

*There is no redemption without restoration,  
and there is no deliverance without atonement.*

# The case for Black racial repair in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

William Yoo

Ten years ago, Ta-Nehisi Coates published “The Case for Black Reparations” in *The Atlantic* magazine. In surveying the promise and failure of Reconstruction, Coates concluded that the United States had yet to confront its history of racial oppression against Black Americans.

After the horrors of slavery, in which millions of uncompensated Black people labored in captivity, Black Americans were subject to the ferocity of ongoing racial discrimination across the nation. In his article, Coates featured the story of Clyde Ross, a Black military veteran from Mississippi who relocated to Chicago in 1947 after his service in World War II. Like so many other Black Americans, Ross had left the Deep South to escape the violent degradations of White supremacy and racial terror.


Yet Jim Crow loomed everywhere. Ross worked hard and saved enough money to purchase a home for his family. But even in Chicago, the color of his skin blocked his access to a legitimate mortgage for a home in a middle-class neighborhood. Instead, Ross fell prey to the widespread racism of redlining, predatory lending and various other legal and extralegal measures of anti-Black housing discrimination.

In 2021, households with a White householder made up **65.3%** of all U.S. households and held **80.0%** of all wealth.

Those with a Black householder made up **13.6%** of all U.S. households but held only **4.7%** of all wealth. And their median wealth (**\$24,520**) was about one-tenth the median wealth of households with a White householder (**\$250,400**).

Coates recognized racial progress and the hard-fought gains of the Civil Rights Movement. The lives of Black Americans in 2014 were better than they were in 1964; but the racial wealth gap between Black and White Americans persisted, with studies showing that, in 2014, White households held 20 times more wealth than Black households.

Lost in today’s debate over reparations is Coates’s emphasis on reparations as being both moral and material. In addition to accounting for the economic ramifications of slavery and segregation, Coates asserted that reparations must entail a collective acknowledgment of historical wrongs and a shared commitment to undo the enduring consequences: “What I’m talking about is more than recompense for past injustices — more than a handout, a payoff, hush money or a reluctant bribe. What I’m talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.” Using words familiar among Presbyterians and other Reformed believers, Coates added that reparations call upon Americans to reject the lure of civic falsehoods and “see America as it is — the work of fallible humans.”



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We cannot undo our past, but we can work to enact a better and more faithful future of healing and wholeness for Black Presbyterians.

In our faith, our admission of human depravity and our confession of sin are ultimately hopeful and constructive. There is no redemption without restoration; there is no deliverance without atonement. As Christians, we do not impose our religious convictions upon others in our nation. We are instead motivated, as God's agents of reconciliation, to act justly and work toward ending racial discrimination in the world we have inherited and now inhabit.

In this article I present a case for Black racial repair in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) specifically. I address larger matters of offering U.S. reparations to the descendants of slavery and segregation. But in focusing on the denomination to which I belong, I aim to illumine a clearer understanding of our history and illustrate the broken paths that have yet to be fully restored. My hope is anchored in my conviction that we must see our church as it is: the work of saints

and sinners who did both good and evil, all in the name of God. The sinful history of racial prejudice within our Presbyterian heritage is simultaneously a sobering reminder of human fallibility and a call to enact justice by repairing relations with Black Presbyterians today.

### **A DEBATE ON RACIAL EQUALITY AT THE DAWN OF RECONSTRUCTION**

In 1867, Robert Lewis Dabney spoke before the Synod of Virginia. Dabney, a professor at Union Presbyterian Seminary, had served as a Confederate army chaplain alongside General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson in the Civil War. He emerged as a significant leader of the Southern Presbyterian denomination, the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), during Reconstruction. The synod was debating racial integration and specifically whether White Presbyterians would ordain Black ruling elders

and ministers. Dabney was absent from the synod's initial deliberations, which resulted in a resolution that overtured the General Assembly "to declare that the church is Christ's universal kingdom" and to support the ordination of Black elders and pastors in recognition that "the work of the gospel ministry is to be given to all those called of God to, and qualified for the work, without respect of persons."

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Shortly after his arrival, Dabney conferred with several ministerial colleagues and former students and grew incensed at the prospect of Black and White Presbyterians worshiping alongside one another as equal members. He later recalled the rage and desperation coursing through his body: "I knew that this negro amalgamation would ruin our church. I felt that it was a moment of life and death for the church. I resolved, therefore, to fight like a man striving for life or death, to drop every restraint, and to give full swing to every force of argument, emotion, will, and utterance." Dabney submitted a motion to reconsider the resolution and delivered a speech that resulted in a vote to rescind the overture and replace it with a substitute in which the synod urged the General Assembly to prohibit further discernment on Black ordination.

John L. Girardeau, a White pastor who ministered among Black people in South Carolina, had initiated discussion of the future of Black Presbyterianism at the PCUS General Assembly the year before, in 1866. Girardeau conceded that the patterns of interracial worship that White

Presbyterians preferred before Reconstruction were eroding. When Black people were enslaved, White Presbyterians had no qualms about worshiping with them in the same sanctuaries because of the firmly entrenched social order of White dominance. Some White enslavers also did not want their enslaved Black persons to worship on their own because the enslavers feared unsupervised gatherings in which enslaved preachers proclaimed scriptural messages about deliverance and enslaved believers sang of their yearnings for liberation.

In 1833, a committee of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia observed that most of its churches were designed for interracial worship, with segregated seating provided for enslaved Black people in galleries or rear pews on the lower floor. The committee added that in those churches without segregated spaces, the enslaved worshipers must listen from outside and "must catch the Gospel as it escapes by the doors and windows." But Reconstruction, with the promise of racial equality, brought with it many White Presbyterians' fierce resistance to interracial worship. These White Presbyterians now did not want free Black people anywhere near their church doors and windows. Girardeau therefore proposed three different options for Black Presbyterians: (1) separate Black churches and presbyteries with ordained officers; (2) Black churches set up as "missionary congregations" without ordained officers; (3) Black churches established as branches of White churches, with ordained officers who did not have authority in councils with White members.

Yet some White Presbyterians were open to racial equality in both their churches and the wider society after the Civil War. John M. P. Atkinson, a White pastor and president of Hampden-Sydney College, publicly expressed his support for both Black ordination and an interracial denomination with Black and White Presbyterians practicing ministry together in sessions, presbyteries and other ecclesial councils. One of Dabney's faculty colleagues at Union, Thomas E. Peck, also

advocated for racial integration and opposed the emerging notion of creating a separate church organization for Black Presbyterians. Atkinson and Peck were keenly aware of the discriminatory contempt that many White people held toward the Black race — but they, and others like them, were willing to enact in their churches the principles of racial equality required of a new American society without slavery.

The change of heart when the Synod of Virginia met in 1867 is therefore telling. It was a pivotal moment, as these White church leaders discerned their next steps forward into a new and uncertain future. At first, they did resolve to remake their church in the image of Christ’s universal kingdom and to work toward the inclusion of Black members as co-equals and co-heirs of the Gospel. But in his opposition, Dabney appealed to familiar scriptural expositions about White supremacy and Black inferiority and persuaded the synod to endorse Girardeau’s proposal of a segregated denomination. Slavery had been vanquished, but Dabney asserted that racial equality was not God’s intention in either this church or the nation. He interpreted the antebellum social order of White dominance as divinely mandated, rather than a humanly constructed means to uphold slavery. Though Black Americans were all free, they constituted a “subservient race” who were “made to follow, and not to lead.”

In his address – published a year later as a pamphlet titled “The Ecclesiastical Equality of Negro Preachers in Our Church and Their Right to Rule over White Christians” and distributed across the denomination – Dabney asked, “Do the Bible and our standards require us in consistency to introduce black men into all our Church courts as our equals, and as spiritual rulers of the laity of the superior race?” He answered his own question with a thunderous no and then challenged those who were prepared to say yes to consider the implications. He alarmingly invited the synod to imagine scenarios of Black worshipers sitting next to White worshipers in the same pews, Black ruling and teaching elders voting on White

candidates for ministry, and Black pastors baptizing White infants. Dabney knew that he was not the only person in the room who loathed the idea of a Black man laying his hands on the head of a White man, woman or child.

The White church leaders at the synod all inhabited a culture of anti-Black racism fashioned over two centuries of slavery, but a majority was willing to engage in the hard work of repairing a church that slavery had broken. Then Dabney spoke and gave them the religious justification they needed to adopt an easier path. In 1868, Stuart Robinson, the White pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, shared copies of Dabney’s pamphlet at a meeting of the Synod of Kentucky.

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### **A CALL FOR BLACK RACIAL REPAIR TODAY**

As we look back at this history today, one of our immediate responses is to disavow Dabney’s racist theology and to express thanksgiving for the racial progress our church has made. But such responses are not enough. In fact, one of the biggest obstacles to reconciliation and repair is the superficiality of condemnation without deeper consideration of the consequences and ongoing reverberations of past sins. Many White Presbyterians in the Southern states accepted segregation in the denomination, upheld racial discrimination in their nation and inflicted great harm upon Black Americans for at least 100 years after Dabney’s speech.

In 1891, J. M. Fulton, a White pastor, relocated from Pennsylvania to North Carolina to teach in a Black school affiliated with a Northern denomination, the United Presbyterian Church of North America. School enrollment was growing; Fulton taught 700 students during the day and another 200 at night. After two years, Fulton arrived at two conclusions. The first was that Black people were indeed capable learners who could accomplish as much as White people could, given an equal opportunity. The second was a lament of the seemingly implacable scourge of racial oppression that crushed his students' dreams and livelihoods. Fulton especially despaired because this racial prejudice had become a religious conviction among the White Christian population.

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In 1897, Matthew Anderson, a Black Presbyterian pastor in the Northern city of Philadelphia, decried the racial discrimination that denied Black people equal access to education and employment throughout the nation. When a wealthy White lay person chastised Anderson for how Black churches sought financial contributions from White Presbyterians, Anderson retorted that Black churches like his were impoverished not because of a lagging work ethic from congregational members but rather because of the absence of good jobs for Black people to support themselves, their families and their churches.

In 1934, James Weldon Johnson, a prominent Black civil rights activist and author, observed: "Those who stand for making the [Black] race into a self-sufficient unit point out that after years

of effort we are still Jim-Crowded, discriminated against, segregated, and lynched; that we are still shut out from industry, barred from the main avenues of business, and cut off from free participation in national life."

And in 1965, when Martin Luther King Jr. spoke in a packed auditorium at the Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina, he highlighted the intersection of structural racism and systemic poverty. King traced the racial wealth gap and higher rates of poverty among Black people to "the legacy of slavery and segregation" as well as the reluctance of White churches to confront racial injustice: "All too often in the midst of social evil, too many Christians have somehow stood still only to mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities."

Every time we sing Johnson's powerful hymn "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and convey King's prophetic words, let us also heed their calls to action in approaching Black racial repair across moral, spiritual, material and social dimensions.

So what does Black racial repair in the PC(USA) entail? My first answer is to profess that no individual has the answer, because we Presbyterians believe in discerning the will of God and movement of the Spirit among a diverse and inclusive community. My second answer is to assert that Black Presbyterians must lead us in this work. Because we are a connectional church, congregations, presbyteries and synods can take many steps in partnership with Black Presbyterians to address the racial wealth gap in our denomination. For example, we can dedicate funds to support the ministries of Black congregations and the flourishing of Black clergy. Collective healing takes place when our Black churches can fully maintain their property and fulfill the distinctive purposes that God has placed in their hearts.

Also required is a plan to ensure our Black pastors receive compensation and continuing education opportunities commensurate to those enjoyed by White clergy. In addition to local and regional endeavors, the entire denomination

needs a coordinated effort. I believe we can raise at least \$100 million over the next 10 years to apply toward Black racial repair. In proposing this figure, I am not suggesting a precise fiscal amount that atones for our Presbyterian sins of slavery and segregation. Rather, I offer it as a material representation of a moral commitment.

Presbyterians are certainly equipped to pursue the ministry of reparative justice. Our practices of confessing corporate sin and bearing mutual responsibility inform and inspire how we may engage Black racial repair in the PC(USA) today. Even our understanding of church property as held in trust reflects a recognition of generational wealth. Our buildings are not ours alone because we honor the faithful contributions – in the forms of tithes, offerings, prayers and actions – of our ancestors. Yet we must also account for the faithlessness of some of our ancestors. History is not a weapon to conceal past sin or induce present guilt; rather, it is a tool to help us better understand our origins, our strengths and our problems. I often ask historic White congregations in cities if they have considered how they worship in prime real estate buildings. The answer is generational, and I want these churches to study these economic forces and disparities — their White ancestors' generous giving, as well as the unjust measures that restricted Black residents' access to the same material resources to shape their contemporary ministries.

I affirm and celebrate the racial progress in our denomination. As a theological educator, I stand in awe of the exceptional legacies of two Black Presbyterian scholars, Katie Geneva

Cannon and Gayraud S. Wilmore. Their wisdom continues to be deeply felt as students engage their writings in undergraduate, seminary and Sunday school classrooms everywhere. I also admire the pastoral leadership of our Black ministers as they instruct, edify, accompany and direct us in various ministries today. But I contend that the PC(USA) remains in need of Black racial repair. Old wounds fester. New harms arise because we have yet to fully comprehend our shared responsibility to honor and support Black Presbyterians.

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My call for specific and sustained attention to Black racial repair need not be interpreted as a competition. I acknowledge the urgency of other matters, such as environmental abuses, gender- and sexuality-based oppressions, myriad challenges in rural communities and the marginalization of sundry persons of color. Therefore I believe in a mighty God who empowers the church to do all things well. One of these tasks is to address the particular history and ongoing reality of anti-Black racism in the PC(USA). We cannot undo our past, but we can work to enact a better and more faithful future of healing and wholeness for Black Presbyterians. When Black Presbyterians thrive, all of us will be greatly blessed. ♦



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