



# The Economics of Racial Equity in the Church

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The global COVID-19 health pandemic and the protests and unrest following the killing of George Floyd by law enforcement in Minneapolis, Minnesota, brought renewed public attention during 2020 to historic racial disparities in the United States. The gaps in home ownership, wealth, educational outcomes, health, and other social indicators between whites and blacks (and indigenous communities and people of color) reveal the entrenched effects of systemic racism. These long-term inequities, exasperated by COVID-19, created the growing tensions that resulted in unrest and protest across the United States.

In the Twin Cities of Minnesota, where Luther Seminary is located, these disparities are among the starkest in the United States. The Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area is one of the best places for whites to live and one of the worst places for African Americans to live.<sup>1</sup> Longtime Minneapolis civil rights activist Spike Moss noted, “You were disrespected your entire life during Jim Crow, which is the reason my mother brought us to Minnesota. Turns out Minnesota is

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Ingraham, “Racial Inequality in Minneapolis among the Worst in the Nation,” *Washington Post*, May 30, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/30/minneapolis-racial-inequality/>. See also, Leslie Redmond and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, “White Privilege Shines with COVID-19,” *Star Tribune*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.startribune.com/white-privilege-shines-with-covid-19/569903692/>.

*Operating within the ethnicity-based economic inequities of the Roman Empire, the early church as described in the New Testament instituted practices of reciprocal equity, which can serve as analogous examples toward establishing racial equity in the church today.*

Mississippi up north.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the explosive outburst after the traumatic murder of George Floyd was not shocking to local activists and academics focused on racial dynamics. The conditions were ripe for such a moment.

As theologically informed Christian leaders, we look to the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the first-century church for wisdom in times such as these. The conditions in the twenty-first century have much in common with the first-century setting narrated in the New Testament. Jews were an oppressed ethnic minority group and colonized subjects under the rule of the Roman Empire. A Roman exceptionalism and sense of supremacy existed, exhibited in beliefs that Jews were “born of servitude”<sup>3</sup> and “good for nothing but slavery.”<sup>4</sup> All across the empire, Jews experienced extreme prejudice and, as a result, often suffered economic deprivation—especially in Palestine, where Jews were highly concentrated. These social realities likely caused extreme disparities among ethnic groups in the Roman Empire, creating a reality that could be comparable to our own racial context in the United States.

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As colonial subjects and an ethnic minority group, Jews were contained by law enforcement within physical and psychic boundaries in the Roman Empire. Furthermore, Jews in Jerusalem and greater Palestine were also under the military occupation of the empire. Over the years, thousands of Jews in Judea were crucified in Roman state-sponsored killings. I assume that first-century Jews (and Jewish Christians) experienced the fear, rage, despondency, and related emotions that are expressed in the twenty-first century as a result of the endless police killings of black women and men in the United States. In the first-century Roman Empire, the protest mantra could have been “Jewish lives matter.”

Following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the church emerged into a first-century reality of economic inequity based on ethnicity and state-sponsored terrorism with law enforcement as the public face. In the early days, the community of followers of Jesus was primarily a Jewish church, meeting in the homes of Jewish Christians. These embryonic communities, composed primarily of Jews, became

<sup>2</sup> Spike Moss, interviewed in Rohan Preston and Jenna Ross, “Seeking Justice, Leaving a Legacy,” *Star Tribune*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.startribune.com/together-these-civil-rights-leaders-changed-minnesota-but-not-as-much-as-they-hoped/572348412/>.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Elliott, “The Apostle Paul and Empire,” in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 102.

<sup>4</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Order* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 21.

places of healing from the impact of colonialism and oppression (much like the black church has been in the United States).<sup>5</sup> As the church spread into Diaspora Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire, Greeks and Romans were invited to join Jewish followers of Jesus. Politically powerful Romans, as well as Greeks who benefited from empire privileges, temporarily let go of their advantages and entitlements to enter the homes of oppressed and colonized Jews for worship, discipleship, and community.

Even Roman law enforcement officers joined these Jewish believers. In Acts 10, the apostle Peter invites a Roman centurion named Cornelius to join the church. Theologian Willie Jennings notes, “If a centurion and his household could be drawn into a new circle of belonging, then its implications for challenging the claims of the Roman state were revolutionary.”<sup>6</sup> In our time, when the transformation of policing is paramount, Jennings’s analysis offers us a valuable perspective.

The New Testament model of the church was one where an oppressed minority community welcomed people from the privileged dominant culture into the local congregation.<sup>7</sup> These first-century congregations were led by oppressed Jews whose daily existence was marked by the realities of a racist society. Once Greeks and Romans joined with Jewish followers of Jesus, the Roman supremacist power dynamics structured into the empire had to be negotiated and negated inside the organizational systems of the first-century church.

With this context provided for the similarities between the first century and the twenty-first century, I want to examine a process of equity that was introduced into the first-century church that might have merit for the church in our times.

## EQUITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

At the beginning of the COVID-19 health pandemic, many Christian leaders looked to Scripture for insights and wisdom. This text, which speaks of global famine, offers a dilemma with similar challenges.

At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:27–30)

<sup>5</sup> For more on my view of the first-century church as a decolonizing and healing community, see Allan Aubrey Boesak and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 12–23, 79–83; and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Jacqui J. Lewis, Micky ScottBey Jones, Robyn Afrik, Sarah Thompson Nahar, Sindy Morales Garcia, and ‘Iwalani Ka’ai, *Becoming Like Creoles: Living and Leading at the Intersections of Injustice, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), 1–15.

<sup>6</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 269.

<sup>7</sup> Boesak and DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation*, 79–83.

The Antioch congregation had greater resources than the congregation in Jerusalem due to the inclusion of privileged Greeks as members, alongside oppressed Jews. So they raised money to send to their sisters and brothers in the faith in Jerusalem who already faced preexisting economic challenges but now also faced a famine on the way.

The presence of Barnabas was critical. As a former member of the Jerusalem church, he brought to Antioch that sense of equity that was the norm in the Jerusalem church. The mother church of Christianity in Jerusalem practiced a radical kind of sharing that created equity among members within the congregation.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:32–37)

The practice of building equitable relationships within the congregation was integrated into the very definition of what it meant to follow Jesus and participate in the life of the Jerusalem church. When a famine occurred in Jerusalem, Barnabas, now residing in Antioch, expanded the notion of equity. Rather than being limited to an internal congregational practice, he initiated a congregation-to-congregation transfer of resources. He embraced the biblical concept of the unity of the church as one family. A congregation of means in Antioch supported a congregation of need in Jerusalem facing a crisis.

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During COVID-19 and following the protests and unrest, there were many examples of crisis funding. Some of the support was technological as churches who had expertise in live-streaming their worship services trained, and even provided

the needed technology for, congregations with less tech savvy. Some churches with more resources provided financial support for congregations after COVID-19 devastated their already meager budgets.

In Minneapolis following the killing of George Floyd, black neighborhoods that were already food deserts had their groceries and pharmacies damaged and destroyed. Black churches assessed the needs of their members and partnered with white congregations who provided food, transportation, and money. Many white Christians volunteered their time to clean up areas where the rubble of looted and arson-burned businesses remained. Like the Antioch church reaching out to the Jerusalem church in a time of famine, charitable actions address inequities that are multiplied in time of crisis and demonstrate the inherent feeling that all churches belong to the same family.

As an aside, equity is not only the exchange of resources. It also involves how the process is managed. In a further action that expressed a respect for equity in leadership, Barnabas and Saul personally delivered the offering to the elders in Jerusalem—the apostles Peter, James, and John. In other words, the leaders of the better-resourced church sent their lead pastors to personally deliver the money to the lead pastors at the poorer congregation. They did not send an associate mission pastor. Equity in leadership interaction was essential to the process.

Building equity relationships between local congregations is rare today. Yet moments of crisis do bring out charitable instincts that seek to address the increased equity gaps that form on top of the preexisting disparities.

## SYSTEMIC EQUITY AS A CORE VALUE OF THE CHURCH

Unfortunately, crisis responses to inequities do not remedy deeply rooted systemic disparities. The monetary provision from the Antioch church to address famine conditions did not transform the reality that members of the Jerusalem church faced daily economic challenges rooted in systemic inequities in society. The generosity of the Antioch church in a season of global famine seems to have been a one-time act of charity.

The persistent equity gaps in US society have caused some to call for a program of reparations. The church, when it steps into its prophetic role, is seen as a moral voice in society. The church could use its moral authority to call for reparations for black and indigenous people in the United States. In their recent book on reparations, William A. Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen use the acronym ARC—acknowledgment, redress, and closure—to suggest the process of addressing historic racial disparities.<sup>8</sup> According to the authors, reparations are effective when “an improved position for blacks [and Native Americans] is associated with sharp and enduring reductions in racial disparities, particularly economic disparities

<sup>8</sup> William A. Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen, *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 2–3.

like racial wealth inequality, and corresponding sharp and enduring improvements in black [and Native American] well-being.”<sup>9</sup>

There is biblical precedent for confession and reparations. I offer two examples, one from the Hebrew Scriptures and one from the New Testament:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites: When a man or a woman wrongs another, breaking faith with the Lord, that person incurs guilt and shall confess the sin that has been committed. The person shall make full restitution for the wrong, adding one-fifth to it, and giving it to the one who was wronged. (Numbers 5:5–7)

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” (Luke 19:8)

While it is right for the church to call for national reparations, the same racial disparities that exist in society are evident in the church. Predominantly white denominations generally have significantly more resources than historically black denominations in the United States. White congregations of similar size are typically better off than their counterparts who are black, indigenous, or other people of color (BIPOC). The church has little credibility to call for reparations in society without addressing its own racial inequities.

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For wisdom on this matter, let us return to the first-century church. Of course, the economic gaps in society between oppressed Jews and privileged Greeks and Romans were also fully evident in the church. Sometime after Paul and Barnabas delivered the Antioch monetary relief package to the Jerusalem church, they met again with the leaders in Jerusalem. In Galatians 2 Paul describes this meeting that he and Barnabas had with Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and John. The meeting was for the purpose of discerning how to include the growing numbers of Greeks and Romans joining the church, without losing the Jewish presence and voice. The apostle James asked Paul and Barnabas to “remember the poor” (Gal 2:10). This was likely a reference to some sort of equity or reparations relationship between the growing and more prosperous congregations that included (and at times were dominated by) Greeks and Romans and the economically challenged, predominantly Jewish congregations in Palestine. This is something that Paul and Barnabas were “eager to do.”

<sup>9</sup> Darity and Mullen, *From Here to Equality*, 3.

We read in the apostle Paul's letters that he did indeed respond to the request of the leaders from the Jerusalem church. He organized a collection of money for the Jerusalem church from churches he started in the Greek-speaking world of the Roman Empire. He described this initiative in his letter to the Romans:

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. (Romans 15:25–27)<sup>10</sup>

Paul spent a few years on this initiative. This was not a one-time crisis-based response. I believe he was creating a system-wide action for equity in his churches. Paul even recommended a weekly set-aside of funds to go to Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1–2). We do not know the outcome of this project that so consumed Paul. Yet it seems to be an effort to build an ongoing equity mechanism for the church to express its unity. As was the practice in the Jerusalem church of an internal sharing to build equity in community, Paul was creating a church-wide practice of equity.

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What is even more striking is that Paul saw this as a reciprocal act. He noted that Roman and Greek Christians were in debt to Jewish Christians for the gospel. They had received “spiritual blessings” from Jewish Christians who introduced them to Jesus Christ, and they now needed to reciprocate with what Jewish Christians in Jerusalem needed, “material things.” Because Greeks and Romans received the gospel from the Jewish church, they should support the Jewish Christians materially (economic reparations). Yet more than simple redress, it was an expression of unity, of being one church. The work of racial equity is a justice initiative. But Paul did not see it as only an act of justice. He declared that the economic reparations he was implementing were based in a relational reciprocity. The Greek and Roman Christians *owed* this to Jewish Christians.

Greek and Roman Christians received spiritual blessings through joining the church founded by Jewish Christians and through embracing a Jewish Christ. These spiritual blessings were found in gaining freedom from the dehumanizing effects of colonialism and a Roman supremacy identity. Their Roman colonial identity was switched to an identity in Jesus Christ. To demonstrate this transformation available in Christ, Paul took the language used for Caesar—“Son of God,”

<sup>10</sup> See also 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8:1–9:15; cf. Gal 2:10. For a good overview of Paul's collection for Jerusalem, see Paul B. Duff, “Focus On: Paul's Collection for the Poor in Jerusalem,” *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, [https://global.oup.com/obso/focus/focus\\_on\\_paul\\_collection/](https://global.oup.com/obso/focus/focus_on_paul_collection/).

“Lord,” “Redeemer,” “Savior,” “Liberator,” “God”—and used it for Jesus Christ. Paul believed that through Jesus’s death on a cross and his resurrection, Romans and Greeks with power and privilege could be transformed by God’s reconciling grace.

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Paul and the first-century Jewish followers of Jesus were able to look through the distortions of domination and colonization and see the humanity of Romans and Greeks. So they invited them into the church family. Romans and Greeks gained the spiritual blessing of an identity rooted in Christ and liberation from a colonial supremacist mindset. Jewish Christians received the needed material blessing of economic support. Equity was reciprocal.

#### A RECIPROCAL EQUITY IN TODAY’S CHURCH

The fact that congregations and denominations in the United States mirror the racial disparities in broader society is troubling. Furthermore, the integrity of the church as a moral voice for reparations, justice, and equity in the United States is compromised by the evidence of its own internal issues of inequity. We must consider how to follow the apostle Paul’s example of creating ongoing equity mechanisms in the church. White denominations and congregations of means must invest in creating an economic equity with BIPOC churches. Also, Paul’s further statement that economic support was an act of reciprocity has merit today.

In his book *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*, Robert P. Jones writes:

The historical record of lived Christianity in America reveals that Christian theology and institutions have been the central cultural tent pole holding up the very idea of white supremacy. And the genetic imprint of this legacy remains present and measurable in contemporary white Christianity. . . . After centuries of complicity, the norms of white supremacy have become deeply and broadly integrated into white Christian identity, operating far below the level of consciousness. To many well-meaning white Christians today—evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, and Catholic—Christianity and a cultural norm of white supremacy now often feel indistinguishable, with an attack on the latter triggering a full defense of the former.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 6, 10.

According to Jones, the “genetic imprint” of white supremacy is found in present-day white Christianity. Whereas the first-century church set Greeks and Romans free from the genetic imprint of a Roman supremacist captivity, twenty-first-century white supremacist-formed Christianity empowers a racist system to flourish in the United States. As a result, BIPOC Christians are relegated to a second-class Christianity in the minds of whites and an economically inferior position in society (and the church).

As noted earlier, the church began in Jerusalem as a community of oppressed ethnic-minority Jews. As a result of the spiritual healing they experienced through Jesus Christ, they invited in those who had benefited from their oppression to also experience healing. This was the essence of biblical reconciliation (Eph 2).<sup>12</sup> In exchange for this spiritual blessing, Greek and Roman Christians invested financially in the Jewish church.

The question must be asked, Can white Christianity set itself free from the captivity of white supremacy? Or does white Christianity need the investment of a spiritual blessing from the faith found in BIPOC churches in order to be healed of whiteness? Is the hope for the salvation of whites dependent on BIPOC Christians? If so, white churches owe BIPOC churches material support so that BIPOC churches will have the necessary resources to help set whites free. When whites invest in repairing the race-based economic inequities in the church, they are demonstrating racial justice and making a down payment on the return spiritual investment they need from BIPOC faith communities.

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Present-day white Christianity needs to be healed from the genetic imprint of racism and to be reconciled to BIPOC Christians. Many BIPOC churches need additional financial resources for their ministries to thrive. The church needs a relationally reciprocal equity like that initiated in the first century by the apostle Paul. This is the economics of racial equity in the church. ⊕

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<sup>12</sup> Boesak and DeYoung, *Radical Reconciliation*, 11–16.