



Faith Forum

CALLED TO BE FREE:

A Conversation on Racial Healing through Spiritual Formation

Session 1: "Freedom to Serve One Another Humbly in Love" with Dr. Jerry Taylor

8/20/23

Mic Biesboer: Welcome to our second Faith Forum, and we are so thrilled to have Dr. Jerry Taylor with us. We have three sessions. This is session one. And then what we typically call worship hour and sermon. We will still have worship, but instead of the sermon we're calling it session two. And then we also have session three, and if you do join session three, we'll have lunch provided. So we are feeding you in all sorts of ways. We're really excited about this day and the opportunity for us to be filled, to grow as the people of God here at Central in this context in Amarillo, Texas.

We want to spend this time together listening and engaging and having thoughtful information conversation about the topic this morning. Let's pray and we'll begin.

God, we welcome the quiet because in the spirit of quiet, we feel and hear and know your presence. And God you are with us this morning. And when you are with us, God, you bring with you opportunities for us to grow. To grow in love with one another, grow in love with your creation. Grow in love with you God. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit and God in the midst of our relationships with one another, with your creation, with you we recognize and we identify ourselves, sometimes as frail and hurting sinful people. But God, we also know there is source of wholeness. A source of righteousness, a source of reconciliation, of healing, that can only come from you. And so God, we give you all the glory and praise. If we give you praise that only you receive. God there are people in the midst that are thinking about maybe loved ones. And God, we know there's a long list as well because we as your people identify those around us who are in grief, who are hurting, who are struggling in so many ways. So God, we lift up all these names to you. You are the great physician and great healer. And for that we say thank you. God, on this day, may we live up to our vision, becoming like Christ for the sake of whatever you bring to us in this world. Not just the joy and good and all the wonderful things that we get to experience, but also recognizing that there are things in our community, things in our nation, things in our world that will still need you.

And so God let us be the people that you called us to be. Let us be witnesses to your grace, to your love, to your hope knowing that one day you'll make everything good and right again. God we're so thankful for Dr. Jerry Taylor, for his wife, for his children. He is such incredible gift to your kingdom. Not just because of his voice, but because of his calling to be a spiritual leader in a world of chaos and hurt. We're thankful for him and the instrument that he is through you. We're thankful that he and his family are your people, disciples of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit. And for that we are excited and grateful to hear the Holy Spirit speak this morning. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Come on up. Dr. Taylor. I don't really have a bio. You all know him. Anytime he speaks, say bio. And so without further ado let's give another warm welcome to Dr. Jerry Taylor.

Dr. Jerry Taylor: I want you to begin by saying, I love you. I love you deeply from the heart. This congregation has made a profound impact on my life over the years since I have been at Abilene Christian University. I'm now in my 20th year on faculty there and on each of my visits to this church, I have been blessed to experience warmth and receptivity, and the messages that I have shared have been received with much grace. I want you to know I appreciate that wholeheartedly. Today I have given a very difficult task, to speak as clearly as I can concerning the topic, Called To Be Free, a conversation on racial healing through spiritual formation. The current climate makes it very difficult to talk about anything related to race.

And sometimes even we as Christians have become trained to be intolerant to hear the gospel as it relates to the topic of race. I'm certain today there will be some who will be somewhat hesitant to hear everything that I have to say, and I understand that and I have accepted that as a vocational hazard, that sometimes we deal with topics and we lose people along the way. But it is not my intention to cause anyone to fall away from an opportunity to hear a clear call of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so I have Galatians 5:13-15 as the foundation of our words today.

And I want to thank Mic and Greg and Hannah working with us, helping to prepare time together here today. And I also want to express appreciation for what we have come to know as the Amarillo Six, who joined the bus ride, from Dallas to Washington D.C. They represented the Central church very, very well.

The passage reads from the NIV "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to free. But do not use your freedom to indulge flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: Love your neighbor as yourself. If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you'll be destroyed by each other. So I say, walk by the spirit and you'll not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you're led by the spirit, you're not under the law."

Freedom to serve one another humbly in love. In Galatians 5:13-15, the apostle Paul underscores the profound concept of Christian spiritual kinship. He began by addressing believers and brothers and sisters, highlighting the familial bonds shared among Christians through their common connection to the blood of Jesus Christ. This bond is symbolically reinforced during Holy Communion every week, where we as believers take the blood of Christ commemorating his sacrificial act that broke down walls, enmity, and hostility between God and humanity as well as among human beings. Paul's usage of "my brothers"

indicates a sense of personal connection and intimacy that he feels with the Galatians Christians. He perceives them not as strangers but as family. Deeply familiar with the share of faith that they have in in Christ Jesus.

This raises the question about how Christians today view one another across racial lines particularly in the context of the American church. In a society historically marked by racial division and the painful legacy of slavery, the concept of spiritual kinship between whites and blacks has faced innumerable, immeasurable, unrelenting challenges. The stain of slavery and the hierarchical mindset created a barrier between these two racial groups, preventing recognition of true spiritual equality in Christ. The idea of slaves and masters sharing in common the Heavenly Father was repulsive to slave owners. They could not reconcile their own position as slave owners with their spiritual unity with their slaves that was inherent in Christian faith.

While slavery and legal segregation ended, the spiritual separation and the spiritual segregation that developed as a result of slavery still affect the hearts of many Christians today. Despite no longer being mandated by law, there is a lingering divide that hinders Christians from fully recognizing each other as brothers and sisters across racial lines. The inheritance of this legacy led to the challenge of acknowledging a shared spiritual connection that transcends race. Paul's message in Galatians 5 resonates strongly today calling for an end to the notion of color lines and barriers within the body of Christ. He reminds believers that in Christ distinctions on race are irrelevant. Instead, he emphasizes a form of brotherhood and sisterhood founded on a rich and vibrant Christian spirituality.

This perspective encourages believers to see beyond the superficiality of color and embrace unity that reflects the transformative power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In essence Paul calls for a renewal of perspective. A shift away from seeing one another through the lens of racial identity to a vision of spiritual kinship that transcends such divisions. By embracing this vision, believers work to overcome the remnants of division and segregation allowing the church to embody the unity that Christ intended. Paul's words resonate powerfully in the statement, "You, my brothers and sisters were called to be free." This summons us to freedom. And it holds the profound implications especially within the context of Americans History and its reverence for the concept of liberty.

From the inception of the nation, the resounding freedom was deliberated through epitomized phrases like "give me liberty or give me death." However, the narrative becomes complex when considering how this quest for freedom intersects with the reality of enslaved individuals in this country. In the midst of further freedom, it's an undeniable truth that many Christians sought their own freedom and simultaneously denied it to others. The deeply entrenched belief that the color of one's skin was the mark of inferiority perpetrated a twisted justification for the denial of basic human rights.

Christian slaves tragically were subject to the false notion that their servitude was ordained by God, a mental captivity that eclipses the divine purpose and potential. Paul's gospel offers a different perspective. He urges both slave and free to recognize a shared calling and vocation. One transcends boundaries and places emphasis on submitting to the holy work of salvation that God extended through Christ Jesus. This divine salvation is for all irrespective of one's race, dismantling this notion that had been cultivated through cultural conditioning. Paul's caution against misusing freedom carries contemporary relevance for us today. He warns against indulging the flesh, which represents the self-centered egotistical inclination that undermines the spiritual transformation that the gospel aims to

accomplish. This fleshly perspective endangers an understanding of others according to the spiritual point of view that the minister of reconciliation brings about.

The powerful meaning behind the term flesh is evident when spelled backwards without using the letter h. It spells the word self. This self-centeredness fosters divisions not only in the Christian community but also within the broader fabric of our nation. The root of this division is a sense of selfish individualism that hinders genuine service and love for one another. The core principle advocated by Paul is the law of love. It is wrapped up in the command “love one's neighbor as oneself.” Paul refrains from attaching a racial description to this neighbor, emphasizing the universal scope of this call that should be applied to all human beings regardless of race and ethnicity. He warns against consequences of rejecting people and choosing whether to bite and devour each other.

And he cautions us in this statement when he says that we will bite and devour one another and eventually destroy one another. And in conclusion, Paul's message challenges Christians to rise above the historical and societal constraints that have hindered the full realization of our spiritual freedom and our spiritual unity. The call to embrace the law of love overcomes racial, cultural, and individual barriers, and it fosters a humble serving spirit that dismantles vision and ushers in a sense of kinship that transcends all boundaries. As the legacy of the past continues to impact the present, the gospel message of freedom and love remains as vital as ever, guiding the journey toward unity and spiritual transformation in and beyond the borders of the church. Brothers and sisters, we truly must now live in that description of brothers and sisters beyond the color line, beyond the racial barriers.

Our time has come, as the church of the living God to stand boldly in the midst of our current society and in the midst of our current nation and in the midst of our world to say with one single voice that we ain't going to let nobody divide us on the basis of skin color because Jesus has destroyed death once and for all. And I admit there is a lot that we have to learn about each other on the other side of slavery and on the other side of segregation. And we have to be students of each other. We have to become teachers of one another, humble enough to admit that no one knows everything, but we all should know the One who does. And that's the One who said, “I am the way, the truth and life,” and nobody gets connected to God except through him. And the truth of the matter is that we cannot become connected to one another across racial lines except through the Christ that we all verbally exalt in our worship and in our praise.

So we have not “what” it takes; we have “who” it takes. And for too long we have been looking to a “what” in order to solve the racial problem instead of looking to “who”—who has all divine wisdom that teaches us to be be humble enough to sit at his feet and take in the rich wisdom that comes from heaven as opposed to taking in the corrupt wisdom of a fallen world. May God bless us this day, moving forward to tune our ears into the speaking mouth of God out of which the breath of life flows. May we be willing to listen to what he's saying to us as opposed to listening to all of the voices that exist in our world today. We as the church must refocus our hearing as sheep, listening to the chief Shepherd, and not to those who seek to mislead the church down the road of division and chaos.

We must reaffirm our love and our commitment and our passion for the one who died on that Friday but was resurrected on that Sunday morning. And the truth of the matter is that our dwelling here on this planet is temporary. As I was grooming myself this morning, I noticed some more changes than I had the last time I visited with you. I actually have a gray hair in my eyebrow, I had not had that before. But that was just a messenger reminding me, this planet that your feet walk upon is not your permanent

dwelling. You are here for just a while and then your breath will return to the One who breathed the first breath of life in the nostril of the man called Adam. We have come from him and we are returning to him. And when we surrender our last breath, it will be surrendered to the One who died on behalf of humanity to make all of us one in him, subject to God the Father, making all of us brothers and sisters, not only underneath the skin, but in the spirit and in the heart and in the soul. Because that is our internal reality, and if we get attached to stuff here, we fight and kill each other and destroy each other. We must remind ourselves that when we open our eyes on the other side of conflict that we must face the One who describes himself as the Prince of Peace. We will have to give an account for how we used our words, and we will have to give an account for the ugly thoughts we allowed to lodge in our minds that prevented us from seeing each other through heaven's eyes as brothers and sisters, regardless of race.

I want to thank you in advance for reflecting prayerfully on the words that I shared with you, but even more so, prayerfully reflecting on the words that Paul penned in this passage that we just shared with you today. And may God give us strength. May he give us internal fortitude. May he give us a burning passion to stand forth as light in the midst of the world where the light has gone out. It's in need of a revival of the church that is guided by the Lord and the Savior Jesus Christ. May God bless you as we continue our time together today. Thank you.

Mic Biesboer: I'd like to open it up a little bit for any comments or questions. And then we'll spend a little more time in prayer. Of course, I'm the one with the mic, so if you do have a comment or question, please be loud and I'll repeat the question for everyone else to hear. Jerry just provided us with a profound message, as he always does, and I would like to hear from you. We call this Faith Forum because we want this to be a safe space for conversation.

Brother Jerry, one of the statements that you made that just kind of hit me the right way was that sometimes we talked about—and I think this isn't just related to racial healing but related to a lot of things—we fix ourselves on the “what” rather than the “who.” Can you speak a little more to that? Because I think sometimes that's where some of the division takes place, is that we have differences of opinions on the “what.” And that's where we kind of get stuck. Could you speak more to that?

Dr. Jerry Taylor: Sure. I believe that it is essential for us to know the difference between physical matter, physical substance, versus that which is in essence spiritual. And when we focus on understanding the difference between what's physical and what's spiritual, we then can see more clearly the futility of trying to resolve something that is of a spiritual nature with something that is physical and made of matter. And so sometimes we look to the “what” in terms of policies that we as human beings are able to write and to develop through the use of our intellect. And sometimes we look at what we as humans can create and develop in an attempt to make life better and more livable here on the planet, as opposed to looking to that divine being that has no form.

We must remember that there is the formless life out of which we evolved as human beings—not as human things, but as human beings. We came forth from the spiritual womb of the divine life of God, and it is to God we shall return in our spiritual essence. People who died in Amarillo yesterday gave up their attachments to something that can be defined as a “what,” but there was something inside of them that could not be defined as a thing in terms of a whatness or physicality. But there was something in them that was created in the divine image of the formless God that will receive their spiritual nature back unto himself.

And if you came out of God spiritually and are returning back to God spiritually, then any problem that we face on the face of this planet must be approached not from a physical standpoint but from a spiritual standpoint. We stand in the divine spiritual wisdom of God that teaches us as an inner teacher, that we know as the Holy Spirit, that can show us how to relate to one another not based on manmade policies but based on the divine policy that God laid down in Christ, which says you must love your neighbors as yourself. And until we can really as a church—now I'm talking specifically Christians—until Christians really have a whole sellout of total commitment to following the divine teaching of the inner teacher that Jesus left with us, the Holy Spirit, until we do that, we will continue to look at the “what” of life, human institutions that humans have created through human intelligence with human intellect, policies and laws that human beings write, as opposed to looking to “who,” who is not just a policy but is the being that dwells in us and that seeks to live his life in and through us on a daily basis. And if we would tune in to what that divine inner teacher is telling us, the voice of the Holy Spirit we have read about it in the holy scripture, we will find the strength to love each other. We must find strength to love each other. Not only love each other, but find the strength to repent from things that we have realized that are in contradiction to the love of God. And then we will even find the strength to forgive.

You see, I think all of us blacks and whites carry the inherited subliminal genes of our ancestors. So how can I as a descendant of the former slaves trust you not to visit upon me rage and hatred toward slaves as a white person? And how can you as descendants of slave owners trust me as a black person not to visit rage and hatred and vengeance upon you? That particular issue can only be solved in the context of a robust Christian spirituality, where we not only focus on forgiveness from the victim but also repentance from the victimizer. And if forgiveness and repentance can sit at the same table under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, those two can work on a wonderful relationship. And so that would be the long answer to a short question.

Mic Biesboer: There we go. As he just mentioned, he gave a long answer to a short question. Are there any other short questions that you might have because he will run with it. So the question from the audience is how much of that doubt comes from reality or from the accuser?

Dr. Jerry Taylor: Well, I believe that out of our desire to be connected to God and believe in God and believe in Jesus and believe in the Holy Spirit, we have spent a huge amount of time professing that belief in God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, as we should. But Jesus warned us, and the Apostle Paul warned us: do not be unaware of the existence of an evil presence that exists in the world. And too often we focus on God and we forget about God's nemesis, known as Satan, known as Lucifer, known as the devil. And I believe since we have stopped hearing about hell, and I don't preach a lot about him in my sermons either, help me somebody, that we have the tendency to forget there is an opponent of God and there is an opponent of God's children. Sometimes we forget that spiritual presence also exists in the world, and we get fixated on people and what they look like externally. And we begin to seek ways to fight them instead of him—the accuser, the evil one who seeks to devour and divide and conquer and to turn people against each other. So I would say that yes, the accuser never takes a vacation. He never goes on vacation; he's constantly working all the time to turn people against each other and will use the slightest little difference to turn them against each other. And I think as Christians, we have to remain mindful that God's first opponent, the first rebel against divine will is still existing in the world.

And he's seeking to get inside of us and occupy us, occupy the territory. And from there, he does his Godly will. And so yes, praise God, worship God, pray to God, meditate upon his word, meditate upon his

will. But also be mindful that there is something existing in the world that is evil, and it is constantly seeking to undermine your connection to God. And it is seeking to undermine your connection to other people, and it is relentless.

Mic Biesboer: Richard Beck's book on the devil and demons states that at least in western society, the devil has fallen on hard times. He's making a joke—the reality is we are very, very skeptical and we don't pay attention to how the devil is working in our context today. I appreciate what you said as something we should be paying attention to. The next question is: what is the role of the church in trying to understand history, its impact, and the role of the historical church in this conversation? How should the church be looking at the social structures that exist both historically but maybe even exist today? What's the church's response?

Dr. Jerry Taylor: I think the church must not be taught to fear history. We don't have to be afraid of history, when we serve God who has overseen history from the very beginning of human history on the planet. We don't have to be afraid of that. At the same rate, we must not allow our hearts to become embittered when we revisit history. And I think that's what the current outcry is among many camps today is that calling out of all the ugly brutality that has existed in this country, primarily against Native Americans and against African Americans. It is somehow feeding a spirit of revenge. It is somehow feeding a spirit of hatred in the minds and hearts of young children that are exposed to this history.

And I think as church, we need to step forth in the society and say that we have made a decision as Christians to care about all of our brothers and sisters who make up the body of Jesus Christ. And how can I truly love you and feel for you and feel with you if I choose to either become ignorant or remain ignorant of the history that shaped and formed you into the person that you are today? When we pick up our Bible, we dare not take one portion of scripture out of its context. We value history, even in our studying by ourselves, such that we have to take an individual text as a personal individual and set the personality of that text down in what we call the historical context because if we don't get the historical context right, we'll misunderstand and then misinterpret the text.

And so if history can be understood when it comes to studying the Bible in that fashion, then how much more should it also be applied when it comes to studying our black brothers and Native American sisters and our Hispanic brothers and sisters and our white brothers and sisters? How can I really come to know you if I don't know the history of you? And I don't study history to hate you, and I don't want you to study my history for me to hate you or for you to hate me. But every conversation I enter in with Christian brother and sisters that I met the first time, they always ask me, where did you come from? Tell me something about yourself. What is your history? Are you seeking to understand who I am in the present moment and what events and experiences led to the shaping of my identity as a human being?

It is just a gesture of love. And it is a gesture of my need to understand who I am as a person and not to lock myself in definitively to the past history of myself as an African American or my people as African Americans. But it is and should be viewed as an opportunity for us to grow at a greater understanding, a mutual understanding of each other. And it can't be a one-way street, brothers and sisters. If we cancel out history related to African-Americans, then we've got to cancel out history related to Europeans. And so the church has never been in my understanding afraid of history because we know the one who controls history. And somebody said, that's why it's called history because it's his story.

God is telling his story with every individual human being and with every individual group, even as God told his story through Joseph who was sold into slavery by his own biological brothers. And on the other side of the famine that hit the world, Joseph found himself face to face with his own brothers. Did he forget the history? His brothers surely didn't. But he interpreted history through the lens of God, that what was meant for evil God meant it for good. And we can view history through the lens of being spiritual people as members of the same body of Christ. Then we can say we make up the body of Christ. We're not afraid of our history. In fact, we will step into that history with you and write about it and fill the hole of what your ancestors felt, and we could make a stand in your presence and say from the loving heart of Jesus, we regret that your ancestors had to go through that.

And now we commit ourselves to making sure that that horrific brutal experience never happens again on our watch. And that's what I appreciate about the Amarillo Six because they took a bus ride with a bunch of black folks from Dallas all the way to Memphis, Birmingham and Charleston to Washington DC and went inside of the museums that contained the horror and the misery that black bodies had to suffer. But they did it in community and fellowship with black bodies. And as a result of that, community was discovered. Brotherhood and sisterhood was discovered because the church stepped up to the plate and said that we didn't create that history because we live didn't live back then, but we're all impacted by it today. So let's go back. Revisit it, look at it and then make the determination that we can't change past history, but we sure have the power of the Holy Spirit that can give us sanctified imagination so that we can begin to create a common future together that looks much better than what we had in past.

Mic Biesboer: For somebody who loves history, you just nailed it on the head for me. It's twofold, not just looking at the past, which is so important, but we right now are in the midst of writing history. And so the history that we're writing—what's the story going to be for our children and our grandchildren? And that to me is so important because if we allow the Holy Spirit to join us in our efforts in writing history, then we can actually create history that can truly, boldly proclaim the gospel. Another question. Will there be other opportunities to take bus tours? This is actually the million-dollar question we keep asking Jerry. What's going on here, brother?

Dr. Jerry Taylor: Oh my goodness. Well, we try to discern the next movement in alignment with the way God's Spirit is leading. And we never want to get ahead of that process and do something out of habit, that because we did it this year we'll automatically do it next year. But we want to take a period of discerning what God is calling this moment to happen. And I'm hearing so many voices of the people that were on the bus tour as well as people who have heard about it that have a growing desire to be a part of an experience such as that. And so we're in the planning stages. The planning committee is looking seriously into hopefully having another bus tour next year in 2024. It may require more buses.

Mic Biesboer: The Amarillo Sixty. There you go. Alright, we're running out of time. I know there are more questions. Jerry, if you would come up here, I want to say a prayer over you. If you the audience have questions, we'll do the best we can and answer those in the afternoon session.

Let's pray together as the people of God. God, we are so thankful for you, for your spirit, for your son Jesus. We're thankful for the good news. And this good news is ongoing, transforming us to be more like you. God you created us from the very beginning, created us not only in your likeness, but in commonality and unity, and so God we are so grateful for this conversation today that has called us to be people of unity. And we're thankful for our time this morning. We're looking forward to worship, singing

together, sharing the bread and blood, and so much more this afternoon. God's blessings to each one of us in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.