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### Abstract

Violence against women of color takes many forms. These forms include domestic violence, racialized violence, and institution-initiated violence. While Christianity may not be a direct cause of violence against women, it nevertheless perpetuates this violence. This paper attempts to trace Christianity's perpetuation of violence, which is often traced to theological and cultural perversions of the Bible's messages of peace, love, and forgiveness. This paper also addresses current examples and facts regarding violence against women of color, along with systemic injustices prevalent within modern society. Finally, the paper proposes actions to mitigate and abolish violence against women of color. These actions include improving theological viewpoints on women and improving dialogue within the Christian church on issues of race and violence.

#### Blessed are the Peacemakers? : Christianity's Perpetuation of Violence against Women of Color

Fear often defines part of daily life for women. Violence against women is so prevalent worldwide that approximately 35 percent of women have suffered violence of some kind, whether physical or sexual, during their lifetime ("Facts and Figures"). Due to the prevalence of violence against women, many women learn early in life to be cautious when walking alone, to stay alert in the work place, and to dress modestly in men's presence. While white women undeniably face instances of violence, women of color endure continual, systemic violence and injustice. Examining intimate partner violence alone, American Indian women are 10% more likely and Black women 7% more likely to experience violence than white women (Osborne). Similarly, women of color are more likely to experience institutional violence and less likely to receive proper care than white women. Many surprising factors contribute to the systemic injustice and violence faced by women of color. Among these factors is the Christian church. By perverting theology and succumbing to cultural norms, Christianity has perpetuated racism,

systemic injustice, and violence against women throughout history. Susan Rakoczy, an expert in women and religious studies, connects Christianity's tendency towards violence to its symbolic language. She states, "Christianity has used certain symbols to justify violence, for example the phrase 'God wills it' in the Crusades of the European Medieval Era became a war cry" (31). Just as God was used to justify violence in the Middle Ages, so God is now used to justify violence against women and minorities. Theological perversions can directly result in violence against women of color, and Christianity's history of systemic racial injustice perpetuates this violence. American history demonstrates that although the church could have redirected injustice innumerable times, it instead remained complicit with the racism ravaging the nation (Tisby 1).<sup>1</sup> As a result, violence against people of color, particularly women of color, has continued to flourish. The Christian church must address the systemic violence faced by women of color by rectifying theological and cultural distortions, as well as entering into dialogue about race and violence.

The church contributes to both domestic and racial violence against women by distorting theology to fit cultural norms and values. A primary theological interpretation often used to encourage violence against women, especially domestic violence, is the claim of male authority over the female. Many Christians cite Eve's role in Genesis as reason for male superiority. In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, Eve succumbs to temptation first, directly disobeying God's rules. Eve's failure is frequently cited as proof of woman's sinfulness, or proof that man is better than woman. Similarly, many Christians cite the "Household Code" of Ephesians 5 as mandating the submission of wives to husbands. Ephesians 5.22-24 states, "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas conveyed in this sentence were drawn from Tisby's collective work in *The Color of Compromise*.

head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (*New International Version*). By taking these verses to their extreme meaning, some Christians believe that submission “in everything” includes the authority—and, sometimes, violence—of the husband. Mindy Makant summarizes Douglas Wilson, a Reformed theologian and “prominent voice in the biblical patriarchy movement” (407). Wilson speaks of rape as a conduit of God’s judgment toward a wayward culture which “has forsaken what he takes to be the normative patriarchal notions of biblical man/womanhood. According to Wilson, women are sinned against by men because of their refusal to accept their God-given social and cultural role” (407). By refusing to submit to the “correct” order of the world, according to Wilson’s viewpoint, women face judgment, rape, and other forms of violence. While many Christians certainly disagree with Wilson’s theology, Wilson’s views are nevertheless accepted by many. Wilson pastors Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho, and serves as faculty at New Saint Andrews College. In addition, he has authored over a dozen books and has accumulated over thirty thousand followers on Twitter. While certainly not every follower or every book-buyer agrees with Wilson’s extreme theology, Wilson’s substantial following does indicate that many Christians believe women to be subject to men. By accepting the idea that violence is the woman’s fault, or by emphasizing male dominance, the church can encourage violence against women. This position is a far cry from God’s emphasis on love, particularly Paul’s command for husbands to “love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5.25 NIV).

While the theological distortion of woman’s place is a key factor in perpetuating violence against women, other theological interpretations contribute to gendered violence. One distortion is the “suffering servant” motif (Rakoczy 33). Women who suffer violence, particularly domestic

violence, are frequently portrayed in the church as worthy servants. They, like Christ, suffer under the oppressions of the world, remaining faithful to God's "will" for their lives (Rakoczy 33). However noble this viewpoint may be, the "use of God language to defend the oppression of women, 'this is God's will,' traps women of faith" (Rakoczy 31). Instead of viewing violence as something to be escaped, the church's theological interpretations can result in continuation or acceptance of abuse. Closely related are the results of the church's disapproval of divorce. In Matthew 5.31-32, Jesus denounces divorce, saying, "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (NIV). Because of Jesus' condemnation of divorce, the practice is widely disapproved of by the church. However, when the church disapproves of divorce even in the case of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, it perpetuates violence. Women of faith often feel stuck in abusive relationships because the church teaches against divorce. Theological interpretations and practices can make religious women more vulnerable in the case of abuse by emphasizing the eternity of marriage and women's importance as "wife and homemaker." This can make leaving an abusive marriage very difficult, especially when paired with the religious ideas of forgiveness and sacrifice (Nason-Clark 304).

In addition to theological distortions on women's value and roles, the church's distortions in regard to race perpetuate racial violence. Frequently, the issues of racial injustice and violence are altogether avoided in the church. Silence prevails as Christians attempt to gloss over the difficult realities of racism. Jemar Tisby presents an example of one Black pastor who sought racial justice; this pastor spoke up for his beliefs and "lost support among some white evangelicals" (182). Somehow, Tisby says, approaching the topic of racial justice has come to

indicate “a drift away from the ‘true’ gospel” (182), with a shift toward “progressive” politics instead. The same gospel that urges one to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly” is often presented as opposed to doing exactly that (Micah 6.8). By distorting doctrine, the church (specifically white evangelicalism) is sometimes guilty of stifling progress for racial justice and rejecting change for racism. One possible result of this reluctance is segregation within the church. According to Tisby, “The reluctance to reckon with racism has led to a chasm between black and white Christians in theology, politics, and culture. This chasm only makes it harder to productively communicate and take effective action around racial issues” (192). When segregation within the church is a direct reflection of theological issues, racial violence is a more drastic result. Segregation within the church, combined with racist teachings, can contribute to feelings of racial superiority from white Christians. This mindset sometimes results in violence against people of color, and paired with theological distortions on women’s roles, this mindset can also result in gendered violence.

The racism and violence seen today, resulting in part from the church’s theological distortions, reflect a history of racial injustice and oppression spurred on by Christianity. Many Americans view the United States as a fundamentally Christian nation. Many early members of the nation were nominally Christian, and Christian principles were incorporated into the new nation. However, the early years of the United States were also marked by slavery and oppression of African Americans—horrors which inclusive Christian doctrine does not sanction. As early as the Colonial Era of American history, both the church and the State denied people of color freedom based on slaves’ religious beliefs (Tisby 25). Tisby cites the Virginia General Assembly as an example, quoting, “It is enacted and declared by this Grand Assembly, and the authority thereof, that the conferring of baptism does not alter the condition of the person as to

his bondage or freedom” (25). The Assembly’s stance reflects both theological distortion and racism. These same injustices are reflected in a missionary of the same period to African slaves. He converted many slaves to Christianity, yet “the vows he made the slaves recite show how European missionaries maintained a strict separation between spiritual and physical freedom” (Tisby 38). These vows included an admission that seeking spiritual freedom was not an attempt at receiving physical freedom. Religion was thus used as a vessel of oppression, keeping people enslaved and pacifying them with the promise of eternal freedom rather than physical freedom. Despite the Bible’s insistence on unity of believers (Galatians 3.28) and the freedom found in Christ (Romans 6), Black people in this period clearly faced a double standard. They were considered spiritually united with their white neighbors, they were considered free of their sins in Christ, yet they were not considered socially equal or physically free by their society.

As America progressed, views on slavery and racial equality progressed little. The 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the advent of the “Great Awakening,” a spiritual revival that swept the nation. While many accepted Christianity, few experienced radical changes in their view of slavery. On the contrary, two of the greatest revivalists of the period, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, promoted slavery (Tisby 46-51). Whitefield and Edwards did equate Black souls with white souls; however, they also accepted slavery as biblically sanctioned (51). According to Tisby, “Like these two preachers, many other Christians did not see anything in the Bible that forbade slavery. In fact, the Scriptures seemed to accept slavery as an established reality” (51).

Theological distortion and misunderstanding therefore contributed to unspeakable suffering throughout history. Frederick Douglass, a former slave, describes this coexistence of Christianity and violence in his autobiography. After one of his masters became religious at a revival, Douglass hoped for a change in the cruel man; maybe now, Douglass, thought, he will show

charity and mercy. Instead, “If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. [...] After his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty” (32). Douglass’s account signals a sad reality of American history, the reality that theology is often used as a weapon of violence. While some Christians, like Whitefield and Edwards, justified slavery, others took this justification to an extreme by acting violently against their Black brothers and sisters.

The most recent period of American history, while certainly granting improvement for people of color, nevertheless demonstrates continual social injustice. The American Civil War ravaged the nation in the 1860s as the right to slavery hung in the balance. Eventually, slaves did receive nominal freedom, yet their rights and oppression saw minimal improvement. This era also saw battles fought within American churches—particularly Southern churches—over the issue of slavery. The Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches fought figurative battles over “slaveholding bishops,” “slaveholding missionaries,” and “Christ and Caesar,” respectively (Tisby 76-80). The very fact that dissension on the morality of slavery occurred demonstrates racism’s integral role in American Christianity. Frederick Douglass deplored the Christianity of the South, stating, “I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,— and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection” (46). Douglass experienced firsthand the injustice the church can perpetuate, which is demonstrated in the dissension of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century church.

In the period following the Civil War, white supremacy arose as a brutal adversary to the nation's battle against injustice. According to Tisby, white supremacists, such as the Ku Klux Klan, use a religious redemption motif to justify bigotry and racism (96). Redemption is a key concept in Christianity, the idea that Christians are saved for eternity by redemption in Christ. White supremacists, however, "saw their efforts as a divine mandate for the white man to take his rightful place atop the social hierarchy" (96). White supremacy and the KKK are closely associated with Christianity through this motif and similar views. White supremacists, both in post-Civil War America and today, use distorted theology to their best advantage. Not all modern racism, however, results in white supremacy. The church often contributes to racism more subtly in the modern era. For instance, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a migration of white people away from areas in which Black people now lived, typically large cities (Tisby 126). White people flocked to the suburbs, typically followed by their predominately white churches. By failing to adapt to the cities' new population through integration, Christian churches instead moved to the suburbs and remained complicit in injustice (127). Instead of seeking unity with their Black neighbors, white Christians instead sought the segregation that embodied the historic religion of "hateful frauds" and "infernal ... slaveholders" (Douglass 46).

While studies of U.S. history often focus on racism against men, the nation's history demonstrates equal horrors against women. Furthermore, the nation's patriarchal roots interact with its racist roots. Not only were women subject to racism, they were also faced with the horrors of patriarchy and sexual violence. According to the patriarchal system which has dominated history, women, as inferior beings, are subject to male rule. Male dominance sometimes results in its worst extreme, violence against women. Particularly in an era marked by slavery, violence sparked by male dominance was further complicated by race. When the women



being abused were Black, they were seen as even less valuable and more at the disposal of white men. According to Nishaun Battle, Black women were excluded from the value system required of white women, “which encouraged submissiveness, piety, domesticity, and purity (Welter 1966). By excluding Black women from social validation, the ideology of ‘true womanhood’ also justified violence against and insufficient legal protection for them” (110). This “justified violence” is recounted in Douglass’s narrative. Douglass describes numerous instances of gendered, racial violence, including against his aunt. She was abused by her master and whipped mercilessly, but “no words, no tears, no prayers, from [the abuser’s] gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose” (4). The horror of violence against women of color stands in stark contrast to God’s call in John 13.34 to “love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (NIV). Nevertheless, Christians not only accepted this violence but also initiated it. Tisby cites Olaudah Equiano, a Black Christian who was traded as a slave. Equiano repudiates people who engage in slavery yet call themselves Christians. He remembers slave traders’ rape of African women and says that it was a “disgrace, not only of Christians, but of men. I have even known them to gratify their brutal passion with females not yet ten years old” (qtd. 30). Heinous actions such as the slave traders’ reflect not true Christian theology but selfish perversions which gratify their own desires. The sexualized violence women of color faced was a unique issue, resulting not only from racial injustice but from patriarchal injustices as well. This compound injustice was not just ignored by Christians; it was perpetuated and enacted by those who claimed to follow Christ.

The racial and sexual injustice women of color have faced throughout history, rooted in patriarchal oppression and racial injustice, dehumanizes women. Battle writes, “enslaved Black women were disregarded as human beings, and inhumane punishment fit well within the social

norms of slavery at the time. White male privilege allowed white men and women alike to ignore the abuse of Black women” (112-113). Furthermore, Black women were treated as “disregarded objects, subject to treatment beyond the law due to the social order of Southern society” (116). Christians, as we have seen, joined in this violence and degradation of human beings, meanwhile citing the Bible in their abuse. Douglass details the results of his master’s religious ideals, which include violence against a “lame young woman” whom his master whips, justifying his actions by quoting Scripture: “He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes” (33). Douglass’s master justifies his cruelty, racism, and dehumanization of this woman with the Bible. Although Christians of the past justified dehumanization with Scripture, the Bible’s repeated emphases on love, forgiveness, sacrifice, and mercy contradict this degradation. Douglass recognized the difference between the practiced Christianity of the U.S. and the Christianity of the Bible. He states, “I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. [...] We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members” (71). The ultimate goal of Christianity is to become more like Christ. Since Christ’s mission is “pure, peaceable, and impartial,” the historical church strayed from true Christianity by following not Christ’s example but their own broken ambitions.

Violence against women of color is not simply a part of the past, nor is the church’s contribution to injustice. Instead, modern women face many of the same challenges wrought by patriarchal, racist distortions of God’s gospel. While no longer usually at the hands of slave owners, “54% of women of color are survivors of intimate partner violence” today (Osborne). Many women are unaware they can receive help from this violence, and often they are too afraid

to seek help from the police due to the “historic and current ways that police have treated [...] Black communities” (O’Neal qtd. in Osborne). In fact, “many black women are often arrested when they make a [domestic violence] call even though they are looking for protection” (O’Neal qtd. in Osborne). Women of color therefore frequently suffer violence with no hope in sight, remaining silent in their pain. This silence is often reinforced by the church. When the church remains silent on the topic of abuse, “Victims keep silent, seeing the issue as their own personal struggle” (Nason-Clark 307). Rather than addressing the injustice in the world, the church frequently disregards it, and women feel that the burden they are facing is theirs alone. Or, in the case of police violence against women of color, women of color remain silent as a result of fear. When churches vocalize support for police while disregarding the violence police inflict, women of color may become alienated, further oppressed by the church. When faced with both religious silence and institutional oppression, the violence women of color suffer becomes overwhelming.

Injustice toward women of color reveals itself within the nation’s institutions, as evidenced from the nation’s history of police brutality against people of color. Women of color are often afraid to seek help from police when they suffer violence because of this brutality. In 2014, Tanisha Anderson was murdered by a police officer responding to a call for medical assistance (Ashley Smith 263). One officer “raped multiple Black women in low-income neighborhoods,” while another used “excessive force against 15-year-old Dajerria Becton at a pool party in Texas” (265). Furthermore, from 2013-2016, “more than 70 Black women and girls have been murdered due to state violence (Khaleeli, 2016)” (264). While these examples are limited, they nevertheless provide a glimpse into the pain women of color can endure from police. Many evangelical Christians, however, strongly support police officers. They recognize the sacrifice of time and, sometimes, life that police officers give to their communities. Many

Christians therefore remain skeptical of police brutality. Christians sometimes espouse that police violence is a result of “a few bad apples,” that most police officers are good people. Not all police officers are bad people, but the overwhelming examples of Black deaths at the hands of police signal institutionalized violence rather than simply individual acts. According to Ashley Smith, white women in a Christian, patriarchal system are traditionally expected to be passive and docile. Black women, however, are stereotypically viewed as strong willed and aggressive. When Black women “act up,” then, they are often treated with excessive violence because they are expected to act terribly as “bad” women (265-266). The intersecting issues of gender and race, combined with racial stereotypes and cultural expectations, result in institutional violence against women of color. Paired with the church’s general support for police, religious norms of segregation and silence diminish women of color as the image of God and instead present them as “the other,” someone unknown and different. When women of color are viewed as both “bad” and “other,” not as God’s beloved children, it is easier to suggest that police violence is a result of “a few bad apples.” However, when violence against women of color is seen as an atrocity against God’s image, it is easier to recognize the institutional violence women of color suffer.

Because both theological and cultural distortions contribute to violence against women of color, theology, the church, and society must be reformed. To reform theological distortion, the Bible must be examined critically. Although Eve’s sin is often cited as one reason for male domination, Adam joined Eve in her temptation. He was not the first to disobey God, yet he remained near Eve in her temptation and soon committed the same sin as his wife. Similarly, while Ephesians 5 does call for wives’ submission, 5.25 also instructs husbands to “love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (NIV). Also, the beginning of the “Household Code,” Ephesians 5.22, commands that both husband and wife “submit to one

another out of reverence for Christ” (NIV). By studying these passages critically and open-mindedly, as well as by engaging in critical discussion on the topics, more understanding may result. Makant advocates for reducing male violence against women by encouraging a biblically-accurate view of the worth and equality of men and women. She states that what society needs is:

a relational account of gender, of being created male and female in the image of God, that reflects God’s creative and redemptive intent for humanity and for all of creation. Such an eschatological account necessarily entails a re-narrating of the way men and women relate to one another with the grace and peace intended in creation. (406)

One aspect of resolving violence against women, then, could come by reshaping theological understanding of the woman’s place to a place of equality, as well as reframing conversations about relationships in a framework of peace.

Like reforming theology, reforming the church and society requires honesty about the past and the mistakes of church and society. The value of repentance from sins, so important within the church, must be implemented to address past mistakes. While the issues facing women of color are both racial and patriarchal, it is important that reform be focused on their specific group and set of issues. According to Andrea Smith, attempts at reforming violence against women frequently add a “multicultural component” to programs intended for “white, middle class women” in order to diversify anti-violence efforts (121). These programs focus on violence resulting from a patriarchal system. Women of color, however, face a racist system, resulting in distinct issues from white women. Women of color must have access to programs tailored to their specific needs, including violence caused by both patriarchy *and* racism. Furthermore, women of color must be involved in planning these programs to ensure that the programs adequately address women of color’s needs (121). Because both the nation and Christianity have

failed to effectively combat violence against women of color, Nason-Clark advocates for a balanced approach in which “the language of contemporary culture and the language of the spirit” work hand in hand to combat domestic violence (304). While inclusive anti-violence efforts are needed, anti-violence programs must work in tandem with a Church that is amending theological distortions. Other suggestions for ameliorating violence against women include devising “programs that identify the signs of sexual victimization in order to support girls who have been traumatized by violence” and developing “the public will to address the challenges facing black girls and other girls of color through elevating their experiences” (Crenshaw et al. 42, 43). Instead of remaining silent in the face of violence, the church can instead join the effort to elevate Black girls and women. While Christianity may contribute to violence against women, it is also uniquely poised to work with society to resolve this violence in an ultimate act of repentance.

The church’s repentance for perpetuating violence could take many forms, but Jemar Tisby offers a distinct method for approaching reconciliation and reform in the church. This is the ARC method: awareness, relationships, and commitment (194). First, white Christians should gain awareness of the United States’ history of racism, as well as current racial injustices facing the nation. White Christians should also focus on relationships, including expanding their relationships to include more Black people and other people of color. Finally, Christians should demonstrate a commitment to reform and reconciliation, making antiracism a “way of life” (196). The ARC method will not resolve all racial violence, nor violence against women of color. However, it is one method of seeking reform. Tisby also suggests reparations within the church (199). Jesus, Tisby says, teaches people to leave the altar if they must first be reconciled to a brother or sister, then to return (199). White Christians owe much to their Black brothers and

sisters. While much of the church has yet to “interrupt their regularly scheduled worship [...] to repair the relationship,” this step must be taken if the church wishes to heal racial violence (199). Tisby suggests a range of other solutions for racial reconciliation and reform, yet he insists that all of it can be done “without rancor but with conviction” (211). In reforming violence against women of color, church and society need not be at odds with one another. Instead, the church can work with secular society to reform violence in a manner reflecting Christ’s grace and peace.

The United States’ history of racial injustice reveals the depth and horror of violence against women of color. Likewise, the extent and horror of violence against modern women of color reveals a dire need for reform. Unfortunately, the Christian church has historically contributed to or perpetuated violence against racial minorities and women. Theological distortions, combined with cultural influences, pervert the church’s responsibility to spread Christ’s love. Despite the horrific historical and continuing violence against women, the church can still be a voice of change. The church must explore theological issues pertaining to female subordination, as well as engage in critical discussion about these topics. In addition, the church must engage with the society surrounding it to most effectively impact women experiencing violence. Like Jemar Tisby suggests, Christians should encourage antiracism and boldly confront instances of violence by engaging in awareness, relationships, and commitment. Most importantly, the church cannot remain silent. Both the church’s leaders and its members must educate themselves on the violence women of color face and engage in open and active discussion. As Rakoczy states, “The church must be seen to be on the side of those experiencing violence, not a silent colluder in that violence” (34). The church must follow Christ’s call to be peacemakers, acting as children of God toward women of color facing violence (Matt. 5.9 NIV).

As the Church, let us boldly raise our voice and cry out against injustice, violence, and oppression. Let us seek to follow Christ fully as the world's peacemakers.



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