

REPENT: Unlearning Colonial Ways

by Scotty J. Williams

Hello everyone, my name is Scotty Williams and I am pastor in the Netherlands serving the American Protestant Church in Den Haag. I am also a pastor-theologian who works to bring local congregations into the greater theological discourse, and to help them find practical ways of addressing local and global concerns. One concern is Colonialism and its legacy, and tonight I will try to answer three questions about it. They are:

1. WHAT IS COLONIALISM?
2. WHAT MUST WE UNLEARN?
3. WHAT HAPPENS IF WE DO NOT UNLEARN?

What Is Colonialism?

In most talks on Colonialism there is a socio-economic language, but in this talk I would like to use a different kind of language. As a pastor-theologian I will use the language of Hamartiology, which (for those who don't know) is the study of sin and its affects on people and the world. Sin, as Cornelius Plantinga writes, is a breaking of Shalom which he defines as wholeness or the way that life should be.¹ It keeps humanity and the world from flourishing and thriving, and traps them in a cycle of decline that leads to death. In others words, sin is not how life is meant to be, and it expresses itself in many ways with a host of ill effects. One expression is Colonialism which has broken Shalom for centuries, and kept the world and people from life as it should be.

For example, in Genesis,² all Creation is made good, but Colonialism harms it through Environmental Degradation. Also, humanity is made in the image and likeness of God³, but Colonialism fragments and distorts who people are. It brings and promotes a lack of flourishing and thriving which Verene Shepherd talks about when she looks at its effects.⁴ These effects are unjust systems and broken ways of living, and they cause good things to be abused for selfish unjust ends. Two things that have been abused are religion and spirituality, which are meant to bring purpose, unity, meaning, virtue, and positive change.⁵ As a sin Colonialism has caused them to bring harm and used them for oppression and a multitude of pains.

In this talk I will focus on the sin of Colonialism in Western Christianity, but examples of its abuse can be found beyond this context. It has touched many non-Western religious, spiritual, and even secular communities, and hindered them from flourishing or life as it should be. Therefore, the sin of Colonialism is more than a Western Church problem. I believe it is a human problem that has

¹ Cornelius Plantinga, "Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin", 10-16

² Genesis 1:31

³ Genesis 1:26

⁴ Verene Shepherd, *Racism, Discrimination are Legacies of Colonialism*. Article, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (United Nations), Geneva, Switzerland, Accessed August 18, 2025. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/get-involved/stories/racism-discrimination-are-legacies-colonialism#:~:text=Environmental%20degradation%2C%20economic%20underdevelopment%2C%20racial,effects%20of%20colonialism%2C%20she%20added>.

⁵ Steven Barkan, "Sociology: Understanding and Changing the Social World (v. 1.0)", 597

brought harm to all faiths. And the solution, from a Christian perspective, can be found in the message of Jesus, who calls throughout the stories of the Gospels for repentance.⁶ Repentance means an inner change of the mind that causes one to turn go in new direction, and I believe this must be done when it comes to Colonialism. There must be a change of mind that leads to a new direction. A direction that makes religion and spirituality bring Shalom to all people and world.

No matter what the sin Repentance begins with unlearning, and for the sin of Colonialism Western Christians must unlearn Colonial ways. When this happens they can truly turn or go in a new direction, and that is Decolonizing Theology within the Western Church.

What Must We Unlearn?

As was said before Repentance starts with unlearning, and when it comes to Theology we must repent of Colonial ways. While coming from a Creole context with a more global South perspective, the reason that I say “we” is because my faith has been shaped in the West. My theological training has been in Western institutions, and I am ordained in a Western denomination and have only pastored in Western Churches. In short, as a pastor theologian, I have a foot in two worlds; one that has benefited from Colonialism and another that is wounded by it. At times I also used Colonial ways and have had to do the work of unlearning them for better ways.

While Repenting as a pastor theologian shaped in the Western world, I have found two things that must be unlearned to Decolonize our Theology. These things are **how we see non-Western Christians** and **how we engage with non-Western Christians**.

A. How we see non-Western Christians

In Genesis God gives humanity dominion over the earth⁷, which Oscar Grootveld writes is being stewards of Creation.⁸ A steward is a caretaker commissioned by an owner to take care of their property and keep it in good condition. A steward is to help the owner’s property thrive and flourish, or bring it Shalom with wholeness and good well-being. Nevertheless, some Western thinkers have interpreted dominion as control, which leads many Western Churches to act like landlords of Creation.

Along with Creation they we also landlords of the Body of Christ, which means that non-Western Churches also have to be under our control. In short, non-Western Christians are not equal follow believers, but tenants to be managed and directed by our hand. We set the rules and they must follow what we say, and we treat them with a paternalism that has a pious face. While Christ is King we are the lords of the manor, and it makes us like the governors of old Colonial states. We also run or control the theological discourse, and determine what should be the top priority or highest concern. Much of the time these concerns and priorities are our own, and we use non-Western Churches in selfish ways to address them.

⁶ Matthew 3:2, Matthew 4:17, Luke 5:32, and Luke 13:5

⁷ Genesis 1

⁸ Oscar Grootveld, *Rule Over The Earth?*. Article, Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, Utrecht, Netherlands, Accessed August 26, 2025. <https://www.pthu.nl/en/bibleblog/2024/11/rule-over-the-earth/>

If we wish to Decolonize we must unlearn this vision of seeing ourselves as landlords and seeing non-Western Churches as tenants under us. We were never told by God to control and run Creation, and we were never told that we were placed above those unlike us. Instead we are stewards who take care of the Creation, and non-Western Christians are fellow stewards with us. We are all co-laborers on equal ground before God, and when we have this vision we can go in a better engagement.

B. How we engage with non-Western Christians

The pious paternalism we have from being landlords makes us treat non-Western Christians like perpetual children. They are always in a position of learning while we are always the teacher, which means that they are never able to offer us critique and call for change. This engagement also encourages a constant dependency, where Western Christians are patrons giving resources to their counterparts. This dependence is similar to what some call “toxic aid” where foreign assistance from one nation stifles the independence of others.⁹ In the end, Western Christians maintain a firm place of power, while non-Western Christians remain under our control. And when they disagree or express some agency, we twist their arm through warnings and withdrawing our support.

For example, at the 2022 African Biblical Leadership Initiative Forum, PLO Lumumba spoke on tensions over sexuality.¹⁰ While African Churches and Christian organisations hold mostly conservative views, many of their Western donors hold to mostly progressive views. Lamumba warned that African Christians should prepare for the possibility of Western donors using funds to get their views accepted. If African Churches and Christian organisations did not become progressive, then key financial support might be decreased or stopped.

Another example of twisting arms by conservative Western donors, is when non-Western Christians uphold causes they disagree with. Many missional conservative Churches see social justice as less biblical, and will criticise and even cut ties with non-Western Churches over it. So, when non-Western Christians began to emphasise social justice, conservative donors will speak harshly and encourage them to stop. If they refuse support is lessened or withdrawn, which also threatens important works and ministry initiatives. These tactics are another thing like Governors from colonial states, who used harsh means, including violence, to deny the agency of others.

One final way of engagement that must be unlearned is how we treat non-Western theologians and theological reflection. Quite often, as Matt Chandler observed in Evangelical circles¹¹, during theological discussions non-Western theologians are often treated like children. Instead of a respectful exchange of knowledge between equals, and atmosphere is created where Western theologians are never learners. Non-Western

⁹ Sebastián Edwards talks about this in his book, “Toxic Aid: Economic Collapse and Recovery in Tanzania”

¹⁰ PLO Lumumba, *Rediscovering Biblical Vision for Mentorship*. (Video), Bible Society of Uganda, Kampala, Uganda, Accessed August 23, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ak1zWwPOAqg>

¹¹ Matt Chandler, *A House Divided Cannot Stand*. (Video), MLK50 Conference, Memphis, Tennessee, Accessed August 26, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wmj0i1oH1Q>

theologians are kept within the place of students, and their thoughts, and sometimes education, are seen as subpar. Lastly, we reject their reflections which critique and challenge us, but we welcome the reflections that we like and affirm our perspective. We want, in the words of James Baldwin, their rhythm but not their blues¹², or the hard parts of their theology that compel to repent.

If we wish to Decolonize we must unlearn this engagement, and interact with non-Western Christians without power plays and paternalism. We must get away from twisting arms to dominate the discourse, and accept their reflections as equal to ours with a humble spirit of learning. We must also not denigrate their theological leaders and institutions, and support them even when their views clash with ours. And while respecting their theologians we must limit them to topics of injustice (e.g., racism), but consult with them on general topics that do not centre on oppression (e.g., soteriology).¹³

What If We Do Not Unlearn?

In a discussion I had about recent protest moments (e.g., Black Lives Matter) that I had with Christian Walti (Pastor of the Grossmünster)¹⁴, he stated that these movements are mass expressions of fatigue. Many have been tired for some time with injustices like Colonialism, and if nothing changes what comes next is a massive indifference. When people become indifferent they no longer simply stop caring, they walk away from the dialogue and stop engaging altogether. They give up on looking for a seat at the table to build their own tables, and will not be open to welcoming those who refused to listen and change.

For the past 10 years I have watched a growing indifference among Churches, where non-Western Christians are walking away from their Western Christian counterparts. They are beyond tired of the lack, and sometimes unwillingness, to change, and are burned out from calling us to unlearn the ways that have been mentioned. They are also building tables where they hesitate to welcome us; spaces where they are free from denigration and disrespect. They are also free from being limited to topics of injustice, and can focus on other subjects that are not about oppression.¹⁵

To be honest, as a pastor-theologian, with a foot in the non-Western world, I too have felt the fatigue and indifference while seeking change in the Western world. I resonate with my colleagues who are tired of a sin that keeps on going, and watching the call to repent of it falling on what seems like deaf ears. I resonate with those who are tired of being treated as tenants and not as co-laborers with the same call and mission to be stewards of this world. The fatigue makes indifference

¹² This is a paraphrase of a line in Baldwin's short story, "Sonny's Blues"

¹³ Anthony Bradley, a professor of religion at King's College in New York City, talked about this issue within the Black American context in a social media post on July 17, 2022. He wrote: »We have to move beyond the idea that the ›only‹ content contribution ethnically Black Christian scholars can offer to churches & the academy is content on race & justice.«

¹⁴ This conversation took place on August 7, 2025 in Zürich, Switzerland

¹⁵ Ekemini Uwan, a public theologian, spoke on during the Jude 3 Network's Courageous Conversations Conference in 2021. Courageous Conversations is an annual gathering that pairs black voices trained in conservative and progressive spaces to discuss topics that are relevant for the church and culture

seem a like solace filled with peace, but the danger is an end of discussion that leaves the Church and world more divided.

If Western Christians seeking to Decolonise do not repent, then we will not go forward in Decolonizing Theology. We will continue going in circles with a sin that has plagued us for centuries, and fail to find a new direction that leads to thriving in flourishing. If we do not repent of Colonialism and unlearn its harmful ways, we will not flourish and thrive or have life as it should be.