliviousness in the

²⁵ Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, p. 18.

community. In her book, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, Mary McClintock Fulkerson unpacks this bias or blindness as a ‘form of not-seeing’ categorised as ‘non-innocent obliviousness [...] the power of the visceral [...] where fear, anxiety and disgust occur’.²⁶ White men as a category carry the power of the visceral, white power, which causes blindness in soft patriarchal congregations.

In his research, ‘Whiteness Made Visible: A Theo-Critical Ethnography in Acoliland’, Todd Whitmore examines the invisible nature of white power as a white man in Africa. Whitmore states that his task is ‘not making the invisible visible to myself and other whites, but to make what is already visible intelligible’.²⁷ For white Baptist congregations, seeing racial injustice is the act of making intelligible or making sense of what is already visible to those who are mistreated and on the margins. White power and privilege are an embedded disability of not seeing what is visible. It is a ‘perceptual blindness’ that keeps white Baptist congregations from seeing the oppression against ADOS communities.²⁸ The following section offers a way to see and address the power dynamics of soft patriarchal congregations.

A Way Forward

Gushee offers egalitarian feminism as a counter position to soft patriarchy. Gushee says that the difference between these two positions comes down to the notion of power: ‘Soft patriarchy preserves male power [...] egalitarian feminism rejects exclusive male power and calls for power-sharing between women and men.’²⁹ Soft patriarchy promotes individual power and in this case for only a few male individuals in the community. However, egalitarian feminism offers a power-sharing model that moves power from individuals to the entire community. Egalitarian feminism offers another option for ecclesial

²⁶ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), p. 19.

²⁷ Todd Whitmore, ‘Whiteness Made Visible: A Theo-Critical Ethnography in Acoliland’, in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, ed. by Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 180.

²⁸ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 185.

²⁹ Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics*, p. 177.

communities wanting to do restorative racial justice work. I suggest that this important aspect of power sharing can move an ecclesial community beyond individualism. The power dynamics of patriarchal communities faces two challenges: acknowledging the injustice, and moving beyond individualism. Egalitarian feminism is a way forward for white Baptist congregations to practise collective forgiveness.

For many white Baptist congregations, individualism is rooted in the theological and ideological beliefs that expect the individual person to make spiritual decisions about salvation as well as living as a self-sustaining citizen in society. In patriarchal churches, Biblical interpretations often focus on the individualised experiences concerning salvation, discipleship, and relationship with God. In the United States, society places a high value on individualism and self-sufficiency. Willie Jennings uses the term ‘white self-sufficient masculinity’ as a way of describing an ideological way of organising life that distorts how people live in and see the world.³⁰ White self-sufficient masculinity is rooted in ‘whiteness’ and is a way that individualism organises itself in institutions and communities in the United States. Individualism is a white privilege that distorts white Christian perceptions on racism in America.

White Christians often view individualism as the only possible approach to racial reconciliation. Emerson and Smith highlight three individualistic beliefs of white Christians who want to address the problem of racism. They found that white Christians ‘view the race problem as (1) prejudiced individuals, resulting in poor relationships and sin, (2) others trying to make it a group or systemic issue when it is not, or (3) a fabrication of the self-interested’.³¹ These perspectives are due to a lack of communal vision, of not seeing the collective wounds and how collective sin impacts the community at large. The very notion of communal sin that transcends an individual’s lifetime seems beyond the comprehension or imagination of many white Christians. Practising collective forgiveness comes with acknowledging collective wounds that have been caused by structural racism and communal sinfulness over several generations. Egalitarian feminism offers an alternative approach

³⁰ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2020), p. 3.

³¹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, p. 117.

to destructive male power dynamics by approaching power communally, allowing the entire community to share in the restorative process of collective forgiveness. This approach, rooted in liberation ethics, creates spaces of discernment and decision-making that involve the entire community, especially those who have been pushed to the margins.

Conclusion

I acknowledge that fixing soft patriarchy does not mean solving racism in the white church. I also acknowledge that the egalitarian feminism structure can prioritise white women over black women. With this said, white Baptist congregations can acknowledge the past sins of slavery by taking steps away from soft patriarchy and towards egalitarian feminism. These steps are not quick nor easy moves for ecclesial communities embedded with centuries of patriarchal beliefs and practices. I offer two steps that will need further exploration in future research and writings. First, patriarchal Baptist congregations must hire and elect an equal or a number of women as pastors and leaders of their communities. Second, these communities can change theological language such as only referring to God as male. These two foundational changes can open a path for ecclesial communities to practise restorative work and collective forgiveness between white Baptist congregations and ADOS communities.