



**JONATHAN  
WILSON-HARTGROVE**

*Foreword by* THE REVEREND DR. WILLIAM J. BARBER II

**RECONSTRUCTING  
THE  
GOSPEL**

*Finding Freedom from*

**SLAVEHOLDER  
RELIGION**



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

Taken from *Reconstructing the Gospel* by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).

# CHRISTMAS ON THE PLANTATION



*I*n the small Southern city where I live, developers with an optimistic eye toward progress built a twenty-first-century, glass-walled theater across the street from the county jail. When I read about their plans in the newspaper, I laughed. What a lofty vision for the gravel lot where I parked my car when I drove downtown to visit my imprisoned neighbors through Plexiglas.

But the developers knew what they were doing. Half a decade later, the Durham Performing Arts Center (DPAC) is ranked among the top five concert halls in America. Last year, Aretha Franklin sang “Respect” and Disney’s *The Lion King* danced the “Circle of Life” in earshot of a high-rise where five hundred people lived on lockdown twenty-three hours a day. I had to pay to park when I went to see a friend.

Which is why, when Sammie invited me and my family to “Christmas at the DPAC,” I was intrigued. Having done more than his fair share of time in the high-rise with barred windows that residents ironically refer to as “the White House,” Sammie’s not the type that usually fills one of the 2,700 seats across Mangum Street. But he is one of the first people who accepted our invitation when, some fifteen years ago, my wife, Leah, and I moved to Durham’s Walltown neighborhood and started asking neighbors to join us for dinner. Since then, we’ve eaten a thousand meals with Sammie. But I still remember our first conversation when he and I realized that we’re the same age—that we grew up watching the same cartoons and going through the same programs in North Carolina’s public schools. Only I was white, and Sammie was black. Sammie ran the streets with guys who are locked up in the county jail. I went to grad school with people who frequent the DPAC.

“Christmas at the DPAC?” I asked Sammie when he brought it up. “How we gonna afford that?”

“Here’s what you ain’t gonna believe,” Sammie said, his eyes wide with excitement. “It’s free!”

A local megachurch, eager to share the good news of the season, had booked the theater and invited all of Durham to celebrate together at five different shows. Sammie and I made a list of who would want to go and figured out how we could squeeze all twelve of us into Sammie’s car and our family’s minivan. We had a plan: Sammie would secure the tickets for the late afternoon show on Christmas Eve. We’d all go down together, wish our city a very Merry Christmas, then come home and eat hot dogs Carolina-style with homemade coleslaw. Sammie was excited. He made sure the rest of us were too.

After getting our kids ready, picking up Sammie's cousins, and finding a place to park, we finally made it to our seats in the balcony. The lights were down and a drumline was finishing "The Little Drummer Boy" as the scene shifted to two classical violinists on the other side of the stage. I balanced our youngest on my knee and watched his eyebrows rise in the glow of the stage lights as he took it all in.

No wonder Sammie had been so excited. This was a serious production, highlighting great local talent in an exclusive space where, for today at least, all were welcome. It felt like we were sitting on a little bridge between two worlds, linking one side of Roxboro Road with the other.

"Jesus would be into this," I thought to myself.

No, it wasn't "peace on earth and goodwill toward all people." I knew, of course, that these balcony seats would cost \$239 each when *Hamilton* came to town, and our friends locked up across the street still wouldn't be able to make bail. But I'm a sucker for any little way we open ourselves to one another when the days grow shorter and, eventually, even the malls close their doors to honor the birth of the Savior of the world. Our evening at the DPAC wasn't a revolution, but it did feel like a little interruption—a moment to consider how, when we're willing to trust a better way, something better is possible. Even here. Even now.

I was starting to think I could skip my reading of O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" this year—that I had my Christmas moment to hold on to—a little light to guard and keep me against winter's wind and the dark night of the soul. I was starting to feel a little bit of that affection we call the "Christmas spirit."

Then the curtain dropped, the house lights came up, and a middle-aged white man walked to the edge of the stage with a Bible in his hand. Before introducing himself, this preacher hemmed and hawed about the amazing talent we'd been enjoying and what a hard act it was to follow—how he taught “every now and then” at the church that was sponsoring this event and how it was his job to “say a word or two” about why we'd all gotten together this afternoon.

The kid on my lap must have felt me tensing up. He wriggled down and crawled over to his mom. I kept hoping it wasn't true, but I sensed what was coming. Alvin, a young African American man who'd come with us, knew it too. He stood up from his seat, climbed over a dozen people, and made a beeline for the exit. I wish I'd joined him. But I didn't.

I stayed to hear about how the angels who sang when Jesus was born in Bethlehem were proclaiming the “good news” that Buddha and Muhammad are dead but Jesus is alive. I listened once more to the neat little syllogism in which Jesus is the logical conclusion to a set of propositions that are assumed to be self-evident. I cringed as the earnest man who'd gone to such pains to dress himself in hipster fashion casually smiled his best smile and invited us to celebrate his message that we were all going straight to hell if we didn't align our understanding of the world with his.

Alvin had seen where this was going from the start. When you live in a world that tells you your existence is a problem, you don't have patience for a religion that says the same with a smile. Soul survival demands a good BS-detector for people who've been labeled black, criminal, ungodly, and undeserving.

But if, like me, you've bowed your head backstage at events like this, praying that the preacher would get it right, you live in hope. Stretched between that preacher's best intentions and the

way his message weighed on my friends' bodies, I started to realize I wasn't going to be able to enjoy the hot dog supper Sammie and I had been talking about all week. I looked down from my seat in the balcony and felt a little woozy.

As quickly as he'd come, the preacher was gone, the curtain was up, and the multicultural choir was back again to lead us all in a rousing version of "Joy to the World." I noted that the energetic young man who invited us to sing along started addressing us as "church."

"Stand with me, church. Let me hear you put your hands together, church."

Apparently we had all been baptized by the preacher's words. Now we were "church," and our worship leader was sending us out of the DPAC on a mission.

"We've heard some good news here this afternoon, church. And when you hear good news, you have to tell somebody about it. I want you . . . I want you to go out there and *vomit Jesus on someone!*"

I'd already felt like I was going to throw up. I got out of there as quickly as I could.

For several days after this experience at the DPAC, I walked around in a haze, trying to make sense of the great gap between the joy I'd felt before the preacher's message and the nausea that had followed it. I couldn't simply dismiss the whole affair. After all, he was talking about my Jesus.

I am a preacher. The gospel story lives inside me and pulses to get out like fire shut up in my bones. I've heard lots of bad sermons. I've preached bad ones myself. But this one knocked the Christmas spirit right out of me. Even O. Henry's story felt flat on the page.

What was bothering me, I finally realized, was that Jesus, the person I love most, had become a weapon to drive away someone I also love. Not just in some metaphorical sense. Literally. Alvin had fled the DPAC and found another ride home. The Jesus I know has been knitting our lives together for the past fifteen years, but the message that sent Alvin fleeing was offered in the name of Jesus.

I thought about how cerebral and distant the preacher's bridge between God and humanity felt compared to the visceral gap in my experience before and after his little talk. Not unlike the contrast between the DPAC and the county jail that I confronted again upon exiting the building, feeling every bit like I'd stepped off one of those rides at the state fair that spins you in three directions at once. It wasn't that he'd failed to connect. No, he'd touched a nerve—in Alvin and in me, connecting with hundreds of years of history in a way that made good tidings of great joy feel like an assault.

But how, I kept asking myself, had his good news come to sound so bad? Why did a message he sincerely believed to be gospel for all people send Alvin running for safety and leave me feeling like I'd betrayed my friend . . . and myself?

This was about something more than differing interpretations of the gospel. It was about the integrity of the good news itself. I had to face the breach that is real, not only in the human family and in our world but also in the religion that was passed down to me.

### **The Gospel Torn in Two**

A few weeks after our Christmas at the DPAC, I visited Saint Matthew's Episcopal Church, a quaint chapel one town over from Durham in Hillsborough, North Carolina. This place was



never a megachurch, but 150 years ago it was the DPAC of its day. North Carolina's elite donated the land and built this chapel in 1824. Their children intermarried, and by the end of the Civil War a member of the church, Paul Cameron, was the wealthiest man in North Carolina. He owned most of the land that is now Durham County and nearly a thousand enslaved human beings.

Saint Matthew's priest showed a small group of us the balcony, which was added to the church mid-nineteenth century to segregate its enslaved members from the landed gentry below. Those Southern gentlemen imagined themselves as great fathers, writing often in their personal letters about "our family, black and white." But they also understood the necessity of distinction. The whole plantation economy rested on every person knowing the difference between slave and free.

We were standing at the front of the chapel, looking up at the balcony in the back, when a fellow visitor turned to the Communion rail behind us and asked, "Were masters and slaves segregated when they came forward for Communion?"

"Oh, no," the priest said matter-of-factly. "They had very good sacramental theology. 'One Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all.'"

He recalled an annual report from one of his predecessors who'd gone on to serve as bishop of North Carolina in the mid-nineteenth century. In it, the bishop reported on an Easter service he'd conducted in eastern North Carolina at a plantation that had its own chapel. He waxed eloquent about how preparations had been made to adorn the building and about the exceptional music that was performed. Then he described the scene of master and slave kneeling together at the altar, receiving the

body and blood of Christ. It had seemed to him a notable image of the reconciliation that Jesus Christ makes possible.

“But is there any record of an experience like that making someone question slavery itself?” The young white woman who asked the question seemed troubled. I think she was feeling in her gut something like what I’d felt on my way out of the DPAC a few weeks earlier.

The priest paused for a long time to consider her question. He knew his parish well, the living and the dead. This was not the first time he’d considered the gospel’s impact on their lives.

“We do know that one freedman left this parish and became an abolitionist in Oberlin, Ohio. I like to think it was because of something he’d seen and heard in this church.” The priest could see how desperate this woman was for a word of assurance—for some sign that the gospel has power, not simply to remind us of what should be but to change who we are.

If he’d stopped there, part of me would have been happy. One abolitionist in a thousand is at least a glimmer of hope—even if he did have to flee this space to live out what he heard in the Scriptures. But looking at our little group of visitors, all pale-skinned, the priest knew he had to tell another story—one about someone far more like most of us.

Thomas Ruffin donated the land where Saint Matthew’s still sits today. He was an upstanding white citizen of North Carolina in the nineteenth century and a lifelong member of the parish, where the fellowship hall still bears his name. Ruffin was also a justice on North Carolina’s Supreme Court. When a white man was convicted of assault against a woman he hired, Ruffin’s court voted in the *State v. John Mann* to overturn the white man’s conviction. Ruffin wrote the opinion himself.

The priest had read Ruffin's words with a pastor's eye. He could see the man who is still buried in Saint Matthew's graveyard wrestling in every sentence with the reality he experienced at the Communion rail each Sunday. Ruffin went to great lengths to acknowledge the humanity of the slave. But legal precedent was clear. "The power of the master must be absolute," the white churchman wrote, "to render the submission of the slave perfect." Reading Ruffin's opinion, the priest said, was "like watching a man tear himself in two."

I thought about the two worlds that Sammie and I grew up in and the two sides of Roxboro Road—about how fractured our world is and how, deep down, each of us longs to see it made whole. I thought about how the same gospel that made some Christians want to sing praise music had sent a black person running for freedom in the nineteenth century and another fleeing the DPAC in the twenty-first century.

Standing there in Saint Matthew's, I had an epiphany about the gospel, the old, old story whose words I'd known since before I'd begun to grasp their meaning as a powerful force. I've seen it transform lives, lift up the brokenhearted, and spur people from bondage toward freedom. But like every good gift from God, the story of Jesus has been hijacked to serve the opposite of what God wants. The institutions of Christianity, the words of Scripture, the very message of the gospel was twisted 150 years ago to endorse what we now readily confess is sin.

This was not the exception, but the rule. The one sister who heard something different at Saint Matthew's had to flee north, all the way across the Ohio River, where she was still breaking federal law when she greeted formerly enslaved sisters and brothers as fellow children of God, not stolen property.

Christianity in America has not occasionally turned away from the gospel's truth, like a sailor tempted by the sirens' call. It has, rather, turned the gospel against itself, tearing in two the people who adopted this form of religion without letting its truth change their lives. This subversion of the gospel put a crack in the foundation of our common life. It opened up a great gulf between people that has thwarted our pursuit of genuine community ever since. And it has left a hidden wound deep in our hearts. Standing in the sanctuary where Thomas Ruffin worshiped every Sunday, that great passage from the prophet Isaiah rang in my head: "And you shall be called Repairer of the Breach" (Isaiah 58:12 WEB).

Sometime or another, we all sense that things aren't as they should be. It's why the young white woman hoped to discover at the Communion rail some link between the slave balcony and the master's pew. It's why I'd longed to experience a hint of reconciliation at a Christmas celebration where all of Durham could sit down together and sing carols without throwing up on anyone. I guess it's even what the preacher was trying to build with his bridge between God and humanity that couldn't begin to comprehend the gulf between him and Alvin.

But the religious experience of a slaveholder compelled me to confess that I'd been as blind as that zealous evangelist, as naive as the young woman who'd hoped against hope that her theology trumped history. I'd deceived myself into thinking that the original sin that ripped this nation in two had somehow not formed me. In a chapel built by plantation owners nearly two centuries ago, a priest told me the truth: *I am a man torn in two*.

I don't just live in a divided world. *I am divided*. And if it's true all the way down—not just for me, but for the sisters and

brothers who've loved and taught me, then I must confess this also: *the gospel I inherited is divided*.

I know this might not sound like good news, but I received it like a man who's been sick for a very long time, dealing with symptom after symptom, finally getting a diagnosis. My soul cannot be well without the society that made it sick finding health.

But that is not all. The gospel that was twisted to accommodate America's original sin must also be reconstructed if we are to experience the healing that Jesus wants to bring. Otherwise, evangelism is violence and those of us who spend our time in church meetings are perpetuating a death-dealing culture without even realizing it.

### **Spiritual Reconstruction**

Another way of saying this is, Christians in America must come to terms with how *institutional racism* has infected us. Few white persons in twenty-first-century America see themselves as racist. (Even fewer Asian, Latino, or African American persons do.) Most American Christians—white, black, or brown—are horrified by the idea of a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) rally or by the public personality who occasionally gets caught saying the n-word. But personal animus against others because of the color of their skin isn't the racism that turned the gospel against itself. Remember, enslaved people were "family" to Paul Cameron and Thomas Ruffin.

The sin that ripped the gospel in two—the spiritual root of our political divisions and class disparities—is a lie that was told centuries ago to justify owning, using, and abusing other human beings. Racism is about implicit bias as much as it's about public policy. It's why a white applicant with a criminal record is as

likely to get a job as an African American with no criminal history. And it's why African American veterans of World War II didn't benefit from the GI Bill—legislation offering educational funding, low-interest housing loans, and other support for veterans—the same way their white counterparts did. It is why, two and three generations later, the median disparity between the wealth of white and black families hasn't changed, despite the advances of the civil rights movement. Racism is why historically black neighborhoods across America are gentrifying at breakneck speed while the families who built and sustained these communities are being displaced.

This is what racism means: we live in a society that continues to be divided, and we are, each and every one of us, split in two ourselves. When white Christians refuse to hear cries for justice from black and brown sisters and brothers, it is one more symptom of the racism that has long divided our souls, our congregations, and our nation. When middle-class Americans silence the voices of poor black and brown people who know from daily experience that race and history still matter, our hardness of heart betrays a spiritual sickness that Jesus detected in the Pharisees of his own day. We, like them, have turned the gift of God's law against itself. Splitting the good news in two, we re-fashion it as both a shield against God's grace and a sword to wield against our neighbors. We turn God's good news into our bad news.

Fifteen years ago, Leah and I moved to Durham's Walltown community, a historically African American neighborhood whose residents have maintained Duke University since its first janitor, George Wall, moved here in the 1890s. Ignorant of much of Walltown's history, we relocated to a place that has taught us

what it means to be white. People like Sammie welcomed us into a community where we've worked and worshiped—where our kids play under the watchful eyes of grandmas who sit on their porches and young men who walk these streets, wondering whether their lives matter to anyone else. One of them knocked on the door not long ago and asked, clearly worried, if I knew my two-year-old was playing alone on the porch. No one needs to tell this young black man that all lives matter.

In this place, neighbors and friends have taught us to see racism—to name the ways history still shapes the present and to doubt the certainties we inherited along with being white. These people, together with the Holy Spirit, have stirred up a passion within me to face America's original sin in my own heart and to join the freedom movement that is committed to exorcising it from our common life. They have shown me how a gospel that doesn't confront racism is no gospel at all. In a moment of clarity—seeing myself and my gospel ripped in two by this shared history—Saint Matthew's helped me to finally name what had left me feeling sick on Christmas Eve.

For all my life I've known that the gospel must reconstruct my life. Whatever humanity's problems, Jesus is the answer. This I believe.

But what do you do when you realize that your Jesus has been ripped in two—that the name of the one who came to set us free has been hijacked by the principalities and powers that bind us? What happens when, like Mary in the garden, you realize they've taken away your Jesus and you don't know where they've laid him?

It is not easy to pray in the midst of such a faith crisis. You find yourself questioning the One you're used to going to with your

questions—wondering if you’re talking to the true and living God or some projection of your privilege that you fashioned in your own image.

But a good diagnosis at least clarifies the situation. Better to see how you’ve been deceived—how, even, you’ve deceived yourself—than to miss the gospel because you thought you already had the answer.

I call it the foggy morning of the soul—that liminal time when you can see just enough to pull the car out of your driveway—but you aren’t quite sure you see where you’re going. We turn our headlights on in such a situation. We sit on the edge of our seats, eyes wide open to detect whatever might emerge before us. We are afraid, yes. But we lean in, because there’s no other way to get where we are going.

This is why Jesus said that the poor are blessed and the hungry will be satisfied and the merciful will be shown mercy. Not because God loves them any more than he loves the rest but because they know their need. They have a clear diagnosis. A hungry man knows he needs bread. A heart that’s been broken knows it wants mercy. And a soul that can see its own self-deception knows it needs good news, which is what the gospel is.

A friend of mine calls it the End-of-Your-Rope Club. There are a thousand ways to get there, but however we come to the end of our ropes, it is the place where we discover that our only hope is a love that comes from beyond us. Maybe you’ve thought you’ve known the gospel all your life. Maybe you’ve always thought it sounded like some crazy con. Whatever your background, the only good news that’s worth believing comes through loud and clear at the end of your rope. This is where you learn you need a Savior.



After my epiphany at Saint Matthew's, I went back to the texts we call the Gospels. I read again those four accounts of Jesus' life and death, and I saw in a way I'd missed before how the diagnosis of a divided faith is the beginning of the good news Jesus offered to nearly every religious person he met during his time here on earth.

Jesus prayed the psalms and quoted the Torah and spent time in the temple, but his message to religious people was surprisingly grim. "Woe to you . . ." was his constant refrain. When he took a more pastoral tone, it was usually something like, "Don't you remember where it is written . . .?"

After reading the Bible all my life, I realized that Jesus, who was a preacher, didn't really say anything that hadn't been said before. In fact, he took pains to make clear that he was saying what the God of Israel had been saying ever since God spoke the world into existence. "I have not come to abolish them [the Torah and the Prophets] but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17).

Jesus didn't come to preach a new gospel. *Jesus came to reconstruct God's good news, which religious leaders had turned against itself.*

How had I missed this? How have so many sincere Christians confessed and practiced a religion that made them worse than they might have been otherwise? How, I had to ask, did slaveholder religion take a message that calls all of us out of systemic injustice and use it to subjugate generations of children created in the image of God?

Following America's Civil War, the moral contradiction at the core of American history had literally ripped the nation in two. Americans were a people at the end of their rope. Humbled by grief and loss, they sought language to name a shared

journey toward a common future. *Reconstruction* was the name they gave their brief attempt to make formerly enslaved people full citizens of the United States. Because that effort was subverted by people who called themselves Christian, slavery did not end. It evolved into Jim Crow in the South, segregated ghettos in the North—an existence both separate and unequal. A Second Reconstruction confronted this fundamental contradiction again in the mid-twentieth century through a nonviolent struggle led by people of deep faith. Though the civil rights movement's stride toward freedom is memorialized on road signs and in a national holiday that bears the name of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., a Moral Majority emerged in the 1980s to subvert almost every systemic change Dr. King had died for. The Jim Crow laws intended to separate the races evolved to subvert Reconstruction.

This book is a reckoning with my own faith's past and with the many ways Christianity in America remains captive to slaveholder religion. It is a confession, for sure, but I'm not just baring my soul. I've tried to tell the truth about the churches where I work and worship and the nation in which I seek to be a faithful citizen. Ours is a shared story, and all of us bear some responsibility for the mess we are in.

Staring this history down has convinced me that reconstruction is, in fact, what Jesus has always been about. But we can't even see this until we learn to deconstruct much of what we assume is given about ourselves, our churches, and our nation. We have so much to unlearn before we can learn the things that Jesus lived, died, and rose again to teach.

This is an American story but one told with an awareness that the economy that developed on the plantations of the South is

now commonly called the “global economy.” The moral contradiction, with which I am intimate by accident of birth, now threatens to destroy the entire world. It has taken me decades to learn to see this, and I’m certain I still don’t comprehend it. But I ask your patience as I try to peel back the layers of slaveholder religion in the first half of this book.

Please do not lose hope. This book is, as its title claims, about how Jesus can reconstruct the gospel to free us from false religion. This is what the Christianity of Christ has always been about. But the biggest obstacle to reconstructing the gospel in America has been (and continues to be) the compromised and corrupted religion of the slaveholder. For the next five chapters, I’m trying to expose how *racial blindness*, *racial habits*, and *racial politics* are tied together in the slaveholder religion that has been passed down to in America as simply as “Christianity.”

God has a way of interrupting us—of laying open the wounds of our past in ways that touch us personally. This, too, is the gospel, which is why each chapter in the first half of this book also demonstrates how tearing down is central to the ministry of Jesus in all four Gospels of the New Testament. Whenever any of us come to the end of our rope, we face a personal crisis. Whenever all of us come to the end of our rope collectively, we face a social crisis. No one chooses the agony of times like these, but Jesus meets us here at the end of our rope.

Still, Jesus does not leave us here. As long as there has been slaveholder religion, there has also been the Christianity of Christ, inviting people and communities into *fusion politics*, *surprising friendships*, and *inner healing*. This, too, is written into our Scripture and history, and such reconstruction is the theme of the second half of this book. I am writing as I hope to preach

and live—with a deep sense of calling to help save the soul of America and sound a warning cry to a world on the verge of disaster. Time is short and the stakes are high.

But as broad as the implications of reconstructing the gospel may be, the heart of this book is deeply personal. It is about the songs my parents and grandparents sang to me and the faith I hope to pass on to my children. This book is a love letter to them, and to you. Where it stings, I pray you can trust that its words are hot with the fire of love.

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