

Author contrasts slaveholder religion and the freedom church

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DALLAS—Throughout American history, two versions of Christianity have competed for the loyalty of believers—slaveholder religion and the freedom church, author Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove told a Dallas audience.

“We are facing a moral crisis. What pains me most is that white evangelical Christians are making it possible,” said Wilson-Hartgrove, an Anglo who is an associate minister at the historically black St. John’s Missionary Baptist Church in Durham, N.C.

He led a workshop on “Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion” during the Red Letter Revival, an event sponsored by a group that emphasizes applying the teachings of Jesus to modern social issues.

Growing up in North Carolina—“just down the road from Mayberry,” in his words—Wilson-Hartgrove “trusted the moral narrative” he inherited from his family and neighbors, including its racist underpinnings, he said.

As a politically ambitious teenager who dreamed of becoming president someday, he received an appointment by Sen. Strom Thurmond from neighboring South Carolina to serve as a page in the U.S. Senate.

‘The narrative began to unravel’

In that role, he learned more about Thurmond’s history as an ardent segregationist who ran as the “Dixiecrat” candidate for president in 1948 and conducted the longest filibuster on record by a single senator in

opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1957.

“That’s when the narrative began to unravel for me,” particularly since most of the people he knew praised Thurmond as a moral champion who protected their Christian Southern heritage, he said.

Wilson-Hartgrove realized the version of the gospel he had learned as a white person growing up in the South was not good news for African-Americans.

“I began to ask, ‘What would another way of being Christian look like?’” he said.

A different understanding of gospel

At a key point in his life, Wilson-Hartgrove encountered William Barber II, pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, N.C.



“He began to teach me about a black-led, faith-rooted freedom struggle,” said Wilson-Hartgrove, author of [*Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion*](#).

He learned how slaveholders and their allies used the Bible to support their arguments in favor of slavery and of an economic system dependent upon slave labor.

However, he also learned about “the freedom church that was born on the edge of the plantations,” he said. Meeting in brush arbors for worship, African-American slaves identified with biblical stories about how God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt and liberated them from exile in Babylon.

“There has always been a struggle between slaveholder religion and the freedom church,” Wilson-Hartgrove said.

Continuing influence of slaveholder religion

While the North won the Civil War, the South essentially won the narrative in terms of perpetuating immoral arguments couched in biblical language, throughout the Jim Crow era and continuing to the present, he asserted.

“Extremism claims moral language to justify sin,” he said. “The patterns we inherited from the 19th century are with us still. But the faith that was at the heart of the civil rights movement is also with us still.”

Slaveholder religion has taken a spiritual toll on the United States, he insisted.

“We have split the gospel in two, and it warps us,” he said. “The narrative cuts off compassion and shriveled our hearts, leaving us with a diminished capacity to love God.”

Wilson-Hartgrove endorsed the idea of “fusion politics” Barber promotes as leader of the Poor People’s Campaign, bringing together people of faith from different races and political parties to support policies that advance economic justice for all people.

However, rather than focusing exclusively on electoral victories, Wilson-

Hartgrove discussed how bringing people together around biblically based moral principles can lead to “surprising friendships.”

“God can transform relationships,” he said.

At its heart, racism in the United States is a spiritual problem that requires “soul work” to solve, Wilson-Hartgrove said.

“Deep healing is needed,” he said. “To be segregated from our neighbors by racial divisions and economic inequities makes it harder to know God. But as we listen to one another, we draw closer to one another and closer to God.”