

Racial Equity and a Just Economy for All

The Movement to Reparatory Justice

September 2, 2020

Matthew 20:4 “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.”

Our God is a God of justice and extravagant generosity. We see in the Parable of the Workers the master’s emphasis on giving everyone the wages they deserve *and even more* because God continually insists that all of God’s children must flourish -- not just those who got to the vineyard first.

As Christians called to bring God’s good news to the people of this world, we are forced to reckon with a history in which workers have NOT gotten what they deserve, they have been actively abused long after their work has ended, locked out of the prosperity they created. Black labor in this hemisphere was stolen from the continent of Africa and an entire oppressive theological and biblical stance was created to justify the inhumane treatment. Thus, the effects of racial injustice in America and the world are a deep and hideous blight that infect God’s church and delay God’s coming kingdom the longer they go unremedied.



Seeking Racial Equity and a Just Economy

Reparatory Justice is Complex

As we address race-based injustices in our society, however, it is important to understand that reparatory justice is multifaceted and requires a multi-pronged approach, guided by the testimony and leadership of those who are most affected by the injustice. In her article [Hurricane Katrina’s Lessons for Transformative Recovery](#), Ashley Gardere describes the massive efforts made by the city of New Orleans after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina to rebuild the city with an eye to racial equity. She cites many excellent programs created and goals achieved, but ultimately concludes: “Despite our best intentions, as leaders we employ race-neutral strategies expecting to achieve racial equity, convinced that ‘a rising tide lifts all boats.’ And so we fail to center people over profits, always in a negotiation with the economic markets.” Because the recovery chose to center “all people” over those who were most affected by the crisis, racial wealth and resource access gaps persist in New Orleans. The lesson is clear: the lived experience of people and the necessity of repairing the breach, not the success of programs, must be the center of reparatory justice efforts.

What are Reparations?

Reparations are a way to make restitution for past wrongs that continue to impact people’s lives today. To make reparation is a process that involves acknowledging the breach, confession, apology, repentance, forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. Reparatory justice requires not only words, but action. For many people, a just process of reparations for our race-based sins requires the provision of financial resources to the victims however it is not the first step. Like Zacchaeus, those who benefited and continue to benefit from oppression must make amends.

Reparations can and must be multifaceted because the problem of racism is systemic as well as historical. The National African American Reparations Commission outlined the following as opportunities for reparation in their [Preliminary Reparations Program](#):

1. Formal Apology and Establishment of a [MAAFA](#)/African Holocaust Institute
2. The Right of Repatriation and Creation of an African Knowledge Program
3. The Right to Land for Social and Economic Development

4. Funds for Cooperative Enterprises and Socially Responsible Entrepreneurial Development
5. Resources for the Health, Wellness and Healing of Black Families and Communities
6. Education for Community Development and Empowerment
7. Affordable Housing for Healthy Black Communities and Wealth Generation
8. Strengthening Black America's Information and Communications Infrastructure
9. Preserving Black Sacred Sites and Monuments
10. Repairing the Damages of the "Criminal Injustice System"

Why Reparations?

Reparations are tangible proof of repentance, as well as a means of giving brothers and sisters of color a just share of the fruit their stolen labor produced. As Rashawn Ray and Andre Perry explain in their Brookings article [Why we need reparations for Black Americans](#),

"In 1860, over \$3 billion was the value assigned to the physical bodies of enslaved Black Americans to be used as free labor and production. This was more money than was invested in factories and railroads combined. In 1861, the value placed on cotton produced by enslaved Blacks was \$250 million. Slavery enriched white slave owners and their descendants, and it fueled the country's economy while suppressing wealth building for the enslaved. The United States has yet to compensate descendants of enslaved Black Americans for their labor. Nor has the federal government atoned for the lost equity from anti-Black housing, transportation, and business policy. Slavery, Jim Crow segregation, anti-Black practices like redlining, and other discriminatory public policies in criminal justice and education have robbed Black Americans of the opportunities to build wealth (defined as assets minus debt) afforded to their white peers."

The staggering [income inequality](#) we see today between black and white families keeps many black families, already struggling with the effects of systemic racism, in a cycle of poverty and desperation, making them susceptible to new forms of exploitation, like payday loans, predatory debt collection, and extortionate mortgage rates. In order to heal both old and new wounds, our nation must repent for its exploitation of human beings in deed as well as in word, and that means sincere financial investment.

International Reparatory Justice Movement

As Christians of a global church, we must remember that racial injustice extends past our national borders, and so reparatory justice must also reach past those borders. Recognizing this, the World Council of Churches has endorsed the [Zacchaeus Project](#) as a means for Christians in countries that have benefited from stolen resources and labor to begin to make repayment for the terrible inequities that persist because of plunder that takes place in the name of the global economy. Key to the initiatives of the Zacchaeus project are a progressive wealth tax on wealthy nations as well as a cancellation of debt for nations impoverished by the transatlantic slave trade and struggling with the impacts of runaway climate change.

The UCC's Stance on Reparations

In 2001, the United Church of Christ's 23rd General Synod passed a resolution, "[A Call for a study on reparations for slavery.](#)" Justice and Witness Ministries produced a discussion guide in 2003 titled [Financial Reparations: a Just Response to the Persistent Economic Effects of Slavery, Segregation, Discrimination, and Racism](#). An update to General Synod on our deeper involvement in the reparatory justice movement is expected in 2021.

More Resources

[HR-40 \(Reparations Bill\) Primer](#) by National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA)

[Race, Repentance, and Reparation: An Ecumenical Opportunity](#) by World Council of Churches

[The Case for Reparations](#) by Ta-Nehisi Coates on *The Atlantic*

[National African American Reparations Commission](#)

[The Caribbean Reparations Commission 10 Point Reparation Plan](#)

[Systematic Inequality and Economic Opportunity](#) by Danyelle Solomon, Connor Maxwell, and Abril Castro on *The Center for American Progress*