

ONENESS EMBRACED

Through the Eyes of
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Chapter 1

BROKEN LIBERTY

The racial problem is an unresolved dilemma of America. Racial problems have gone on since America's inception because their root has not been addressed by the people who are most qualified to address it: the church. When we can only bring people together in a limited way, without canceling who they have been created to be, under an umbrella that is bigger than the color that they claim, then how can we expect much more from the world?

The goal of the church should be to glorify God by reflecting the values of God among the people of God through letting the truth of God be the standard by which we measure right and wrong and the way we accept skin color, class, and culture. Until we can embrace how we were born and raised, we will never be able to manifest the values of God in history so that people can understand and fully see that God is a God of multi-coloredness. God loves the variety in His garden called earth, and each one of us has equal value; after all, He died for each one.

The Contradiction of Liberty

During my college summers, I lived and worked in Philadelphia as an associate evangelist with the Grand Old Gospel Fellowship, regularly setting up tent, church, or outdoor crusades. Frequently, I was able to participate in more than the logistics of the event, but also had the opportunity to do what I am passionate about doing, and that is to posit the truth of God through preaching.

I have always been drawn to the truth. Truth, at its core, is God's view of a matter. It is a powerful entity able to transform lives both in history and for eternity. While truth includes information and facts, it also includes original intent, making it the absolute, objective standard by which reality is measured. The presence of truth brings clarity and understanding. Its absence leads to confusion and the presence of cognitive dissonance—holding contradictory ideas simultaneously.

Located in this same city of Philadelphia where I once preached as a young man is a perfect example of such a contradiction rising out of the abyss of the absence of truth. Hung in the heart of the City of Brotherly Love is the Liberty Bell. Originally cast to commemorate the fifty-year anniversary of William Penn's Charter of Privileges, the quotation, "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land unto *all* the inhabitants thereof," was especially suited to the circumstances surrounding the intent of the Charter and its anniversary. That quotation from Leviticus 25:10 came immediately after the command, "Consecrate the fiftieth year." It was followed by the statement, "It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan."

At this time in biblical history, according to this passage, all Jews who had been sold into slavery were set free (Leviticus 25:40–41). Not only was liberty a possibility in light of the Jubilee, but it was guaranteed. Liberty and the end of slavery were simultaneous realities, mutually dependent upon each other in relationship to the call for jubilee.

Yet at the time in America when the jubilee was inscribed on the side of the great bell, the liberty it announced had been aborted for many. Slavery continued with no foreseeable end, sanctioned not only by society but also by the church. Fifty years after William Penn's

famous charter, our nation's bell proclaimed its own contradictory fifty-year jubilee, ringing out the bittersweet sounds of an emasculated freedom across the hilltops and prairies of our vast land.

The Breaking of the Bell

The Liberty Bell rang in celebration of momentous civic achievements or to summon people together for a special announcement. One of these achievements, according to tradition, was the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence on July 8, 1776. It is said that the sound of the Liberty Bell called out to citizens both far and near to join in this heraldic event. Rich and poor, well dressed and disheveled came together as a community to hear the words,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that *all* men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The Declaration's truth rang deeply within those who heard it, echoing the resonant tones of the bell. For a moment in time, both the Declaration and the Bell proclaimed liberty together. Yet fissures, or cracks, in the bell, a reflection of fissures in the conscience of our land, raised the concern of those most closely working with it. Attempts were made to bore out the cracks before they developed into something more severe.

In 1846, in honor of George Washington's birthday, the bell rang faithfully for hours until ultimately succumbing to the pressure put on the cracks. The *Philadelphia Public Ledger* reported that just after noon, the bell split widely on one side, rendering it unringable:

The old Independence Bell rang its last clear note on Monday last in honor of the birthday of Washington and now hangs in the great city steeple irreparably cracked and dumb. . . . It gave out clear notes and loud, and appeared to be in excellent condition until noon, when it received a sort of compound fracture in a zigzag direction through one of its sides which put it completely out of tune and left it a mere wreck of what it was.

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In a city known for brotherly love, a compound fracture proclaimed otherwise. The jagged divide up the side of the symbol for equality and liberty could not be any more profound in its revelation of dualistic realities. There is a gap in the Liberty Bell, a missing point of connection preventing it from ringing clearly with the smooth tones of a complete union—of oneness.

Something is also missing in our nation today. The election of our first African-American president, and all that led up to it, reignited the discussion in our land on race relations and equality. What many thought would be racial healing in our land has only brought to light how deep the racial divide really is. Whether it is reflected in racially motivated acts of violence in the community or workplace or in political accusations between and within parties, racism has been reintroduced as an issue that simply hasn't been resolved. Issues of race smolder beneath the news headlines of today in the areas of immigration reform, racial profiling, zoning issues, and educational disparity.

Yet beyond that, and what concerns me personally even more, is that something is missing in the church.

Like the problem with the bell, a compound fracture has zig-zagged through the body of Christ, keeping us largely divided along racial and class lines. This division has existed for some time, and while attempts have been made to bore out the fissures through seminars, racial-reconciliation events, and well-intentioned efforts at creating experiences of oneness, we have a long way to go toward strengthening the areas that have cracks or filling in the gaps that loom between us.

Why This? Why Now?

In light of all that has been done and how far we have come, you may be asking, "Tony, why write this book? And why now?"

A battle is going on right now in our nation about the meaning of freedom. This battle concerns the role of the church. Often we are divided over politics. A battle between socialism and capitalism is seeking to divide our nation even further than it already is. The emergence of the New Black Panther Party as well as the rallying efforts of the Tea Party are heating up public debate today.

We, the church, have allowed these battles to divide people of faith even more deeply than before. We cannot afford this. Our nation

cannot afford this. Our sons and daughters—whether black, white, or any other color—cannot afford this. We can no longer afford to sit idly by representing the body of Christ as a “mere wreck” of its divine design. The solutions to the issues we face today are found only by applying a biblical and divine standard as answers to the questions before us. The church should be a model, at such a time as this, to reveal to the world what true oneness, equality, and freedom can produce. Hell advances on the church’s doorsteps with fervent speed, and as long as we remain divided, it will continue to do so.

We can resist hell’s advances and take back our nation for Christ if we are willing to come together by first filling in our own gaps—gaps in our understanding, our knowledge of our unique histories, and our relationships—while simultaneously repairing our own fissures that lead to even greater divides.

Our songs ring mournfully flat when the bells on our churches remain cracked. Even so, we continue to belt out our songs with tremendous passion at times, perhaps in hopes that by singing them loudly enough we can somehow cover the silence between us. We sing emotion-filled lyrics designed to draw us together by reminding us that “we all bleed red” until we are blue in the face. But the truth is that when the song is over, we go our separate ways.

We go our separate ways because we have discovered that it takes more than a hug or a friendly “hello” to bridge the gap. While some of us have, many of us have not taken the necessary effort to get to know each other on a level of an authentic exchange. Without a basis of shared knowledge, purposes, and mutual respect, we cannot come together for any meaningful impact.

I read an interesting quote in a book the other day that highlighted the reality that many of us often don’t realize—authentic oneness comes as an outgrowth of shared lives, not simply through a cross-cultural experience here or there. The author’s words originally caught my attention as I stumbled across my own name, but then I saw that the point he was making summarized a common theme in American Christian culture today. He said, “I know many of my white friends and colleagues, both past and present, have at times grown irritated by the black community’s incessant blabbering about race and racism and racial reconciliation. They don’t understand what’s left for

them to do or say. 'We have African Americans and other people of color on our staff. We listen to Tony Evans's broadcast every day. We even send our youth group into the city to do urban ministry. Can we get on with it already? Haven't we done enough?'"¹

With the racial divide still stretching wide for miles, we obviously haven't done enough. Much of what has gone on under the designation of racial reconciliation and oneness in Christianity is nothing more than tolerance. To be certain, we have come a long way from slavery, Jim Crow laws of segregation, and other overt expressions of racial hatred. But tolerating each other does not mean we have reconciled. The two are not the same, as demonstrated by the fact that we remain relationally separated most of the time, only coming together for a scheduled event as opposed to living out a desire for ongoing mutual edification and implementation of a shared vision.

The proof that we still have a long way to go in the church today is that a collective cross-cultural presence is not having a restoring effect in our society. We are more concerned about achieving the American dream than we are about letting the rule of God remake segregated churches and denominations. In so doing, we have limited the degree to which the healing balm of God's grace flows freely from us into our communities, and ultimately throughout our land. If what we call racial reconciliation is not transforming individuals, families, churches, and communities, then it is merely sociology with a little Jesus sprinkled on top.

Biblical racial reconciliation may be defined as *addressing the sin that caused the divide for the purpose of bonding together across racial lines based on a shared commitment to Jesus Christ with the goal of service to others.*

In a nation whose middle name is "Me" and where "time is money," being intentional about relationships is required even when connecting with others in our own culture. The very structure of our society impedes many of us in our pursuit of making authentic connections. This is even more so when it comes to developing relationships with others in a different culture than our own. But oneness, as we will see through a careful study of Scripture, is worth the effort. This is because oneness is the preeminent vehicle through which God displays not only His power and His presence, but also His glory.

This book at this time is set forth not only as a biblical call to oneness, but also as an invitation to an extended handshake. It is my hand reaching out to my white brothers and sisters to say, "Hi, my name is Tony Evans. Let me introduce myself, and the history of my people, in a way that you may not have yet heard." It is also my hand reaching out to my black brothers and sisters to say, "There is a lot more about you, and us, than you may have realized. And it is good."

More than a discipleship book on reconciliation, the kingdom, and justice, this book serves as a much-needed compilation of the spiritual history and development of the black church and black evangelicalism, stories too long shelved in the attics of our collective minds. This history is shared in order to introduce truth to those in the African-American community who may not know the richness of our own heritage in a nation and in churches that have often turned a blind eye. It is also done to introduce this same truth to my white brothers and sisters so that their vision may be clear, and through seeing, they may realize the benefits that can be found when embracing what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called our "inescapable network of mutuality . . . [our] single garment of destiny."

While many books have chronicled the history of blacks in America and black spirituality, and many other books have laid the foundation for oneness in the body of Christ, this book presents a holistic story proffering not only a bid for oneness, but also providing the necessary elements to begin to do so by filling in the gaps of black church history. The merging of a biblical foundation for oneness along with a sequential summary of Christianity within the African Diaspora combines to present a broader kingdom perspective on God's view on race.

This perspective flows uniquely out of my personal situation of having been doubly influenced first by black culture through my intimate ties with black individual, family, church, and community life combined with the influence of white evangelicalism, having studied in its institutions and worked alongside its leaders. Weaving these two worlds together and placing them underneath the truth of Scripture has framed a distinctive lens through which to view racial oneness and biblical justice within the body of Christ.

If the truth is supposed to set us free and yet we are still not free

from enormously destructive racial and class divisions in the church, then the truth is missing.

The result of this missing truth in our history and culture has kept segments of the black community looking to governmental systems for assistance rather than taking personal initiative. This lack of initiative often comes cradled in a victim mentality where racism is blamed for many more things than it should be.

This missing truth has also kept segments of the white community in bondage to a relational style based on stereotypical presumptions as well as a paternalistic expectation birthed in a spirit of entitlement. This prohibits many white Christians from adopting and benefiting from a learning posture underneath black Christians.

The effect is a stronghold on both groups, keeping pockets of society chained within a prescribed framework, creating pathologies that continue and are reinforced generationally.

This is why I have chosen to broaden the scope of this book beyond a discussion on race relations or oneness in our modern church, and have sought to return, as well, to the realm of what has brought us to where we are now by exploring our historical accounts. When a gap so wide exists in liberty, it is indicative that something is missing. That something, in this case, is the whole truth.

Gaps in Our Accounts

Secular history has often excluded the whole truth from its record of accounts. It has rewritten the annals of our foundation to offer a one-sided and limited view of the founding of our nation. Even though African-Americans were involved and present, as freed men and not only as slaves, in the critical junctures of the birthing of our land, our history books, mainstream movies, and often even our artistic renditions show little or no racial diversity. African-American heroes of such important battles such as the Battle of Bunker Hill are not only completely absent from mainstream historical accounts, but also, more recently, explained away out of paintings made by those who witnessed the battle firsthand.²

What this has done in the American psyche is elevate one group of people, white Americans, above all others. Not only does it disconnect African-Americans from any personal heritage to our nation,

but it also offers an incomplete and inaccurate view of ourselves. An erroneous view of oneself, or a misguided view of another as is the case when whites are taught an anemic view of black achievement and involvement in our land and churches, leads to actions that perpetuate the illusion, on both sides.

Just over a year before the Liberty Bell rang out calling all to come hear the Declaration of Independence, a young Paul Revere took his well-known Midnight Ride. Few of us who have been raised under the tutelage of our country are unaware of this ride. Yet how many of us know that on the very same night, a black man, Wentworth Cheswell, the freed grandson of a slave, also rode a Midnight Ride?²³ Cheswell was the first black judge elected, in 1768, a devoted husband, church member, father of thirteen children, and for forty-nine years he served our nation in some form of public office such as auditor, assessor, moderator, and “town father.”

Cheswell’s commission as messenger, given to him by the Committee of Safety, was the same as that given to Revere. Wentworth Cheswell rode north. Paul Revere rode west. Both had a part to play in the fight for the American Revolution. Cheswell’s alerting those in the north to make haste and organize themselves to head south for the imminent conflict with the British served our country just as well. Yet Wentworth Cheswell is virtually nowhere to be found in our historical accounts.

Likewise, as the Liberty Bell cracked, creating a gap on the day honoring George Washington, another gap exists in the retelling of the historic accomplishments of the general. This gap belongs to a man named James Armistead. The ending of the American Revolution with the victory at Yorktown and the capture of British General Charles Cornwallis, from a historical perspective, is attributed to General Washington and his troops.

Yet what has been often left out of the retelling of this event is that Washington was able to do what he did with as minimal loss in soldiers’ lives that he had—less than a miniscule 1 percent casualty rate—due to information supplied to him that had been acquired by James Armistead, a black man. At great personal risk, Armistead had posed as a runaway slave and pretended to be a British spy, all the while gaining the confidence of General Benedict Arnold and General

Charles Cornwallis. The officers spoke freely in front of Armistead concerning their strategies. Armistead's reports documented the movements of the British, giving General Washington all that he needed to bring about a swift end to the war, saving scores of American lives not only in the battle at Yorktown, but in future battles that did not have to be fought.

Similarly, the contributions of the black church have often been neglected or marginalized, thus hindering the oneness of the collective American church. Because much has been ignored, the oneness of the church has missed the opportunity to present a model of highest functionality that the world needs to see.

Social and Spiritual Realities

Although some have historical gaps of understanding that need to be filled, others simply have difficulties in reconciling their spiritual beliefs with social realities. My story reflects this difficulty. Yet, what is important to note is that while my story is my own, it is not mine alone. It is not unique to me. My story mirrors countless others still being written on the pages of African-American lives. Whether there exist generational, class, educational, denominational, or even theological differences between us, one unifying theme that binds the African-American story together is that we all wrestle with reconciling the social and spiritual contradictions prevalent in American Christianity.

Growing up in urban America in a Christian context during a time of racism, segregation, and an incomplete historical education, as referenced briefly just now, not only in the society but also in the church, served to remind me in many ways that I was a second-class citizen. It was frustrating, painful, and confusing. There were places that I couldn't go and people with whom I couldn't associate simply because of the color of my skin. In fact, I was even told that I could expect to only go so far in my life because that was the nature of my created being.

These experiences ripped a social and spiritual schism in my understanding that demanded to be resolved. Much like the gaping crack in the Liberty Bell representing a contradiction within realities—that of freedom for *all* in the midst of racism and segregation for

some—I struggled to connect the social reality presented to me as that of being less than someone else with the spiritual reality of hearing that Jesus loved me so much that He died for me. I wrestled in an attempt to come to grips with whether or not I was required to accept this second-class rendering that I was hearing in so many different directions about *who* I was and *why* I was.

What I witnessed in the church only reinforced this conundrum concerning truth. Some of my professors in college and in seminary would either attend or pastor a segregated church while at the same time teach a theology on the oneness of the body of Christ. It forced me, and many others, to seek out an authentic understanding of biblical theology rooted and grounded in absolute truth. It forced me to dig deeply to discover what God had to say about the situation, rather than passively accept the contradiction.

Did God want me to give up my culture, background, and history in order to make it in a society that would not embrace me as I was? Or did He want me to see myself as He sees me—a child intentionally designed by His creative abilities whom He has positioned within two cultures?

Experiencing urban America at the height of the civil rights movement and the formation and implementation of black power and black theology has afforded me a perspective on race distinct to my own culture. However, studying theology for nine years in a white evangelical institution, as well as being the first African-American to be graduated with a Th.D. from there, has afforded me a keen view into the theological thinking of white Christians. Through both realms, I learned how to hone and apply exegetical skills in order to analyze the theology I was being taught.

My perspective for this book, then, and my perspective for all I do with regard to a kingdom agenda philosophy for ministry, flows out of this diverse locus. It is my attempt to tie reality to Scripture in such a way so as to emphasize the paradigm for how the Bible reveals that the church and society should address matters of race and social justice. In doing so, I speak not only to others in the church and society, but also to myself and those like me who have had to wrestle with reconciling the schisms between America's social and spiritual actualities.

Seeing Clearly

As an evangelical, I am tightly tethered to Scripture as my final authority on all matters to which it speaks. And it speaks on all matters. I am committed to the thesis that there are two answers to every question—God’s answer and everyone else’s. And when they contradict each other, everyone else is wrong.

As an African-American, my vision was formed in the pragmatic reality of racial disparity that caused me to focus on questions about race, oneness, and justice in church history that many of my white counterparts did not have to address. This dualism forced me to read Scripture to shed light on these issues, leading me to the conclusions that are being put forward in this book. I had to look not only to the theology but also the practical application of that theology within the *sitz im leben*—or situation in life—for how that theology fleshes out.

White evangelicalism believed the right things concerning the oneness of the body of Christ, but throughout history it did not consistently apply this belief system in either the church or the culture. While there have always been individuals—a remnant such as the Quakers, the abolitionists, and the white freedom marchers, among others—in white culture who wanted to apply the right practice of this belief, they did not always have a paradigm through which to express it, nor do they always have that today. There has existed a dichotomy, making it difficult to implement the applicational truth of not only oneness, but also biblical justice. As Dr. Warren Wiersbe, renowned white Bible teacher and father to many in the ministry, acknowledged, this roadblock often led to an ignoring of these and like issues in the white church. He wrote,

We are handicapped in the white church. If I preached Jesus’ first sermon (Luke 4:14–30) and gave it the social emphasis that He gave, our church has no vehicle for doing anything about the problem. People would respond in one of two ways: 1) “This preacher is off-base, so let’s get rid of him,” or 2) “I’ve never seen it quite that way, but what do I do next?” For the most part, our white churches don’t have the instruments, the organizational

structure, to get involved in social action. Our usual solution is to put some inner-city organization into the budget or maybe to collect and distribute used clothing. . . . When it comes to racial issues, many white churches will participate in any number of symbolic activities, but they're hesitant when you ask them to get involved in sacrificial services in the trenches.⁴

Although difficulties and challenges exist, their presence should never be the criteria for whether we give up or keep trying. Views of theology formulated through the lens of any culture will not only produce a myopic view, but also the resultant effects of an inability to carry out the true teaching in Scripture. This inability not only affects those who would be the recipients of the ministry outreaches, but it also affects those doing the ministry because it limits God's involvement in what is being done. Only when truth is the absolute standard by which thoughts and actions are aligned will we experience the full manifestation of God's glory, purposes, and plans in the body of Christ. Maintaining an informational view of theology while neglecting a holistic view of God's kingdom aborts any real opportunity for application.

I will talk more about him later in the book, but my father had an early impact on me in my teenage years to point me to the truth. I grew up just a few hours away from our nation's Liberty Bell that so proudly proclaimed "Liberty . . . unto *all*." Yet, when I would go to a fast-food restaurant, I was denied the freedom to eat in a public dining room because I was black. The restaurant was pleased to take my money at the take-out window, but eating in was definitely out.

Though I didn't fully understand it at the time, the contradiction between proclaiming liberty while simultaneously denying it sought to shape my mind. Thank God for my father who knew what I was facing and who made a polemic effort to counteract the lie. "Son," he would say, "you're a child of the King. If they don't want royal blood in their restaurant, then don't go in there."

My earthly father pointed me to the truth of my heavenly Father.

As I grew older and looked more closely at the Bible and at Jesus, the Christ, who had come, I discovered something awesome. I discovered that His love for me repositioned me above the class that I

had been given by other men. Embracing this truth all of a sudden made what men thought and how men felt about me irrelevant because now I was seated with Christ in a very high place. He gave me recognition, significance, and value, causing me to be fully proud of His creation in me so as not to allow others to denigrate me by how they defined me—or even to make me think more highly of myself than I ought to think—because now I had truth as my reference point.

This book is my attempt to put on paper this reference point, detailing how it applies to both blacks and whites with regard to oneness in the body of Christ. Our unity can then serve as a template for bringing about comprehensive unity for other racial groups in our land. Because until we see ourselves, and each other, as God sees us, and respond with an intentional embracing of His mandate of oneness, we will forever ring flat in a world that longs to hear the liberating cadence of truth.

Notes

1. Edward Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006), 80.
2. David Barton, *Setting the Record Straight: American History in Black & White* (Aledo, Tex.: WallBuilders, 2004), 5.
3. <http://www.wallbuilders.com/LIBissuesArticles.asp?id=20990>
4. E. K. Bailey and Warren W. Wiersbe, *Preaching in Black and White: What We Can Learn from Each Other* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 105.