

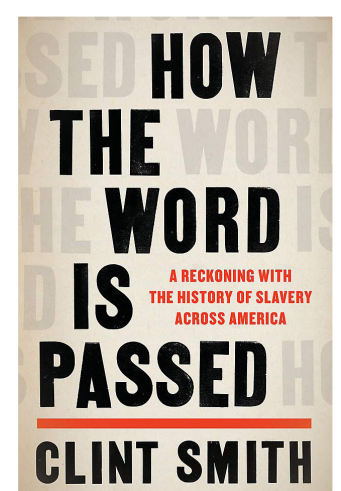


CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Alexis Weaver

How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America

By Clint Smith



About the Author

Clint Smith is an acclaimed poet, staff writer at *The Atlantic* and author of the award-winning book, *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning With The History Of Slavery Across America*, which achieved #1 *New York Times Bestseller* status and was named one of the 10 Best Books of 2021.

Smith has received fellowships from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, New America, the Emerson Collective and the Art for Justice Fund. He is a former National Poetry Slam champion and previously was a public high school English teacher in Prince George's County, Maryland. Smith received his B.A. in English from Davidson College and Ph.D. in Education from Harvard University. He resides in Maryland with his wife and their two children.

About the Book and How to Use

Clint Smith takes readers on a tour of monuments and landmarks across the United States as he unpacks the central role of slavery in shaping the memory and history of our nation as well as ourselves. He mixes scholarship and powerful stories of people living today to help shed insight and prompt reflection and needed transformation.

Through visits to seven distinct but intertwined places with connections to slavery in America, Smith weaves narrative story with intensive research to “reckon with the history of slavery.” As Smith points out, slavery “is not irrelevant to our contemporary society, it created it. This history is in our soil, it is in our policies, and it must, too, be in our memories.” (p289)

A poet, Smith's stories are deeply engaging and do not shy away from confronting the myths that undergird the common American identity. The questions that follow consider the themes that reverberate throughout the book and across chapters and place. Leaders can utilize these discussion questions to connect individual engagement with the stories as part of our “collective endeavor to confront the story of slavery.”

Alexis Weaver is a Cooperative Baptist and nonprofit and community leader focused on poverty transformation, racial equity and food security.



Book Discussion Questions

Reflections on Knowledge/Education

- Were you surprised by anything learned from this book? Did the history surprise you? Did it differ from what you learned in school?
- How has this book challenged what you've been taught? (Consider the founding of the U.S., the institution of slavery, Civil War, etc.)
- Were you surprised to learn about the extensive influence of the United Daughters of the Confederacy on our public education system (p161)? What feelings came up for you throughout the book when confronted with this history?

Perspective

- Contrast the Monticello Plantation with the Whitney Plantation. How does the story change by centering the perspective of the enslaved rather than the enslavers? How might our perspective on history change when we do this?

Financial Legacy of Slavery

In the chapters at Monticello Plantation, Angola Prison and New York City, Smith emphasizes the direct connection between the creation of the U.S., capitalism and the ongoing generation of wealth through the “free” labor of the enslaved imprisoned.

“So what is this slave system? It is a system of exploitation, a system of inequality and exclusion.” (p11)

“This place really is just like the plantation was....They lost all that free labor to emancipation, and now how are we going to get that free labor back?” (p117)

Smith points out that at the corner of Water and Wall Street was the second largest slave market in the U.S.

- Reflect on these quotes and facts. How does this impact your view of financial institutions? Of prisons? From reading these chapters, what are your takeaways regarding the financial legacy of slavery?

Monuments & Mythology

Throughout the book, Smith discusses monuments, sites and landmarks, and explores the tension between symbolism, mythology and history. From large sites—plantations and Blandford Cemetery, to smaller memorials such as the plaque at Water & Wall Street, these memorials fall in various places along the spectrum from “preservation” and “celebration” (p126).

- How has this exploration shaped or changed your perspective on future visits to historic sites? Have sites in your community memorialized slavery or the myth of the “Lost Cause”? Whose perspective is on focus of these memorials?

The Way Forward

Clint Smith sets out in *How the Word is Passed* to “reckon with the history of slavery across America.” Consider the historic sites visited. How are the locations connected? Did you have a personal reckoning through reading these stories? How has your perspective been shaped or changed from this experience? What questions have been raised for you?

Smith contrasts the systems of racism and the individual experience of racism. In the Epilogue, he writes: “In order for our country to collectively move forward, it is not enough to have a patchwork of places that are honest about this history while being surrounded by other spaces that undermine it. It must be a collective endeavor to learn and confront the story of slavery and how it has shaped the world we live in today.”

He concludes: “At some point it is no longer a question of whether we can learn this history but whether we have the collective will to reckon with it.” (p289)

- How then can we as Christians, as congregations, as participants in a system built by slavery, move forward collectively with this reckoning in order to create lasting, systemic change?