



Anticipating the First Two Chapters
Reconstructing the Gospel: Article One
A Letter from Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

Dear sisters and brothers,

Easter greetings as we continue our journey toward freedom from slaveholder religion. Thanks to those of you who shared your concerns and reservations in the online forum. I'm grateful for the ways you're trusting yourselves to one another, to this formation process, and ultimately to the God who is alive and active in the world, liable to show up anywhere in the disguise of siblings who are strange to us.

I hope you were able to prayerfully sing "Were You There?" during the last two weeks of Lent. A classic of the spiritual tradition that arose from among the enslaved people of America's plantation economy, it conveys a communal wisdom that was distilled and passed down by people who knew that the God who raised Israel from Egypt before raising Jesus from the dead would also make a way out of no way to lead them toward freedom. Inherent in their embrace of the true and living God was a critique of slaveholder religion. To sing the songs of the freedom church that arose from the brush arbors of plantations is to tune our hearts to the longing for freedom that we all need.

I celebrated Easter this year by going to see Aretha Franklin's "Amazing Grace," a documentary filmed during the 1972 recording session for her best-selling gospel album by the same name. Lost to technical difficulties for nearly half a century, "Amazing Grace" is itself a resurrection, inviting us to behold gospel music's powerful synthesis of the spirituals and the blues in the 20th century. It is the truest art to emerge from American Christianity, and as such it offers a powerful resource for our formation. Even if you can't go see the film, I hope you'll use these live recordings for guided meditation over the next couple of weeks:

[Aretha Franklin – Amazing Grace](#)

The two chapters you are reading this week are an invitation to face—both at the experiential level and in terms of our darkest history—the malformation of slaveholder religion. The stories I tell are Christmas and Easter stories—uncomfortable stories from our highest holidays—because we cannot tell the truth about our bondage until we name the ways sin has become entangled with the very gifts God offers to save us from our sin.

These are ultimately stories about self-deception. I hope you've come far enough on the formation journey to know that self-deception is a primary tool of the enemy. We manifest our thoughts to one another and confess to spiritual directors because we know that, as individuals, we cannot trust ourselves to always hear God's voice clearly. But what is true



for each of us as individuals can also be true of societies. The powers and principalities conspire to keep us from seeing ourselves as we really are. Radical self-honesty requires the insight of those who haven't been insiders in any society.

St. Benedict understood this to be an inherent facet of any life in community. He instructs abbots in the gospel-centered communities he founded to consult the newest member of the group on any major decision because he understood how easily we can be blinded to our own self-interest in patterns that just seem normal.

If this is true of a society established for the sake of living out Christ's teachings, how much more must it be the case for an economy and government that was established upon the lie that some people can own other people?

In contemporary consciousness raising and educational programs that are designed to highlight racial inequality in America, people raced "white" in this story are often taught to identify their "privilege." Because historic inequalities persist and make a real difference in terms of opportunity, access and outcomes, this is important work to do. But the formational work we are trying to do must go deeper. What "privilege" is it, really, to be the economic beneficiary of a lie?

To put it another way, finding freedom from slaveholder religion begins with recognizing that whiteness is a kind of spiritual poverty. I don't mean that people of European descent are inherently spiritually inferior, but that we have inherited a system of racial identification that lies about who people are based on the color of their skin. All available research suggests that this system continues to create real disparities in every aspect of life. We often say that it "privileges" some and "disadvantages" others. But spiritually speaking, it has most diminished those people who've not developed the internal resources to resist the lie.

Which brings me back to gospel music. The gift of the blues man was that, however impolite or unrighteous his words might seem, he told it like it was. Not unlike today's rap artists, the blues artists of the early 20th century articulated the anguish of people who live and love and die with their backs against the wall. Though their art was often shunned by the church, they captured something about what it means to stay human in a society that treats you like an animal.

Gospel music was born when blues notes reached out and grabbed onto the hope of the spirituals—when the hope of the freedom church spoke in song to the individual struggle of the soul on her journey toward God. "I'm climbing higher mountains, trying to get home," isn't just about what Jesus did for each and every one of us "when they hanged him to the tree" and "when he rose up from the grave." It's about how that same God will meet you when you're facing the particular challenge of your journey, trying to get home.



Which is why I wanted to recommend “Amazing Grace” as a meditation guide as you walk through the horrors of the Colfax massacre and the strange echoes of Christmas on the plantation in contemporary evangelicalism. I don’t know all the contours of your particular mountain in this broader story we share, but I look forward to hearing what you are learning as you trust the risen Christ who reveals himself to us along the way.

Peace of Christ,
Jonathan