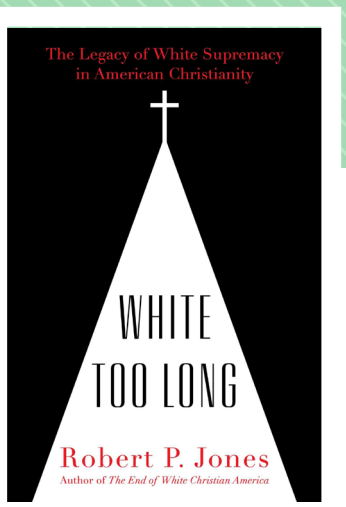
CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Harrison A. Litzell



White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity

By Robert P. Jones

White Too Long by Dr. Robert P. Jones is a work that seeks to tell the truth about racism. With an opening quote from James Baldwin, Jones begins his task of describing the entanglement of white Christianity and white supremacy through history, social scientific data and personal stories. The book demonstrates the way in which white Christianity—many times the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) specifically—was not just a complacent bystander in the atrocities of racism in the United States, but rather a dominant cultural power in its formation and perpetuity.

Jones is the CEO and founder of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) in Washington D.C., which researches the roles of policy, religion and culture. He holds degrees from Mississippi College, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Emory University. In this book, he speaks at length of his own upbringing in the American South and his relationship with the SBC as the church of his childhood and adolescence, as well as part of his higher education.

Jones intertwines history, data and his own memories to present a full history and analysis of the relationship between white supremacy and white Christianity. His historical work details the time building up to and around the Civil War as white Protestant denominations in the United States split along similar lines as the nation, and how white ministers preached on the virtues of owning slaves even as church members participated in lynchings in the community immediately preceding or following a church service. This historical record serves as a correction to the narrative that the Christian Church was at worst a bystander to the sins of slavery and at best was leader in the abolitionist movement.

Jones also discusses the social-scientific data collected by PRRI and shows the relationship between white supremacist ideas and white Christian identity. Using a "Racism Index," a collection of questions and analytic tools seeking to provide a single rating for a person's opinions and beliefs regarding race, Jones' work shows that the entanglement exists not only in the history of the Church, but in the present as well. His results lead to a conclusion that a white person sitting in a church pew on a Sunday morning is more likely to hold racist attitudes than a person similar in all other metrics, but who does not attend church.

Jones intersperses his story into the data and historical work. He uses his own life in the white evangelical world to illustrate some of his findings as well as to show the realities of these datapoints in an individual's life. Furthermore, he celebrates churches, such as the two First Baptist Churches of Macon, Ga., where white and Black congregations come together to heal the wounds of racism.

White Too Long is a text which points to the truth. Jones bears witness to the historical and present sins of white Christianity and provides a correction to the narratives long told. The work serves as a strike to the "reality" carefully constructed by white evangelicals of their own innocence. The book displays this truth as Jones calls upon the reader to believe and act in ways that more fully celebrate the image of God in all people.

Book Discussion Questions

Chapter 1: "Seeing"

1. The book opens with the statement that the Southern Baptist Convention was founded on the belief that slavery was divinely-mandated and could flourish along with the Gospel. What would you say to a person who claimed the compatibility of slavery and the Gospel of Jesus Christ? What resources would you use in your conversation with them?

2. In this book, published in 2020, Jones says that Donald Trump "activated the white supremacy sequence within white Christian DNA." What have you experienced and/or witnessed in the past five years related to this claim. Do you agree with the author?

3. The title of the book and much of the first chapter point to white identity or "whiteness." When was the first time you recognized or encountered the idea of whiteness? What is your understanding of the meaning of whiteness?

Chapter 2: "Remembering"

1. Prior to reading this book, what did you know of Baptist history—the history of the Southern Baptist Convention, of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and of your own church? What is your family's historical relationship with the Baptist denomination?

2. What ought we do regarding the work and legacy of theologians or leaders who enslaved other humans or who supported the work of white supremacy? How should they be remembered and what role should their work play in our continued tradition?

3. How will what you have learned regarding the history of the SBC and white Christianity affect your understanding of this tradition?

Chapter 3: "Believing"

1. When considering the presence of white supremacy in the DNA of white Christianity, how deep does this presence go? As followers of Christ, what sources of our faith, traditions, doctrines, sacred practices should be subject to review in our quest to excise this sequence? Are there any aspects which remain untouched?

2. What is your answer to the PRRI question: "When people claim to be Christian and commit acts of violence in the name of Christianity, do you believe they are really Christian, or not?" How do you perceive the actions of the Church as a perpetrator of violence throughout history?

3. The Baptist tradition has a strong heritage of claiming a faith based solely on the Bible. What lessons or ideas do you remember from your own childhood or continued faith education that married the teachings of the Bible and the ideas of white supremacy? What do you remember of the images of the characters in your Bible? Do you remember the first time you saw a depiction of Jesus or another biblical figure as a person of color?

Chapter 4: "Marking

1. What was your perception of the Confederacy and/or Southern heritage before reading this book? What role did these ideas play in your life and in your family's life?

2. Over the past few years, the debate over monuments (some related specifically to the Confederacy, though not exclusively), has continued. What do you believe should be done with monuments of Confederate generals and politicians? What about statues or monuments of others who were slave owners? What about those who lived following the Civil War but who continued to profess and practice white supremacy?

3. What do you remember of the massacre of Emanuel AME Church in Charleston? What do you remember of the news coverage of the perpetrator following that day?

Chapter 5: "Mapping"

1. What do you know about the history of slaveholding society in your state, county or town? According to Jones, this history has a causal affect on current racial prejudice. Do you see reflections of that in your community?

2. From your own experience, or from conversations with friends, coworkers, or family, what is the source of anxiety and fear regarding "changes from foreign influences"? Why do you think white Christians show such strong fear of this influence?

3. Jones asserts that a white supremacist would be more successful recruiting sympathizers from a white Christian worship service than from a coffee shop on a Sunday morning. If this is true, what does this say about our worship practices? What should be changed in our weekly worship services to alter this reality?

Chapter 6 "Telling"

1. Have you visited any of the museums or memorials that Jones mentions in this chapter? With whom did you go? What was that experience like?

2. What do you know of the history of racial violence and lynching in your community? Do you know of any stories or histories of these acts in your state, county or city? If you want to know more of this history, you can go to *lynchinginamerica.eji.org* to look at a specific history of your county.

3. Do you know any churches that are engaged in healing the wounds of white supremacy? What are they doing to go about it? What do you know of their successes and setbacks? Are they partnering with anyone else in this work? What churches do you know that are not engaged in this work? Why do you think they are not? Do you have hope that they might engage in it in the future?

Chapter 7: "Reckoning"

As you complete this work, allow the final chapter to rest in your meditations and in your prayers. If Jones' work is to bear witness to the reality and violence of whiteness in Christianity, what must be done? If you were the author of this book, what personal stories would you have shared on these topics? If the reality Jones presents is true, then what are we to do with the idea of white Christians as "good people who do good things"? Allow these questions to sit and to goad you as you move beyond the reading and into further action.

Listen, Learn and Act

Suggestions to Move beyond Discussion

In a panel discussion with author Robert Jones, hosted in part by CBF, , Rev. Dr. Kevin Cosby, president of Simmons College in Louisville, Ky., quoted his governor in saying that white folks can "listen, learn and act." (Watch the full conversation at *www.cbf.net/WTL-panel*.) Cosby amplifies the work of Jones as a witness by reminding the viewer of the choice of Emmett Till's mother to leave his casket open so the world could see what was done to her son. Cosby said, in light of this violence and the ongoing reality of white supremacy, allies can listen, learn and act.

After reading Jones' book, these three points can serve as a map forward. By listening, one can be aware of the intersecting effects of white supremacy and how they impact everyone. Listen to Black folks and believe what they have to say. Listen to other people of color and believe what they have to say. Continue to listen as new fruit is borne on this tree. You can begin with some of these podcasts as a way to continue to listen: *Code Switch*, *Black History Yea*, and *Still Processing*. As these podcasts mention people, events, or resources you do not recognize, look them up to expand your understanding. And more than listening to podcasts, read Black authors; watch movies with Black people and produced by Black people; listen to Black artists; eat food prepared by Black chefs. Diversify your consumption in order to listen.

In order to learn, find the topic(s) that speak to your soul. The pernicious thing about white supremacy is that it touches every aspect of our society. There will be news stories and events that happen that will break your heart and spark your anger for a minute, but then your attention moves to the next one. But then, something will grab ahold of you. It may intersect with your vocation, your community, your identity, or your family. It may be related to education disparities, housing segregation, immigration, monuments, policing, or something else. Whatever it may be, learn all you can about it. Dig into the real history of a topic and do not allow a false reality to be written. Bear witness.

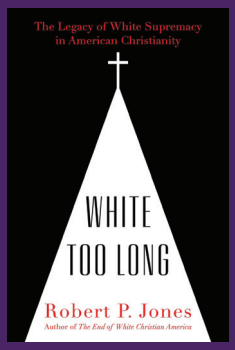
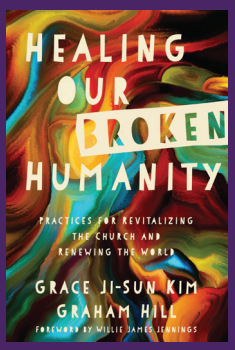
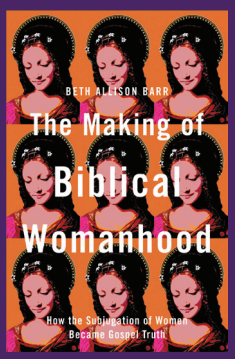
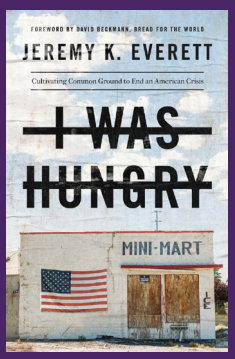
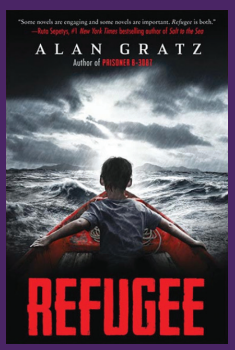
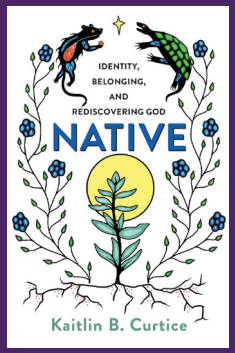
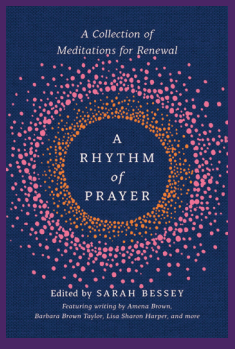
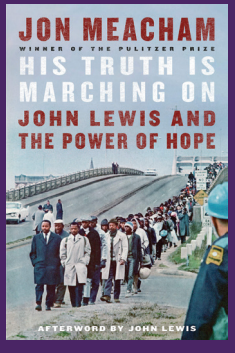
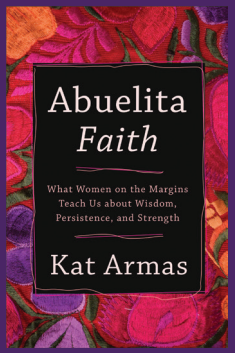
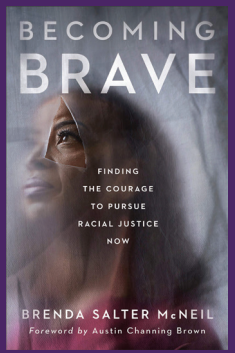
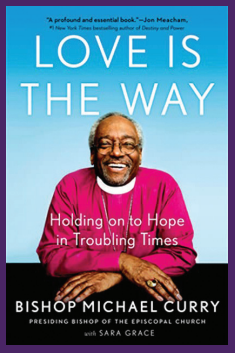
And don't forget to act. Listening and learning are good, but they cannot be the end of the road. There must be action to bring justice to the world. Act in accordance with organizations and causes with leaders who are people of color. Action may be big, encapsulating a career and an identity, but it can also be small. Act by rebuking the innocence that white Christians have constructed for themselves. Speak out in your community and do not allow racism to be tolerated where you are. Support Black businesses. Vote for anti-racist politicians. Allow anti-racism to permeate your life and act in way that prioritizes the people who have been subjected to the oppression and violence of white supremacy.

Some suggestions for action include:

- Join a Black-led advocacy organization and learn their perspecive on current issues. Show commitment and keep showing up.
- Begin visiting a Black church. If you are white, have the experience of being a minority in Black space.
- Begin researching the racial history of your own church or city, then share what you find with fellow church members.
- Strive to build multi-racial relationships of mutual respect and trust.
- Encourage your pastor and church to commit to addressing racism as a congregation.

Rev. Harrison Litzell serves as co-director of the Smoke Rise Baptist Weekday School in Stone Mountain, Ga. He is a graduate of Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology.

CBF Book Club 2021-22

We're excited to announce selections for this year's book club. With new subjects, great authors, more comprehensive reading guides and Fellowship-wide virtual events. We invite you and your congregation, Sunday school class or small group to join us as we read and learn together.

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