

“Choose This Day Whom You Will Serve”:

**How Domiciliary and Congregational Choices Generate Possibilities
For Baptismal Self-Discovery and Racial Reconciliation
In Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove’s *Free to Be Bound***

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What is the relationship between Christian faith and the practice of racial reconciliation? How might one’s choice of what neighborhood she will live in impact her ability to befriend members of another race? How does one choose who her neighbors will be? How might a Baptist’s understanding of the reconciling work of Jesus Christ shape her decision about which church community she will join? What role might Baptists and Baptist communities of faith play in the work of racial reconciliation in the United States in the coming decade? The author of this essay presupposes that practices of reconciliation constitute an important part of the *missio dei*. Since the work of Jesus Christ made possible the reconciliation of creation with God, Baptists today are called to continue the reconciling work of the Son.

Undoubtedly, one of the greatest divisions in the United States both historically and today is the division based on race. Even after the Civil Rights era and the end of legally-enforced racial segregation, the practice of voluntary segregation exists today in many arenas of American public life, including most Baptist churches. Since many contemporary black and white Baptists have some choice as to which neighborhood they will inhabit and which church community they will affiliate with, the normative practice

of voluntary segregation begs the question, Do *voluntarily integrated* Baptist churches in the United States today offer a more faithful witness to the reconciling work of Jesus Christ than do *voluntarily segregated* Baptist churches?

The hypothesis of this essay will be that the general answer to that question is yes.¹ In order both to combat the pervasive (frequently sub-conscious) prejudices of racism and to foster the work of racial reconciliation, unlearning racism through concrete practices of cross-racial relationship-building will be required. Instead of exploring the practices of racial reconciliation among black and white Baptists in the abstract, though, I will describe the witness of a white Baptist named Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, who, along with his wife Leah, answered a calling in 2002 to relocate their domicile to a predominantly black neighborhood in Durham, N.C. and to join a historically black Baptist congregation in that neighborhood called St. John's Missionary Baptist Church. My contention will be that Wilson-Hartgrove's story serves as an important contemporary witness to the Messiah who "...is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."²

Drawing largely on Wilson-Hartgrove's book *Free to Be Bound*, I will explore how his witness challenges the dominant presuppositions and motivations that underwrite the choices that many Baptists (and many other Christians) in the United States make when they choose what neighborhood they will live in and what church community they will

¹ Yet, this hypothesis bears in mind that because of the history of white racism and oppression in the United States, the black separatism that African-Americans have sometimes practiced with regards to their churches and associations has been (and may continue to be) justified as necessary for greater black autonomy, empowerment and self-protection.

² Ephesians 2:14. NRSV. Although I recognize that the author of Ephesians was referring to the Jews and the Gentiles when he described the two groups whom Jesus made into one, I hope it is not too far of an isogetical stretch to see Jesus' work of breaking down the dividing wall between those groups as a generative example of the reconciliation that Jesus has made possible between black and white Americans today.

join. Rather than allowing motivations of comfort, safety and social status to dominate our choices, Wilson-Hartgrove's vocation serves as a challenge to Baptists in the United States to view their domiciliary and congregational choices as moral tasks that involve probing questions such as, How might my choice of neighborhood witness well to the reconciling peace of Jesus Christ? How might my choice of congregational affiliation best witness to the reconciling peace of Jesus Christ? Whom (which neighbors) will I choose to serve and why?

As Wilson-Hartgrove grapples with such questions in *Free to Be Bound*, one notes the emergence of two important points. First, since the practice of voluntary segregation among most black and white Christians in the United States is normative, the idea that it is theologically problematic is not obvious and must be learned. This learning must involve a sustained engagement with embodied others constituted by patient receptivity and a generative vulnerability whereby one allows others to name her in ways unimagined before. Secondly, Wilson-Hartgrove asserts that if white Christians are to engage in the arduous work of racial reconciliation they must become disciples of the black church in America. Such training will help to enable white Christians to name and unlearn (frequently sub-conscious) patterns of racialized thinking, thus becoming free to embrace more comprehensively their identity in the Body of Christ. Wilson-Hartgrove describes this as a kind of *conversion* where white Christians choose to forsake their whiteness by becoming black. The task of the following four sections of this essay will be to demonstrate how both of these points emerge through Wilson-Hartgrove's narrative.

Why Does Everyone in My Church Look Like Me?

Wilson-Hartgrove begins his theological memoir *Free to Be Bound* with an account of his family and his childhood environs. “The truest part of church,” he claims, “is always the part you take home with you. For my family, it was the music.”³ Describing family sing-alongs to his Granny’s favorite hymn, “I’ll Fly Away,” Wilson-Hartgrove opens with a portrait of his rural upbringing in King, North Carolina. He describes the faithful Southern Baptists of his home congregation, Quaker Gap Baptist Church, and how they chewed tobacco and talked Republican politics on the porch of the church building after worship. Wilson-Hartgrove narrates his upbringing as a typical white southern conservative Christian one.

Believing that the way to change the world for the right was by striving to be a Christian law-maker, Wilson-Hartgrove placed himself as a high school student on a path towards that end. He became a page in Senator Strom Thurmond’s office. Through an interest he took in local government he was invited to take a non-voting seat on the Stokes County School Board. But perhaps the most life-changing of all of these for Wilson-Hartgrove was a governor’s program he attended for youth with political aspirations. Although he had thought that God was calling him into a career in nation-state politics, Wilson-Hartgrove writes,

Then I met Reverend Barber. It happened in a dimly lit Holiday Inn banquet room just outside Raleigh, the state capitol. Marty and I had spent all day listening to young and energetic seminar leaders who were supposed to help us become

³ Wilson-Hartgrove, 23.

politically savvy [...] When Reverend Barber stepped to the podium that evening at the Holiday Inn, we recognized his language. He was a preacher. He spoke the language of Scripture, even among young political hopefuls and their secular advisors from the governor's office. That way of speaking had been conspicuously absent from our weekend of reflection on political responsibility and the means of social reform in a democratic society [...] I heard a voice that sounded familiar, and I started to listen.⁴

Although Wilson-Hartgrove had heard many other sermons before, this particular sermon catalyzed a foundational change in vocational direction for him.

Wilson-Hartgrove goes on to describe some of the stylistic details of Reverend Barber's sermon, including his closing illustration. Yet, rather than any specific detail of the sermon, it was the overall impression that left the indelible mark. He continues,

Recalling that scene some ten years later, though, I am captivated by its significance. Reverend Barber was the first black Christian I'd ever heard preach. In the dim light of that hotel room, he opened my eyes to the existence of a black church in America. I suppose I knew by then that black Christians existed – and that they worshiped somewhere. I'd heard gospel choirs before. I'd seen the movie *Sister Act*. If I'd thought about it, I probably could have imitated the stereotypical black preacher, quoting lines from Jesse Jackson or Martin Luther King. But I had never thought about it. A white Southern Baptist kid, saturated with Scripture, I'd never thought to ask why everyone in my church looked like me. I'd never reflected on what that might mean for my relationship with other Christians or my relationship with God. I'd never once had to think about it.⁵

Having experienced a kind of liberation through this sermon that was preached by a black pastor, Wilson-Hartgrove was forced to face the fact that his prior experiences of church had been segregated. Facing this fact confronted him for the first time with the question, Why?

Although Baptist churches in the United States had not always been rigidly segregated, they became increasingly so in the decades leading up to and following the Civil War. Wilson-Hartgrove describes how this historical separation impacts the contemporary religious imagination:

So the "black church" was born, and along with it a "white church," marked not only by the absence of black Christians but also by the mental division between heaven and earth, faith and politics. This dichotomy, so deeply rooted in our way of being church, did more than lead to racial segregation some two hundred years earlier. It persisted as a block in our

⁴ Wilson-Hartgrove, 27-8.

⁵ Wilson-Hartgrove, 30.

imagination, making it impossible to even ask what the church has to do with racial justice, precisely because racial justice was not spiritual but political. Racial justice and integration weren't supposed to have anything to do with our worship on Sunday mornings. Whether they were right or wrong, they just weren't the sort of thing you heard the preacher talk about [...] And so it was that I had lived some sixteen years in a world saturated with Scripture and drenched with Jesus without ever having to think about the absence of black Christians in my life.⁶

Wilson-Hartgrove draws an interesting parallel between the dichotomies of black and white, faith and politics. A certain interpretation of the separation of church and state principle that divorced spiritual concerns from social ones had become entrenched in the white American religious imagination. Thus, certain topics of social relevance like race relations were thereby gated and patterns of possibility that could have provided alternatives to Jim Crow were hard to imagine, much less explore. Because issues of race were deemed to be political and social, as the rubric went, Jim Crow was not to be challenged from white pulpits or in white Sunday School conversations.

After some reflection, Wilson-Hartgrove later describes his pivotal encounter with Reverend Barber in terms of a conversion experience. Specifically, he incorporates the language of “dying” and the imagery of baptism to make the point.

Reverend Barber's presence was just so appealing – so wonderfully compelling – that I never stopped to think about what might have to die for me to enter into the world from which he spoke. It didn't occur to me, a kid still trying to navigate the white side of a divided church, that Reverend Barber was introducing me to a whole new way of seeing when he assumed that the gospel is itself political and bodily, that the best thing to do when invited to a governor's conference is to preach.⁷

So what was it that would have to die in order for him “to enter into the world” from which Reverend Barber spoke? The short answer is Wilson-Hartgrove's ignorance of how powerfully the ideology of race had shaped his world. So how could Wilson-Hartgrove's vision be transformed in order for him to see the politically relevant gospel that Barber preached?

⁶ Wilson-Hartgrove, 31-2.

⁷ Wilson-Hartgrove, 32.

Although at the time he did not quite know the answer to that question, Wilson-Hartgrove suspected that more experiences with Reverend Barber would help. Thus, a few weeks after returning home from the governor's program in Raleigh, Wilson-Hartgrove and his friend Marty were on the road early on a Sunday morning to head down to Goldsboro, N.C. to Greenleaf Christian Church to hear Reverend Barber preach again. Wilson-Hartgrove confesses, "I didn't know then where that road would take me. All I knew was that I had to fly away."⁸ Echoing the lyrics of the hymn he had learned to sing with his Granny about the reward that follows mortal death, Wilson-Hartgrove points to the new life that awaited him in the black church. But in order to experience that new life, former assumptions about where and with whom he worshiped would have to die.

Vacationing in One Another's Worlds

Wilson-Hartgrove's visit to Greenleaf Christian Church nudged him further up the aisle of discipleship in the black church. After describing the differences that he had noticed between his home congregation and Greenleaf, Wilson-Hartgrove relates how he and his friend Marty invited Reverend Barber to preach the baccalaureate service at their high school the next spring. Barber accepted the invitation, but it was only later that Wilson-Hartgrove learned that Barber had done so with some trepidation. He explains,

On the afternoon of the baccalaureate service, Marty and I met the Barber family minivan in the

⁸ Wilson-Hartgrove, 33.

school parking lot. We greeted Reverend Barber with hugs, and he introduced us to his brother-in-law, whom he had brought along for support. Though he had traveled quite a bit in North Carolina, this was Reverend Barber's first time in Stokes County. Black folks knew about Stokes County, he said with raised eyebrows. He'd heard stories about how this used to be "Klan country." It had never occurred to me that it might be frightening for someone with black skin to visit my hometown, but Reverend Barber had been afraid to come to Stokes County alone. My world looked different through his eyes.⁹

Through his interactions with Reverend Barber, Wilson-Hartgrove grows in his awareness of how race matters. This growth in awareness includes learning more about one's self by learning how one looks through the eyes of another. By taking the time to get to know and to listen to others who experience the world differently, one receives important insights that might otherwise remain unknown.

Through this encounter with Reverend Barber, Wilson-Hartgrove also learned how one's story is inextricably linked with the story of her people. This moment of self-understanding confronts Wilson-Hartgrove as a kind of existential crisis. He asserts,

But until that day in the spring of 1998 when Reverend Barber came to preach at South Stokes, I had never imagined Stokes County as a dangerous place. Backward, provincial, even boring – yes. All these things I had thought. But dangerous? How could my home be dangerous? Stokes County was farm country, populated by good and simple folk – folk who were my people. How could my people be the enemy?¹⁰

This encounter led Wilson-Hartgrove to begin asking questions that made it clear to him exactly how his people could be the enemy. Although he had thought that the activities of the Ku Klux Klan in Stokes County were a far distant memory, the more he began to ask around the more he realized that the memories were not so distant; Klan rallies and signs of aggressive racism haunted the same Stokes County that, until that day, had seemed to Wilson-Hartgrove to have been so benign.

Thus, Wilson-Hartgrove's conversations with Reverend Barber helped him to discover part of what it means to be white. Although the natural tendency may be for one

⁹ Wilson-Hartgrove, 45.

¹⁰ Wilson-Hartgrove, 45.

to assume that the way they were raised to see the world is the way that most others see it, this tendency to universalize the particularity of one's formation can blind one to the multifarious ways in which particularity matters. As Wilson-Hartgrove confesses,

The white gospel I learned as a child in the Southern Baptist church had convicted me as a teenager to ask what I could do for others. 'To whom much is given, much will be required,' the Bible says (see Luke 12:48). I wanted to give my very best for the sake of those less fortunate – for the sake of dark peoples in the uttermost parts of the earth who had never had the chance to ask Jesus into their hearts. But all the time there was a brokenness so deep within me and my people's history that I needed someone else to show it to me. Of course, Reverend Barber could see it the moment he first looked at me. To his eyes my history was written on my skin. And mine was a history of sin.¹¹

Ironically, although the eye is the organ that allows one to see the world, the eye cannot see itself. When it comes to seeing itself, the eye is blind and therefore requires some kind of a mirror in order to permit the perception of its own reflection. Similarly, it is very difficult for an individual to begin to understand fully their own upbringing (to see themselves clearly) without having learned from someone else who has been raised differently. Reverend Barber became for Wilson-Hartgrove the mirror that allowed him to see himself (and how his growing up white had defined him and implicated him in a history of sin) more clearly than he ever had before.

By sharing these conversations and worship experiences with Reverend Barber, Wilson-Hartgrove was confronted with important questions of identity: Who am I? Who are my people? What is my story? Again, he fleshes out his working answers to such questions by incorporating the imagery of baptism:

But in Reverend Barber's vision of God's beloved community, it wasn't just white folks who were 'my people.' Because he and I had both been baptized in Jesus' name, Reverend Barber was my brother – an elder brother who was himself on a 'most important religious quest.' The crossing of our paths had meant for me the discovery of two worlds – one black, one white – neither of which I had been able to see before, despite the fact that I had lived my whole life in the latter.¹²

¹¹ Wilson-Hartgrove, 52.

¹² Wilson-Hartgrove, 53.

Reverend Barber helped open up for him the discovery of two worlds: the white world in which he lived (understood more clearly through having been named by another who was not of that world) and the black world of this other. But what is crucial to note here is Wilson-Hartgrove's insistence that because of baptismal regeneration Reverend Barber is "my brother." This claim is not sentimental and Wilson-Hartgrove is not invoking vague ideals about the brotherhood of humanity. Rather, Wilson-Hartgrove's is a claim of faith that is rigorously Christological; because Jesus tore down the dividing wall of hostility and made both groups into one, the veiled anthropological reality is that Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove are one by virtue of their baptisms.

The key then becomes unlearning the idolatrous habits of racism that witness poorly to the new reality, the new identity and the new baptismal family that Jesus has made possible. In order to unlearn these habits, Wilson-Hartgrove learned that sustained engagement with black persons would be required. Fortunately, when he arrived at Eastern University in Philadelphia for his first year of college, Wilson-Hartgrove had been randomly placed with an African-American roommate named James. This year-long relationship taught him a great deal more about the realities of white privilege that Reverend Barber had unmasked.

Reverend Barber had helped me see back in North Carolina both the existence and the uncertainty of white privilege – that I had inherited an unjust way of life and that I could not simply accept it for what it was. But now James was pushing me further, forcing me to admit that I could not simply refuse to climb the social ladder, drop out of school, and claim holiness in a life of poverty. To do so would be to accept the terms of a twisted and broken world. Instead, God was calling me to see that I needed James. I needed James to save me from my romantic ideals and to show me the reality God was inviting us into together.¹³

¹³ Wilson-Hartgrove, 66.

By living with James for a year, Wilson-Hartgrove learned that he needed James (and, I would argue, that James needed him) in order to see the new reality of reconciliation that God has invited the world to enjoy.

What James also helped Wilson-Hartgrove to see was that in order to take his curiosity about race and reconciliation to a deeper level, he would have to do more than “vacation” in the worlds of African-American friends. The problem with vacationing in an exotic locale is that it can give one the false sense of having really experienced an area when in reality what was experienced was a pre-packaged and artificial simulacrum. In order to experience an exotic location more fully, one needs to spend months or years there away from the tourist resorts learning the local language, eating the local food, sleeping in local domiciles and walking the local roads. Similarly, in order to experience more fully the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, Wilson-Hartgrove began to understand that he was being called to sacrifice the familiar on a long journey of learning what it means to be white by learning what it means to be black in America. Though such learning Wilson-Hartgrove hoped to allow Jesus to disarm more comprehensively the idolatrous power of race and racialized vision over his life.

Walltown

After graduating from Eastern University, Wilson-Hartgrove accepted a scholarship to study theology at Duke Divinity School. When Wilson-Hartgrove and his

wife Leah arrived in Durham they began asking around about neglected neighborhoods in the area where the church was active. People began telling them about Walltown. He notes,

A few years earlier, three neighborhood churches had partnered with two white churches from adjacent neighborhoods to start Walltown Neighborhood Ministries, a community development and direct aid service center created to address the drug trade, violence, and community deterioration that Walltown had been experiencing since the 1970s. On a landscape that had been racially divided as long as anyone could remember, black and white churches were working together in holistic ministry. God was doing something in the abandoned social space of Walltown, on the margins of those places that 'mattered' in Durham. Leah and I decided that Walltown was where we wanted to be.¹⁴

Sensing a call from God to root their domicile and their ministry in Walltown, the Wilson-Hartgroves first moved into a home situated across Broad Street (the historical dividing line between white and black sections of Durham) and then later into Walltown itself. Although Walltown was a historically African-American neighborhood, in recent years it has seen an influx of new Hispanic residents.

So, by choosing to move to Walltown the Wilson-Hartgroves were intentionally choosing to reside in a neighborhood where racially they would be in the extreme minority. By answering a call to live in a neighborhood where income-levels are low and the crime rate is high, the Wilson-Hartgroves subsumed the fears for safety and security they may have had in order to follow faithfully the way of Jesus. Yet, the Wilson-Hartgroves discerned a call not only to reside in Walltown, but also to allow their residence to be a home where the hospitality of Jesus is practiced. As Wilson-Hartgrove explains,

As we waited for a way into Walltown, before we found a home at St. John's, Leah and I rented a house together with our friend Isaac and set up an extra bedroom to welcome the stranger we hoped God would send. Leah explained to Reverend Hayes that we wanted to be a house of hospitality and that we had set aside a 'Christ room' for someone who needed a place to stay. 'For...I was a stranger and you invited me in,' Jesus said (Matthew 25:35). We wanted the chance to host Jesus in our home.¹⁵

¹⁴ Wilson-Hartgrove, 78-9.

Clearly, for the Wilson-Hartgroves the notion of domicile is inextricably bound to their discernment of God's call on their lives. Where they live and whom they will invite into their home are not questions that are compartmentalized from their faith; rather, creating a home where hospitality is practiced is central to their overall understanding of the way of Jesus and the ethics of Christian discipleship.

Once they had made the decision to open up their home to Jesus in the form of strangers, it did not take long for God to bring someone their way. Wilson-Hartgrove reports,

Reverend Hayes said she knew two or three people who might be interested in coming to stay with us. She told Leah about Jerry who had been paying fifty bucks a week to stay on a friend's couch in Walltown. Now the friend was getting evicted and Jerry had no place to go [...] We invited him to stay with us [...] So within two weeks of starting our little experiment in hospitality as a Christian community, we were a white woman, a white man, a Hispanic man, and a black man trying to figure out how to live together.¹⁶

Of course this living arrangement was very unusual. One of the refreshing things about Wilson-Hartgrove's narrative is his refusal to romanticize the difficulties that inevitably accompany the attempt to do life together. Although the term reconciliation sounds beautiful, he reports that in their early experiences at Rutba House, "reconciliation seemed to be about negotiating a thousand little differences in our life together."¹⁷ There is nothing glamorous about the thousands of sacrifices and compromises required in order to live in a domiciled community that intentionally seeks to glorify God through its life together.

Yet, this was not the first time the Wilson-Hartgroves had made sacrifices in order to obey God's call on their lives. By journeying to Iraq with a Christian

¹⁵ Wilson-Hartgrove, 95.

¹⁶ Wilson-Hartgrove, 96.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Peacemakers Team in March 2003 at the beginning of the most recent American war, the Wilson-Hartgroves were able to learn that hospitality is one of the most important practices for fostering peacemaking. As Robert Schreiter affirms in his book *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, “Hospitality is central to...reconciliation. So much of the ministry of reconciliation is about waiting and listening...Hospitality, on the other hand, is something we can do. Here we can take the initiative to create an environment in which reconciliation can happen.”¹⁸ The Wilson-Hartgroves learned firsthand how hospitality is peacemaking when they were driving west through the desert from Baghdad to Jordan and one of the cars in their caravan crashed. The passengers of this crashed vehicle were picked up by an unknown group of Iraqis and taken to the hospital in the nearby town of Rutba. Even though the U.S. military had recently bombed this hospital, a doctor there mended the wounds of the injured Americans. When asked how they could repay him, his only request was that they tell the story of the hospitality they received in Rutba.

Thus, when the time came to name their house of hospitality, Wilson-Hartgrove explains,

We called our community Rutba House, after the little town of Rutba in Iraq. We wanted to remember what we learned about how God shows us His love through a Good Samaritan, one who’s supposedly our enemy. We thought it was a parable for how hospitality could be an act of peacemaking, the first step toward reconciliation. It was a story we wanted to remember in our life together at Rutba House.¹⁹

Thus, the practices of naming and remembering help the members of the Rutba House community to live into its *raison d’être*, namely practicing the kind of hospitality that makes for peace.

Hopefully it has become clear that the Wilson-Hartgroves understood their decision-making with regards to what neighborhood they would live in as a moral task. Their decision was not based on questions of safety, comfort or status, but rather it

¹⁸ Cited in Wilson-Hartgrove, 95.

¹⁹ Wilson-Hartgrove, 96.

emanated from the specific ways in which they were responding to the claims God had made on their lives. Similarly, when it came time to choose with what congregation they would worship, it was not questions of comfort or familiarity that guided their decision-making. Rather, their discernment was directed by a sense that, “Maybe the only way to find true reconciliation in America was to become disciples of the black church.”²⁰ So, after moving across the street into Walltown the Wilson-Hartgroves began worshipping at an African-American church in Walltown called St. John’s Missionary Baptist Church.

At St. John’s they began learning that the work of racial reconciliation to which they had been called would require of them another kind of conversion; they would have to become black. To describe what he had learned at St. John’s, Wilson-Hartgrove cites the following passage from James Cone’s *God of the Oppressed*:

I am not ruling out the rare possibility of conversion among white oppressors, an event that I have already spoken of in terms of white people becoming black. But conversion in the biblical sense is a radical experience, and it ought not to be identified with white sympathy for blacks or with a pious feeling in white folks’ hearts.²¹

So, if Cone was correct, the Wilson-Hartgroves would only experience the kind of conversion they sought if they were willing to have several of their most closely cherished beliefs (including the vision of Jesus with which they had grown up) radically extirpated. If the Wilson-Hartgroves were serious about working for reconciliation in the abandoned social space called Walltown, they would have to become black.

But what exactly does it mean to become black? Based on Cone’s quotation, it entails much more than sentiment or sympathy. Ironically, for Wilson-Hartgrove a crucial step in his journey towards becoming black included a painful dramatic awakening to what it had meant all along for him to be white. He relates,

²⁰ Wilson-Hartgrove, 74.

²¹ Wilson-Hartgrove, 91.

As a white first-year theology student, I was assigned [by the St. John's staff] to write a performance of scenes from black history, setting before me the story of black suffering in America. I listened to the tape of the spirituals that would accompany the scenes as I read through books of history I had never been taught, disgusted by the roles that white people played in these stories of inhuman abuse. When it was time to cast the scenes, though, there was only one candidate for all the white roles. I would be the slave trader, ship captain, slave driver and master, as well as Abraham Lincoln and civil rights activist. Before a congregation of black Christians whom we were just getting to know, I was destined to perform my people's terrible past. As we practiced making the sound of a leather whip striking human flesh, I felt sick. Was this really my story? Coming to terms with the history of black-skinned people of America meant confessing that I was the heir of an oppressor people who worshipped a White Jesus. No wonder St. John's was not willing to let me be myself worshipping God as I knew how to worship. They wanted to introduce me to the true and living God. They wanted to teach me to worship the God who is black.²²

An important part of becoming black includes learning what it means to be white. In order for racial reconciliation to happen, Wilson-Hartgrove suggests that those coming to the table of reconciliation must possess a measure of self-awareness as to the stories that have shaped them. Sometimes such an awareness can be more deeply realized through interactions with an other who embodies a kind of difference (racial, socio-economic, nation of origin, etc.) through which she has learned to name others in ways that are unfamiliar yet truthfully compelling.

After having worshiped at St. John's for many months, a time of decision arrived. Were the Wilson-Hartgroves going to ask to join, or were they going to leave? Wilson-Hartgrove describes the issues at stake:

The tension Leah and I had been feeling in worship at St. John's was this: We could not worship the Black Christ without becoming black. But becoming black meant forsaking our white identity. We had already begun to feel the questioning glances of white friends and family when we talked about our experience at St. John's. Few people were overtly negative. It was, after all, a good 'experience' for us to be having. But so-called 'good race relations' depended on our knowing when to leave. Our identity as good white Christians depended on our knowing which lines not to cross. Leah noted that when she was in public with the young black men from the Neighborhood Ministry staff, the questioning gaze of white folks became more intense.²³

Again, the theme of "vacationing in one another's world" arises. As the well-intended yet irksome comments about this being a good "experience" suggest, the Wilson-Hartgrove's

²² Wilson-Hartgrove, 86-7.

²³ Wilson-Hartgrove, 87-8.

felt pressure from their peers to end this vacation so that they could get on with the proper business of preparing for their ministerial careers. Wilson-Hartgrove continues,

As my first term as a student minister at St. John's drew to an end, I felt pressure from some advisors at school to consider my 'professional development' and get some experience working in a white church. What if God was calling us to stay at St. John's and make our spiritual home in the black church? It would mean forsaking a white god to worship the Black Christ. But it would also mean forsaking white privilege to become part of a people who live on the underside of the American dream. It might even mean joining with them in God's struggle against white supremacy in America. Were we forsaking our families and white friends if we joined the black church? Were we really up for this? God seemed to be saying that our vacation in the black world was over. Were we going home, or were we here to stay?²⁴

Wilson-Hartgrove claims that just as God called Abraham in the twelfth chapter of Genesis to leave behind his family and to go to the land that God would show him, he and Leah felt called to try to begin to learn what it would mean to leave white privilege behind and to request membership at St. John's. Although they knew there would be costs that they did not yet know how to count for themselves and for their children, they trusted in the God who had called them. For, as Wilson-Hartgrove concludes, "even if it cost everything, we knew this life was worth it. Jesus already knew the troubles we would see. And Jesus would be with us all the way."²⁵

Relocation and the Reclamation of the Primacy of Baptismal Identity

Describing the problems that confronted black Christendom in general and black Baptists in particular during the years of Reconstruction that followed the Civil War, James Melvin Washington questions, "Could the majority people envision a day when

²⁴ Wilson-Hartgrove, 88.

²⁵ Wilson-Hartgrove, 93.

the exalted doctrine of human equality of both the revolutionary era and abolitionism would become a daily praxis rather than a tragic and vacuous shibboleth, a remnant of a dead Romanticism?”²⁶ Although important strides have been made, the jury is still out as to whether “the exalted doctrine” has become a *daily* praxis among the majority (white) people 140 years later. Interestingly, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove’s contemporary witness embodies the kind of daily praxis to which Washington refers. Yet, what motivates Wilson-Hartgrove’s ministry is not an exalted doctrine of human equality rooted in some resuscitated Romanticism. Rather, it emanates from his attempt to take seriously the following claims from the second chapter of Ephesians, “His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” (vv. 15-16). As he contextualizes these verses and measures them against the racialized presuppositions of American culture, Wilson-Hartgrove proposes,

Out of two peoples, God has made one new body. Black and white together, the blood of Jesus runs through our veins. As this reconciled community, Ephesians says, we are reconciled to God through the Cross. This is what salvation means. Like we sing at St. John’s, ‘I know it was the blood that saved me.’²⁷

Thus, Wilson-Hartgrove describes the ground of possibility for his praxis by invoking the traditional evangelical themes of salvation, the Cross and the blood of Jesus.

Ironically, these very same themes *had failed* to motivate the majority of white churches in earlier generations to embrace black persons as family by virtue of the regeneration that God works through baptism. Wilson-Hartgrove’s witness therefore presses the question, Does a thick description of what it means to be born again or born from above through baptism into the family of God offer the kind of narrative buttressed

²⁶ Washington, 107.

²⁷ Wilson-Hartgrove, 136.

by constitutive practices that can generate and sustain the kind of racial reconciliation that Romantic ideals of universal brotherhood have failed to achieve? It is worth noting that Wilson-Hartgrove begins his Preface by notifying his would-be readers that *Free to Be Bound* is not a how-to book on racial reconciliation. “This is, instead,” he clarifies, “a how-it’s-been book. It’s a story – or, rather, a collection of stories – written along the way by a white boy who followed Jesus from Klan country to the black church, listening for the music that could teach his soul to sing.”²⁸ Although Wilson-Hartgrove hopes that his journey will not be regarded as a model for how to do racial reconciliation, I would argue that his story explodes and constructively reforms the segregated patterns of ecclesial possibility that many readers presuppose when encountering his text.

Indeed, because of the frequent historical exclusion of black persons from full fellowship in white Baptist churches in the United States, *Free to Be Bound* presses the question as to whether or not today it is incumbent upon white Baptists who have discerned a call to participate in the hard work of racial reconciliation to relocate from their white Baptist church to the nearest black Baptist church and to consider the possibility of moving domiciles if that would enable them to knit their lives more closely to those with whom they worship. Surely, such domiciliary and congregational relocation would require the kind of patience and courage named by the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Similar virtues of hospitality would also be required of the black Baptist churches that would choose to welcome white Baptists into their fellowship. The narratives of relocation described in Wilson-Hartgrove’s book offer cogent examples of how cross-racial friendships become possible through the joyfully arduous work of living and worshipping in inter-racial Christian community. Thus, because such friendships

²⁸ Wilson-Hartgrove, 15.

indispensably condition possibilities for racial reconciliation, they touch on one of the most important issues in Baptist ethics today.

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