



WEBINAR SERIES

Justice, Love, AND Humility

PASTORING A DIVIDED CULTURE

presented by  AMPLIFY MEDIA

Episode 1: How Did We Get Here? Exploring the Roots of Our Division

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Host

Rev. Lisa Yebuah, Lead Pastor, Southeast Raleigh Table, Raleigh, North Carolina

Panelists

- Diana Butler Bass, Author, Speaker, and Independent Scholar, Alexandria, Virginia
Author of *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*
- Robert P. Jones, Author and CEO, PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute), Washington, DC
Author of *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*

Episode Recap

Americans have long had a team mentality when it comes to politics, and the additional stressors in 2020 have brought the country to a crisis point. How did we arrive to this point of tribalism and division? What lessons from 2020 can help pastors navigate these conversations between the people in their churches?

Our panelists began the conversation by looking at our country's history of white supremacy in its places of power, including churches:

- Historically division comes out of suffering. The more politics affects people's daily lives, the more they will argue about it.
- Race and economics usually push division forward.
- We can look at both FDR's election and the Civil War as moments in American history where division was great. It's easy to stand in our present moment and believe we will never get through this, but history offers hope that we have been able to move forward from these points of division and build better systems.
- Many times during these points of division, the issues get pushed down or partially resolved, but the core of the issue is never dealt with.
- Originally published in 1929, H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* discusses the "unacknowledged hypocrisy" of religion with its "caste system" and "color lines." We continue to struggle with these divisions.
- Our current moment is especially fraught with division because partisanship has become welded onto religious and racial identity.

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Historically, churches have reflected society and its inequalities rather than transforming it. The historic division between the voting patterns of Black Christians (who typically vote Democrat) and white Christians (who typically vote Republican) should be a scandal, because the heart of this division is the question of “who gets to be an American.”

American churches are institutions inside a contested democracy, and many choose to follow the path of least resistance to maintain their power and privilege.

In 1972 Dean M. Kelley wrote *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, which many church leaders at the time read as *only* conservative churches grow. This created a myth that standing for justice and biblical values does not equal growth. Historically, being an advocate for the powerless is not an indicator of growth – some of these churches became bigger; some didn't. More importantly, growth in attendance and giving does not mean the church is healthy. We must separate these ideas.

In fact, Public Religion Research Institute's research shows that Mainline Protestantism's decline has stopped, and in the past few years there has been some growth. White evangelical churches, however, continue to be in decline, and the past 10 years in particular have been in steep decline. This is a numerical counter to the myth that progressive churches cannot grow, yet people continue to believe it.

We need more nuance when discussing megachurches, because many Black and Brown megachurches are very healthy.

For pastors who are struggling with being deemed “political” by critics, the panelists offered these thoughts:

- We have to tell the truth. Healing cannot come until we tell the truth, and the truth will keep pursuing us until we do.

- Many churches are protecting their legacy or history at the expense of their children's generation. You cannot protect both. We must acknowledge the sins of our past to move forward to a healthy future.

- When people use “political” as a criticism, that is a good sign you should look for the white supremacy they are defending.

- Pastoral leadership – when done right – can shepherd people through the cognitive dissonance these sorts of difficult conversations cause.

When people say that Jesus didn't discuss politics, that is simply not true. He was a peasant subject to a brutal empire, so his parables questioned that society of patronage and payback. The New Testament is a political document that white Christians have muted, which is a failure of teaching the Bible.

The panelists find hope in this moment because they are seeing more people open to conversations about white supremacy and injustice than ever before. They cautioned leaders to not push down these conversations, or this opportunity of growth we find ourselves in may disappear. We should lead in the deeper work of dismantling destructive theological structures.