

# Jemar Tisby offers lessons from an ‘evangelical reject’

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WACO—Predominantly white spaces—particularly in evangelical circles—seldom welcome African Americans who focus on racial justice, author Jemar Tisby told a conference at Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary.

“If you persist in fighting racism in predominantly white spaces long enough, you will either sell out, burn out, or get pushed out,” said Tisby, author of *The Color of Compromise* and *How to Fight Racism*.

Tisby was the closing keynote speaker for a conference called “Time to Wake Up: Racism in the White Church.” The event—the second in a three-year series focused on racism and the church—was made possible by a grant from the John and Eula Mae Baugh Family Foundation.

As a Christian who came to faith in a predominantly white evangelical church and attended a predominantly white Reformed seminary in preparation for ministry in a predominantly white denomination, Tisby considered himself “pushed out.”

He offered what he called “seven lessons from an evangelical reject,” based on his experience:

**. “There is a difference between intent and impact.”**

He recalled the high school youth group where issues of race never were acknowledged.

“The issue wasn’t what they said. It was what they didn’t say. It’s not what they did. It’s what they didn’t do,” Tisby said.

“I felt invisible. ... They never once did anything malicious. ... But the impact was real. The impact was that I was in but not of.”

**. “Priestly proximity builds empathy.”**

After he graduated from Notre Dame University, Tisby joined the Teach for America program. His assignment was to teach sixth graders in the Arkansas Delta.

“I was confronted with a reality I had never been immersed in before,” he said.

Tisby served in the nation’s fourth-poorest county in a town where 43 percent of the residents lived at or below the poverty level.

Working first as a classroom teacher and later as a principal, he learned “up close” about the lives of Black children trapped in generational poverty for reasons that date back to the era of chattel slavery.

While the Bible had much to say about the kind of injustice he witnessed, Tisby said, his church had nothing to say about the subject.

**. “There is a difference between racial reconciliation and racial justice.”**

Evangelicals emphasize individual accountability and interpersonal relationships, Tisby observed. So, their idea of racial reconciliation is

focused solely on building relationships.

“Fighting racism takes more than handshakes and hugs,” he said. “It takes more than a pulpit swap. It takes more than a heart-to-heart conversation over a cup of coffee or tea where we pour out our life stories, share and hug it out in the end.”

The white evangelical emphasis on individual accountability and relationship building is accompanied by a mistrust of systems and structures that makes any discussion of systemic racism “off-limits.”

“Black lives matter” emerged as a “heart cry” and “expression of lament” after police shootings of young Black men, Tisby noted. And when whites countered by saying, “No, all lives matter,” many Black people felt their pain was minimized and they were misunderstood.

“‘Black lives matter’ doesn’t mean ‘only Black lives matter.’ ‘Black lives matter’ means ‘Black lives matter, too’—as well as, in addition to, ‘all lives matter,’” he said.

**· “Sometimes, you have to build your own table.”**

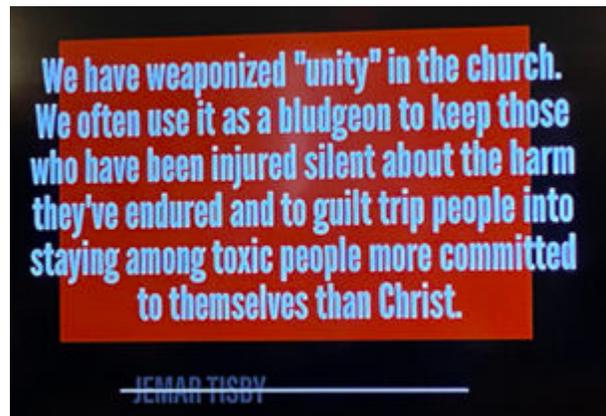
Too often, white institutions may want Black faces in the crowd, but they don’t want Black voices speaking from their own experience, Tisby said.

“They value our presence but not our perspective. They value our faces but not our feelings. They like our attendance but not our experience,” he said.

Rather than continuing to work within predominantly white structures where they are not valued, asking for a place at the table, it sometimes may be best for Black people to create their own structures, he noted.

## . “Justice takes sides.”

“There’s an oppressed and an oppressor—which is Bible language. You’ll see on the Internet all the time, ‘To say the word—oppressed—is CRT.’ No, that’s Bible. Look it up,” he said.



Too often, any discussion of racial justice is discounted as “woke” or branded as “critical race theory,” he said.

When Tisby spoke at Grove City College in October 2020, he described his on-campus reception as “tense but polite.”

However, a year later an online petition—[Save GCC from CRT](#)—circulated, and the board of trustees created a special committee to investigate “mission drift” within the institution. The committee produced a report the trustees voted to receive and adopt.

In part, [the report stated](#): “Most of those in GCC leadership with whom we spoke observed that ‘the Jemar Tisby that we thought we invited in 2019 is not the Jemar Tisby that we heard in 2020 or that we now read about.’ They allow that, in hindsight, inviting Mr. Tisby to speak in chapel was a mistake.”

Since the reaction rose to the level of official action by a university’s governing board, Tisby said he chose to speak up. He noted his views on racial justice were formed by the study of history and Scripture—not a study of critical race theory.

[Tisby wrote](#): “History and Jesus will determine whether my words were divisive and un-Christian and whether the actions of the Grove City College committee represented a defense of the “faith once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

“We are living in times that call us to take sides, either the side of justice or injustice. The side of righteousness or unrighteousness. Choose this day whom you will serve ... and what Christian college or university you will support.”

**. “Go where you are celebrated, not tolerated.”**

In recent years, Black worshippers began what originally was described as a “quiet exodus” from predominantly white evangelical churches.

In response, Tisby and others promoted #LeaveLoud—a call for Blacks to reclaim their dignity from institutions where they did not feel valued.

Institutions cannot “repair hurt and harm” unless they hear the stories from those whom they have injured, he said.

Last fall, Tisby accepted a faculty position as professor of history at Simmons College, a historically Black institution in Kentucky.

**. “Be strong and courageous.”**

Tisby pointed to the promise of Joshua 1:9—if God’s people show strength and courage, and if they step out in faith, they can be assured of God’s presence.

“If you want a closer walk with Jesus, then you need to step up and be

strong and courageous,” he said. “When you stand up for racial justice, you are on God’s side. Why are you timid? What are you afraid of?”