Amanda Tyler interviews Jemar Tisby about the history of white Christian nationalism in America, including how conflations of politics, race, and religion in our past continue to impact conversations today.

Jemar Tisby offers two definitions of racism at the beginning of the podcast. He says racism can be described as “a system of oppression based on race” or “prejudice plus power” (5:54). Under his definitions, everyone can be prejudiced against another race, but fewer have the power to implement or enforce their prejudice through policies and systems that create and perpetuate inequality and inequity. How does Tisby’s framing of racism differ from your own understanding? How does separating the difference between prejudice and racism change your understanding of what is “racist”? What are examples of policies or systems that have created inequality between people based on race?

Tisby describes white supremacy as the pervasive story that a person’s worth is based on the amount of melanin in a person’s skin, and whiteness is considered superior or the central perspective (6:52). White supremacy culture is pervasive, but often unrecognized. Consider his grocery store example of a racial description only being present on the “ethnic food aisle.” Because most grocery stores are designed from the standpoint of white people, the assumption is that most food is just “food” unless it’s from a non-white culture. Can you think of other examples where whiteness is the central perspective or assumed default in your community?

Tisby’s book looks at more than 400 years of history, and it is critical of almost all Christian denominations and major players. According to Tisby (9:01): “the racist status quo in America could not have formed or been perpetuated without the cooperation oftentimes of the church.” Hearing Tisby’s argument, what thoughts or feelings first come up for you?
Most of the time when we think of racism, Tisby says we think of the extreme examples (such as the Ku Klux Klan), but by doing so, we overlook a massive group of more moderate white people who created a context of complicity. Tisby’s chief argument (9:47) is that instead of courageously confronting racism, many white Christians chose complicity and compromise and – in so doing – created and perpetrated a racial caste system in the United States. Do you agree with Tisby’s assertion that we typically only think of racism in the extreme terms and ignore the complicit majority? What are examples you can think of where churches were too quick to be complicit or to compromise instead of speaking out against racism?

In regard to history, at 14:10 Tisby says, “When we talk about white Christian nationalism, any information, any data that refutes the idea of American exceptionalism will be rejected, will be questioned, will be undermined.” However, Tisby reminds of us the importance in making our historical past public and for people to understand that we still live with the legacy of enslavement. At 16:35, he states, “[The legacy of slavery] is not just about the Antebellum period. It’s not just about history up until 1865. It’s about the continuing ramifications of subjugating an entire group of people and crafting a narrative of superiority and inferiority along racial lines to bolster that system of oppression.” Where have you seen examples of the narrative of American exceptionalism in the retelling of American history? What are examples today of the legacy of slavery that Tisby describes?

Tisby talks about many different stories in his book that illustrate how white Christian nationalism has consistently involved famous American religious and political leaders throughout history. For instance, he discusses theologian Jonathan Edwards owning a young slave girl named Venus, the KKK burning a cross on Stone Mountain next to an altar of the American flag and a Bible, and President Woodrow Wilson — son of a Presbyterian minister — showing a KKK propaganda film called Birth of a Nation multiple times in the White House. Of all the stories Tisby shares, which story stood out to you the most? Which had you never heard before? Which did you find most disturbing? Why do you think these stories are important in remembering and retelling America’s history of white Christian nationalism?
When asked by white people, “What can I do?” in their efforts to combat white Christian nationalism, Tisby offers an acronym: ARC, which stands for Awareness, Relationships, and Commitment (28:50). He says people can educate themselves further about race, racism, its history, and how these things show up every day. Second, people can go out of their way to befriend the “other” or people of different races than them. Finally, people can commit to not only educating themselves or building relationships, but also committing for the long haul to fight for anti-racist policies which address issues like mass incarceration, education funding, and health care discrepancies. What are ways you can implement ARC in your own life?