

## Interview with Lisa L. Spencer Executive Director, Local Colors, Roanoke, VA

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*In what way were you encouraged and left wanting in your Christological studies in your evangelical seminary?*

At Dallas Seminary, all degree students were required to take six core classes in systematic theology each with a focus on a particular doctrine. I am grateful for two of these courses that specifically focused on the work and person of Jesus Christ. These courses not only provided a substantial foundation for understanding historic and biblically-informed Christian theology, but also encouraged students about the significance of rightly articulating theology.

The core of Christology was taught through the Trinitarianism course. My appreciation for this context has only grown stronger as I reflect on the interdependent working of each person as one God. Everything God the Son did was in accordance with the will of the Father and administered by the Holy Spirit. This enriched my study of Christ's earthly ministry in the Gospels, knowing that his every word and action functioned in accordance with the foundation laid from the birth of creation in Gen 1.

The Soteriology course provided the meat of Jesus's condescension,<sup>1</sup> death, burial, and resurrection. The study was enriched by examining atonement theories from historical perspectives. In combination with the two required historical theology classes, these courses provided a good means to spot Christological heresies and distortions regarding the atoning work of Christ.

These courses were instrumental in navigating through other areas of theology and through practical application courses. For me, they enforced

that God's redemption program through the Son is the chief anchor of Christian belief. What we believe about Jesus affects every other area of Christian faith and practice. So I was greatly encouraged to think Christologically through all of my coursework, including my master's thesis, in which I wrote on extra-scriptural divine speech. This Christological focus also affected how we considered mission in the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The common thread throughout seminary was to consider that God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, who, by the will of the Father, left his heavenly abode to take on flesh, perfectly obeyed the law, and provided a substitutionary sacrifice on our behalf to reconcile man to God. Salvation comes by no other, and this is the universal message for all mankind. I left seminary with this firm foundation and continue to absorb its significance to this day.

Our theological studies expounded greatly on the complexities of the divinity of Christ and the hypostatic union and rightly so. However, I believe Christological studies could have been strengthened with more consideration of the cultural aspects of the incarnation and what these mean for the message of salvation for a diverse people. I do not believe that such consideration suggests that we impose anything more on Scripture than what is stated, nor does it subject Jesus to a cultural standard to appease our sense of ethnic identity. But his condescension to earth in fulfillment of the divine purpose for which he was sent transpired in a particular cultural context. Cultural aspects were only considered to the extent that they conveyed a theological truth grounded in Scripture.

In the past few years, I have noticed an increased focus on Jesus's ethnicity and skin color to define him as a brown-skinned Jew. The impetus is to show that he is not "white." As I explain below, the historical portrayal of Jesus was borne out of a racial superiority that normalized a "white" paradigm that nearly erased his ethnic heritage. Jesus's ethnic heritage is of great importance because God's promise required a descendent from the line of David to fulfill the eternal kingship (2 Sam 7:11–16). While I believe that some consideration should be given to the ethnic composition of the incarnate Son to recognize his non-white identity, for me such consideration was never a primary issue. It was more important that he be represented as the one who reconciles us to God and is building a church of every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev 7:9–10). The incarnate Son did not need to look like me to save me. However, for the African American seminary student that has a greater sensitivity to the whitewashing of Jesus's ethnicity, I can see how the lack of attention can create a slight and make heterodox models that over-emphasize race more attractive.

<sup>1</sup> Condescension refers to the act of God coming down to man to care for his creation. The condescension of Christ is demonstrated in the humility he displayed in the incarnation for God's redemptive purpose. See Phil 2:5–8 and Glenn Kreider, *God With Us* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 15–16.

*What characteristic or quality of Christ drew you to Christianity and continues to carry you in your faith today?*

I came to Christ as a freshman in college in 1982 out of a great need to be found in good standing with God. I grew up in a missionary Baptist church but did not know the Lord. Like many people who do not believe they need Christianity, I believed I could be good on my own. Meeting two devoted Christians in college and accepting an invitation to a campus outreach ministry changed all of that for me, and thus began my journey of learning the one true Christ.

Since I came to Christ that first semester in college, I spent a few years as a young, zealous Christian but then descended into a thirteen-year rebellious period. After my repentance in 1999 from that rebellious stretch, I would experience bouts of wavering faith, sinful episodes, and inconsistent zeal. What anchored me most has been that my failures were always met with the perfection of Christ. Jesus provides something for me that I cannot do for myself.

The perfection stems from the divine nature of Christ, the second Person of the Trinity. He is the exact nature of God (Heb 1:3), which means he brought the perfection of God and all his attributes to bear in his incarnation, his earthly ministry, and his redemption for lost humanity. He condescended to a sinful and broken world to redeem it. This humility comforts me greatly.

Whereas I have not always obeyed the law of God, Jesus obeyed it perfectly and lived sinlessly. This was necessary to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law and for his imputed righteousness on my behalf (Rom 5:19; 8:1–4; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:21). I also find it truly remarkable how his perfect obedience interacted with those who were deemed imperfect by society standards—the poor, outcast, and sinner.

Jesus provided the perfect sacrifice to atone for sin and grant forgiveness.<sup>2</sup> His perfect atonement meant that sin for all time was sufficiently expunged (Heb 10:14). The legal demands for God's satisfaction have been met (Col 2:13–14).

It would have been enough if Jesus provided this perfect obedience and perfect sacrifice, but he took it one step further. He was seated at the Father's right hand and now serves as our advocate, in full awareness of our sinful tendencies and actions. As the writer of Hebrews says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet

<sup>2</sup> The book of Hebrews chs. 5–10 provide a thorough explanation of the perfection of Christ's atonement as the final sacrifice needed under the New Covenant.

without sin" (Heb 4:15 ESV). My periodic failures in belief and practice are met with advocacy on my behalf because there is nothing that can separate me from the love of God (Rom 8:39).

All of this provides a security for me to rest in what Jesus accomplished on my behalf, especially when feelings of inadequacy arise. He already knows my weakness, and God is always at work in those who are his (Phil. 2:13). I can rest in God's securing me as his own because of his seal of redemption by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13). I am also comforted to know that God disciplines those who are his (Heb 12:5–11). I have experienced this throughout my Christian journey and can attest to its goal of "bearing the peaceable fruit of righteousness."

The security provided by Christ's work and his continual advocacy also gives me room to breathe when I face uncertainty in navigating faith and practice in a complex world. I have definitely experienced some perplexity during this time where tensions over race and social justice seem to be at a fever pitch and members of Christ's body are very divided on how to best handle these issues. I may not always come to the right conclusions, but I know that Christ has me in his grip. He is not afraid of my questions or concerns, but rather he has provided a ready platform where I can boldly come before the Father's throne with confidence (Heb 4:16).

I would think this to be incredibly comfortable for Christians of color who are wrestling with the ways in which Christianity has been used to marginalize and disregard them. We can look beyond the transgressions of history to see what was intended for the Savior and Lord of creation who calls a diversity of people to himself as his body. While others have failed to recognize the inconsistencies of their belief and practice, we can see the perfection of God in the redemptive work of his Son. I rest in this acknowledgement over and above the transgressions of history.

The ultimate comfort comes in knowing that God's final redemptive act will perfect his creation when Jesus returns and renders judgment on all wickedness that worked against him. He will set everything right, and wipe all sin, pain, tears, and death away (Rev 21:1–4). Whatever darkness, tragedy, confusion, hate, chaos, factions, and hostilities exist now, will be completely eradicated upon his return.

*What do you see as significant barriers for African Americans to accept Christ?*

Before I delve into what I consider might be significant barriers for African Americans to accept Christ, I want to preface my explanation on the reality of what Scripture says regarding God's calling of the elect. I believe that the Father chooses whom he wills and draws that individual

to saving faith through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of race or ethnicity, upbringing, or socio-economic status, we are naturally hostile to God because we are born into a sin condition that disables us from seeing his redemptive work properly. We are dead in our trespasses and sin (Rom 8:7; Eph 2:1–3). Upon hearing the good news of the gospel, the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit enables a person to see his or her need of Christ and placing saving faith in him. There is no barrier that God cannot overcome in this regard. In Matt 19:26, when Jesus said that there is nothing impossible with God, he was referring to God's work in overcoming barriers to faith in his Son.

Nonetheless, we must consider man-made obstacles that might create an added burden to the objection of Christianity. Here is where I believe that we must peer into the annals of church history in the West to grasp how these man-made barriers have been erected and the impact these barriers have had upon many black people, particularly in the United States.

For many African Americans, Christianity has been seen as “the white man's religion.” The reasons for this perspective are due to the acculturation of Christianity to a Euro-centric framework that dominated the West for centuries and contributed greatly to shaping the cultural lens through which Christianity was viewed. The prominence of the Renaissance era and subsequently, the Reformation produced cultural artifacts that made this Euro-centric framework normative for Christian expression, such as liturgical and art expressions.

Simultaneously, the development of the false construct of a “black race” and a “white race” began to infiltrate the way Christianity was considered. As this paradigm took root in the development of the Americas, it further entrenched an ethos that deemed persons of African descent to be inferior. Sadly, this distortion of racial superiority found support from misguided interpretations of Scriptures such as Gen 9:20–25. The curse of Ham was construed to mean that persons of African descent were unworthy of equal value. Thus, churches became complicit in perpetuating a system of racial inferiority and articulated these sinful distortions as an authentic expression of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> This line of thinking continued through Jim Crow segregation with impassioned resistance to integration and fair treatment of Blacks by those who also proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ. While conditions related to acceptance and fair treatment of African Americans have improved, unfortunately, pockets of this type of thinking still exist. It is not uncommon to hear objections to Christianity

<sup>3</sup> I hold to a traditional Reformed understanding of election.

<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth treatment, see Joel McDurmon, *The Problem of Slavery in Christian America* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision Press, 2017).

on the grounds that the Christian paradigm itself promoted this deep and abiding partiality rather than considering how misguided individuals distorted it with sinful interpretations and applications.

I believe a helpful counteraction to the objection of Christianity as the white man's religion is to recognize what Christianity is meant to be from revelation in Scripture. Starting with the creation account, God created man in his own image and gave a command to subdue the earth. After the Fall of man, God moved to reconcile his creation to himself through select individuals as representatives that foreshadowed the ultimate fulfillment of promises in his Son. These representatives hailed from geographic regions that today would not be considered white. The promise to Abraham clearly denotes that people from around the world would inherit covenantal blessings (Gen 12:1–3) that are fulfilled in Christ<sup>5</sup> who is building a church from every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev 7:9).<sup>6</sup>

The geographic trajectory of the spread of Christianity negates the idea that Christianity endorses a racial superiority of a “white” race. What started as a kernel in the bowels of the Middle East soon extended to all parts of the world spreading through the cities of Judea, Syria, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and Italy. Northern Africa held great significance related to the transmission of Scripture and defenses of the Christian faith. Long before the Reformation, notable African church fathers such as Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, and Augustine contributed greatly to the refinement of Christian theological articulation. In fact, Augustine's writings greatly influenced the work of the Reformation. Pointing to this early history directly contrasts the distortions that would later develop regarding African inferiority.

*What are the benefits and challenges of using unique language to describe the person and work of Christ in an African American context?*

As noted above, the historic context for African Americans of Christianity in America plays a considerable role in how Christianity was framed in light of the physical realities of enslavement and oppression of black people. For black Americans living under such conditions, Christianity was not a disembodied experience. Dependency on Jesus as Savior meant more than just a spiritual union denoting reconciliation with God.

<sup>5</sup> Galatians 3:7–14 clearly indicates that those who place faith in Christ are heirs to the promises of God. Ephesians 1–2 lay the foundation for equal valuation regardless of ethnicity, a contradiction to decades of false paradigms regarding persons of African descent.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:5–11 also demonstrates that God's post-resurrection work would equally engage people from various ethnicities.

But there was a longing for relief from oppressive conditions.

From the bowels of chattel slavery, language developed that was indicative of the unjust experience and paralleled the Exodus narrative. The Israelites bondage in Egypt and the oppression experienced under that bondage served as a correlation with the black experience as observed in many Negro spirituals that emerged from that time period. The deliverance that came through Moses was not just seen as a precursor to the spiritual deliverance that Christ would offer but also that this spiritual deliverance would result in freedom from physical oppression. Jesus furthers this idea when he speaks of freedom. So the language of deliverance and freedom from oppression became an expression of Christian hope for the whole person—immaterial and material—and later served as the backbone for black liberation theology.

Deliverance language is helpful to better understand the African American experience historically. One of the most unfortunate teachings to emerge from the system of chattel slavery was that slaves had good lives if they got to hear the gospel and convert to Christianity. While it is true that reconciliation with God through Christ Jesus is the most significant thing a person can experience, this dualistic way of thinking focused exclusively on the immaterial aspect of humanity and divorced God's ethics from the salvation paradigm granted to us through Christ. Short-circuiting Christianity in this manner created a longing to experience God's justice and goodness.

Second, it is helpful to consider the significance of physicality in God's created order. The first two chapters of Genesis demonstrate that God's goodness was tied to his physical universe and what he intended for it. After each step of creation, he declared, "It is good," with man being the pinnacle of goodness. I do not suggest that there is something inherently good in man post-Fall. Rather, God created man as a whole person whose embodied presence and obedience to God's mandates serve as the means by which the physical earth would reflect the glory of God.

After the Fall in Gen 3, the redemptive narrative of Scripture connects God's revelation to his physical acts of working through his chosen representatives (Abraham, Moses, David, prophets, etc.), culminating in the incarnation of God the Son. It was necessary for Christ to be embodied and serve as a living sacrifice for us and our salvation. This is why the physical nature of the church is significant in the New Testament; Christ's body is the means through which his work gets accomplished. God's ultimate act of redemption will involve glorified bodies and a new heaven and new earth. The tragedy of the injustices experienced through chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and any lingering post-Civil Rights Movement vestiges

is that the physical reality of oppression contradicted God's good intentions. Hearing the language of deliverance should remind us that God's ultimate rescue involves all of physical creation, not just the immaterial part of our being. By thinking in these holistic terms, we can have a greater appreciation for how tragically the Fall impacted human beings, particularly in the African American experience.

Whereas this unique language can garner a greater insight and appreciation for the African American experience, care must be taken to extract the language from the paradigm of Black liberation theology. Black liberation theology promulgated the language of oppression and deliverance into a redemptive model in purely soteriological terms. In black liberation, salvation comes when there is freedom from physical bondage, not when an individual comes to faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. This stands in contrast with a holistic paradigm of Christian faith and practice which recognizes that personal wholeness begins with spiritual union with Christ. It is quite possible that one who uses the language of liberation without careful attention to necessary distinctions could unwittingly adopt an unbiblical framework.