

# RECONSTRUCTING THE GOSPEL

*with the*

# BEST OF ENEMIES

BY JONATHAN WILSON-HARTGROVE

A group study guide to accompany “The Best of Enemies,”  
written & directed by Robin Bissell & starring Taraji P. Henson as Ann Atwater

Adapted from Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove’s  
*Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom From Slaveholder Religion* (IVP)

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# INTRODUCTION

Dear reader,

“The Best of Enemies” tells the story of how Ann Atwater, a civil rights activist, encountered C.P. Ellis, a local leader of the Ku Klux Klan in Durham in 1971. Through a surprising friendship that emerged during meetings to desegregate the local schools, Ann and C.P.’s personal lives, as well as the life of their city, were transformed. Three decades later, Ann Atwater became a spiritual mother to me and welcomed our family into the beloved community she’d spent her whole life building up. I’m delighted that this new movie will give millions of people around the world the opportunity to learn from Grandma Ann’s life and witness.

For Grandma Ann, faith was at the heart of everything she did. This study guide is designed especially to help faith communities learn the faith that inspired this story and consider how they might learn to practice that same faith today.

This guide outlines four sessions a group can do together before or after seeing “The Best of Enemies,” which is scheduled for an April 5, 2019 release in theaters nationwide. For groups that want to watch the movie together during Holy Week of 2019, this guide can serve as a four week Lenten study.

Each session includes a short excerpt from my book, *Reconstructing the Gospel*, in which I share lessons Grandma Ann passed on to me. These excerpts can be read by participants before a group meeting or aloud in the group at the beginning of a meeting.

There are also links to additional resources that your group can access online at the Ann Atwater Freedom Library. [[www.schoolforconversion.org/ann-atwater-freedom-library/](http://www.schoolforconversion.org/ann-atwater-freedom-library/)]

Each excerpt is followed by a Scripture passage and discussion questions to use in the group meeting.

Finally, each session also suggests a way you can put the lesson into practice. Grandma Ann always said God gave her the gift to “reach out and touch.” I hope that as you practice these “reach out and touch” exercises you will grow into the faith that sustained Grandma Ann her whole life long and helped build a beloved community around her that inspired so many of us to want to work toward a more perfect union.

Sincerely,



Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove  
Director, School for Conversion

# SESSION I

## *Recognizing Racial Habits*

White supremacy doesn't persist in America because racists scheme to privilege some while discriminating against others. It continues because, despite the fact that almost everyone believes it is wrong to be racist, the daily habits of our bodily existence continue to repeat the patterns of white supremacy at home, at school, at work, and at church. White supremacy is written into our racial habits. In short, it looks like normal life.

Change your racial habits and you change the way you see the world. But it doesn't happen all at once. When you open your eyes after a lifetime of blindness, the light can be unbearable. Real conversion takes time. Maybe you see people, but they look "like trees walking around" (Mark 8:24). Without a doubt, there are many details and nuances you cannot see at all. But as you change your habits, you begin to meet new people and hear new stories—not just on a page or screen but living in bodies like yours, people you know and may even come to love. No, it doesn't happen all at once, but every day these new experiences are laying new neural pathways in your mind. Follow where they lead, and you start to realize you're getting born again.

One of the illusions of whiteness is the myth that each of us is somehow a world unto ourselves, responsible for the choices we make and the relationships we choose. But the compound effect of sin-sick individuals is an unjust society. Along with racial habits, white people have inherited racial politics. Like our racial habits, racial politics have little to do with how each of us feels about other individuals. Try to talk to a white person about racial politics and the go-to response is some version of "that's not what my black friends say." And it's true—because racial politics has never been about hating the people you know. Racial politics is about dividing us from people we don't know through fear, then offering a savior to make us feel secure.

And righteous. In America, racial politics has always been "Christian"—has always cloaked itself in the language of redemption and morality. Coopting the poor refugee Christ to defend white supremacy, we have crucified him on a gilded cross, turning the most revolutionary symbol of our movement into a talisman to finger when we're anxious. Meanwhile, the gold-plated illusions that the real Jesus died to free us from continue to be our frame of reference, however much we may lament its imperfections.

### **Group Activity**

Visit the Ann G. Atwater Freedom Library website and watch the trailer for "The Best of Enemies" together.

### **Scripture Passage**

*Mark 8:22-25*

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on

him, Jesus asked, “Do you see anything?”

He looked up and said, “I see people; they look like trees walking around.”

Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Can you name a racial habit you inherited—a normal pattern of life that encouraged you to spend your time with other people “raced” as you are in society?
2. Can you think of an experience that caused you to question a racial habit? Did you change the habit? If not, why?
3. What are the social costs of racial habits? What are the spiritual costs?
4. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus heals a blind man. But the man who was blind cannot see clearly at first, even after Jesus has touched him. What role does changing racial habits play in helping each of us learn to see more clearly the world around us?

### **Reach Out & Touch**

If you’ve been shaped by the racial habits of whiteness, make a plan to interrupt one habit this week. Go out to lunch on the other side of town. Take public transportation. Attend a worship gathering in a church led by people of color.

Recognize you are a guest in these new spaces—and that the interruption of your presence may be threatening to some people there. But try to be present, pay attention, and listen. Don’t ask anyone in that setting to help you process the experience, but commit to journal or pray at home about it. If you’re willing, share with this group next week what you noticed when you intentionally interrupted a racial habit.

### **Further Reading**

Eddie S. Glaude, Jr’s book *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* explores how racial habits perpetuate a value gap in American society. See especially pp.51-70.

## SESSION 2

### *Encountering the Wisdom of Ann Atwater*

From the first time I heard people talk about “Ms. Ann,” I could tell from the way folks said her name that she was a force. Fifty years earlier, Ann Atwater had been a single mother, living in Hayti, the heart of Durham’s African American community. When a local organizer recognized her capacity to reach everyday people, she was recruited to attend a sixteen-week Community Action Training, then went to work as a community organizer. “Pretty soon I was kicking butt and taking names,” she later said. Ms. Ann became sergeant of the local foot soldiers in Durham’s Civil Rights Movement.

In 1971, the federal government sent in a mediator to facilitate the desegregation of Durham’s public schools (an action the Supreme Court had ordered seventeen years earlier “with all deliberate speed”). In a surprising move, the federal agent invited Ann Atwater to co-chair the process with her arch nemesis, C. P. Ellis, a local leader in the Ku Klux Klan.

“Hell, no!” she reportedly told the mediator. But soon she realized that, without her participation, the Klan would have sole control of the process. “I called him back and said, ‘I’d be happy to serve as co-chair,’” Ann later recalled. Thus the desegregation of Durham’s schools was co-led by an avowed white supremacist and a militant black activist.

Over the course of their meetings, C. P. and Ann learned some things about each other. Both of their families were poor, and poor kids weren’t being served well by public schools, no matter the color of their skin. History and political powers pitted black and white against each other, but when self-interest compelled C. P. and Ann to work together, they came to see how much they had in common. At the end of their public meetings, C. P. tore up his Klan card and Ann embraced him as a brother.

This was the Ms. Ann whom folks in Durham still called on when they needed something from the powers that be. I’d begun to realize that I needed something from Ms. Ann too. I wasn’t quite sure how to name it, but I felt a basic contradiction between my experience of community in the African-American community and the ways white people had taught me to imagine changing the world.

Everything I knew about race taught me to think that I was white while Ms. Ann was black. Everything I knew about faith taught me that Jesus loved me and I could love him back by loving my neighbors as myself. But in the segregated worlds that whiteness had created, I’d inherited a false sense of superiority that suggested Christian charity meant white people helping black people. Fellow pale-skinned Christians who saw me crossing the color line in Durham shared this assumption—and responded awkwardly whenever I questioned it.

“I don’t hang out on my neighbor’s porch for her sake,” I told white friends, trying to be honest. “I’m learning to porch sit for my sake”—which was true. But I was also learning on that porch that my decisions weren’t just about me.

There are, in fact, huge disparities that point to systemic injustice in twenty-first-century America. From lack of access to education and job opportunities to the disparate impacts of disease and incarceration, black bodies in America continue to bear an unfair share of humanity's burden. To do nothing, even in protest of my white privilege, is itself an injustice. If his neighbor was hungry, Jesus would feed her. If there were policies that made it harder for people to feed themselves, Jesus would challenge them.

But how? How do Christians faithfully engage the societies in which we live—especially after we've realized how race has warped our vision of the world and of ourselves?

For far too long, racial politics kept me from the wisdom of Ann Atwater and the black-led freedom movement she represented. Like most people formed by whiteness, I thought you read a book or went to school to learn how to engage the world. While faith might inspire us to love our neighbor, the experts and the politicians would tell us how to put together the building blocks of a healthy society.

Racial politics keeps us from seeing that the gospel turns these assumptions on their heads. If Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, then the stone that society's experts rejected is the key to the success of our common life. I needed to learn a new kind of politics, and Ann Atwater was the teacher God gave me.

I drove over to Ms. Ann's house and tried to explain what I needed. "I spent a lot of time in school," I told her, "but I never learned what you know."

"Well, what I do is pretty simple," she said.

"Ok," I said, "tell me how you do it."

"I listen to you until I understand what you want, then I help you get it. And when we get about halfway to what you want, I tell you what I want."

She smiled, satisfied with the simplicity of her description. Ms. Ann was not naive. She had been involved in Durham's public life for half a century and was widely recognized as a local hero. Schools and housing developments had been named after her, books and plays chronicled her story, and she lectured regularly at colleges and universities. But she lived in the same Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing and did the same organizing work she'd been recruited to do half a century earlier because she was good at it.

Ann's politics didn't ignore self-interest, but she obviously wasn't self-serving either. She described a way of life she had practiced—a way that was practical, however unlikely it might seem. She had shared her story and experience with thousands of people, but she didn't pretend to be an expert. She was passing on to me what others had passed on to her. It was as simple as that—with one catch. She knew her wisdom wasn't a set of disembodied ideas that I could memorize and take with me. It was, instead, a living tradition.

"I'll teach you everything I know," Ms. Ann told me, "but you've got to do one thing. You got to become my son."

We agreed to the deal, and I became part of a family that exposed the lie of racial politics. When Leah and I completed the required classes to adopt our oldest son, Grandma Ann was there for our graduation ceremony. Throughout America's Obama years, our kids grew up listening to her commentary on the world.

Grandma Ann gave us what she had given C. P. Ellis—what she freely offered anyone who wanted it. She gave us an identity that ran deeper than the racial politics of black and white. Grandma Ann loved us into her freedom family, and in doing so showed us how the way of Jesus contradicts the basic patterns of the world that white supremacy built.

### **Group Activity**

Get to know Ann Atwater by watching video of her telling her own story at the Ann G. Atwater Freedom Library's website.

### **Scripture Passage**

*Luke 4:24-26*

“Truly I tell you,” [Jesus] continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Without knowing it, C.P. Ellis interrupted his own racial habits when he accepted the invitation to co-chair the desegregation process with Ann Atwater. What did he learn when he did?
2. Ann Atwater described community organizing as helping people get what they want. What do poor and marginalized people in your community want? How do you know what a community wants?
3. Racial politics separated Ann and C.P. in 1971 Durham. Who are you separated from by racial politics today?
4. Why does Jesus say the prophet Elijah was sent to a poor widow from another group of people to receive God's grace? Why does Jonathan believe he needed Ann Atwater and her wisdom?

### **Reach Out and Touch**

A basic skill of community organizing is the one-on-one meeting. Ask someone in your community who is directly impacted by an injustice to meet with you for 30 minutes. Ask them about their life, their hopes and their experience of the place where you live. Listen to try to understand what they want badly enough that they would work with other people to get it. Thank them for their time, tell them what you've heard them say, and let them know ways you are willing to help them connect with others who want the same thing.

### **Further Reading**

Osha Gray Davidson's book *The Best of Enemies* tells Ann Atwater and C.P. Ellis' stories in the broader context of American history. A new edition was published by UNC Press in conjunction with the movie.

## SESSION 3

### *Practicing Fusion Politics*

When she moved to Durham from rural Columbus County, Grandma Ann was following a young man she had married. He had promised to come ahead of her and the child they were expecting to prepare a home. When she received an address where she could find him, she didn't know it was for a boarding house where he was sharing a room with a man neither of them knew.

At her insistence, Ann and her husband rented their own place for a little while, but by the time he left her, their first baby girl had been born and another was on the way. Grandma Ann found work as a domestic, cleaning white women's houses, and scrambled to raise two girls on her own.

Grandma Ann learned from experience the political and economic system that Zora Neale Hurston summed up so well in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.

Given the burden she bore as a mule of the world, Grandma Ann could have easily hated the white man who inherited power by default, the white woman who assumed she was superior, or the black man who left her when he couldn't take the pressure anymore. Carrying the weight of a whole society on her back, she could have resented the Mexican immigrant who seemed to find work more easily than she did or the sister who stole her man. She might have despaired, giving up hope all together.

But she didn't. Instead, Grandma Ann learned to see through the pitfalls of racial politics to confront a system that made everyone less than God had created them to be. Grandma Ann knew that injustice was unnatural. People—not God—had set up this system. People were going to have to come together to fix it.

Grandma Ann was a veteran of America's most celebrated effort to confront systemic racism—the twentieth century's Civil Rights Movement. The political achievements of her lifetime were real, and they echoed the demands of America's First Reconstruction: the abolition of slavery, full citizenship in public life and equal protection under the law, and equal access to the ballot. What the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments had not in fact secured for African Americans, Grandma Ann and many others had worked to guarantee through direct action to desegregate public accommodations and political organizing to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

Grandma Ann organized for systemic change because Jesus called her to love her neighbor as herself. But she knew well that neither black nor white churches in her lifetime had universally embraced a prophetic challenge

of the world that white supremacy built. Stokely Carmichael coined the term “institutional racism” in his 1967 book, *Black Power*, summing up what Grandma Ann’s generation had learned from experience: people have to change the unjust systems that people built. But forty years later, the basic notion that economic and political systems function to exclude people of color from access to power was still offensive to many Christians. Indeed, faith seemed to create an internal resistance to systemic change. Whenever church folks talked to Grandma Ann, she wanted to talk about how public schools continued to fail poor students—how they were resegregating as a school-to-prison pipeline, guaranteeing that one in three African American boys born after 2000 would experience incarceration. She wanted to organize people of faith to challenge institutional racism.

But church folks almost always wanted to talk about how she had befriended a Klansman. People cried when they heard Grandma Ann’s story. Overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, they confessed terrible things they had heard their parents say about black people behind closed doors. They apologized for not doing more to resist hatred and bigotry.

But I don’t think I ever heard a single church person ask Grandma Ann whom they should vote for in the next school board election. Somehow, a faith that moved people to believe in racial reconciliation did not raise the issue of racial politics.

This wasn’t a personal fault of individuals who sincerely lamented the sins of America’s past. It was, instead, a persistent symptom of the world that white supremacy had built. A century earlier, faith leaders who supported the full citizenship of freed people in the South had been branded advocates of “political religionism.” Preachers who defended Reconstruction were labeled “too political” by those who backed Redemption, no less political a movement. But once fear of black political power had been exploited to reinforce white supremacy in government, politicians called for peace and preachers encouraged Americans not to dwell on the past but to focus on the work of rebuilding.

The book of Nehemiah, depicting the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, became a favorite text among Southern preachers. Now that black political power had been checked, the very people who had decried Reconstruction started preaching about the virtues of rebuilding.

But this nation-building program extended far beyond the South. The Supreme Court’s *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which offered legal precedent for “separate but equal,” made clear by the end of the nineteenth century that America had preserved its Union without healing its racial politics. This was America at the dawn of the “Christian Century,” on its way to world superpower status. Jim Crow’s segregation was not an anomaly but a regional expression of the separate and unequal opportunities African Americans found in cities of the North and Midwest when they fled the terror of Southern lynching.

This Great Migration was the largest internal displacement of people in US history, but after half a century, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led an integrated march into Chicago’s all-white suburbs in 1966, he said he witnessed hatred there he had never seen in Alabama or Mississippi. This from the man who just three years earlier had preached the funeral for four little girls in Birmingham who were dynamited by the Klan.

No, the world that white supremacy built wasn’t confined to the South, and it had not gone away after Reconstruction. It had morphed and changed, impacting the lives of billions as America came to dominate the

world stage. No one knew better than a black woman in Grandma Ann's position how little freedom meant in mid-twentieth-century America.

But the world that white supremacy built could not hear Grandma Ann's voice. And a faith that tried to practice Christian charity without confronting systemic injustice only reinforced this systematic silencing of Grandma Ann. Thank God, she wouldn't be quiet. She often said, "God gave me a big mouth, so I used it to holler." A persistent woman, Grandma Ann helped me to see the virtue of stubbornness, which Jesus affirmed, even if American Christianity did not.

### **Group Activity**

Watch this introduction to systemic racism from Race Forward:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgH2aN3ehFA&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgH2aN3ehFA&feature=youtu.be)

### **Scripture Passage**

*Luke 18:1-5*

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why do you think faith communities are often reticent to address political issues? Why did Ann Atwater believe faith requires us to be political?
2. Jonathan writes about how Ann helped him understand racism as a systemic issue. What systems perpetuate the inequities of racial division in your community?
3. Who is working for systemic change in your community? How can your faith community bless and support their work?
4. Why did Jesus say the unjust judge grants the widow in Luke's gospel what she wanted?

### **Reach Out and Touch**

Identify an organization that is persistently asking for systemic change that a group of directly impacted people want. Reach out to someone in that organization this week and ask how you can use your voice or your vote to support their demands.

### **Further Reading**

William J. Barber's *Revive Us Again: Wisdom and Action in Moral Organizing* is a collection of sermons on the recently re-launched Poor People's Campaign. Grandma Ann was active in the Poor People's Campaign in 1968 and died with a photograph of the Rev. Dr. Barber by her bedside, grateful that he and others were taking up the work of faith-rooted action for systemic change.

## SESSION 4

### *Holy Disruption*

While most Christians today recognize Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as both a great American and a great preacher, he was not affirmed by a majority of Christians in his own day, black or white.

Southern white segregationists dismissed King as “Martin Luther Coon.” It’s easy today to conjure an image of a Klan preacher, spewing hatred against the Civil Rights Movement at a rally around a fiery cross. But while such preaching did exist, it was certainly not the only Christianity to oppose King’s effort to expose and transform racial politics in America. Dr. King’s own denomination, the National Baptist Convention, pushed him out, along with other Baptist preachers who insisted on confronting the world white supremacy had built.

King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” perhaps his most famous written work, was written in response to seven Christian ministers and a rabbi in Alabama. Though high school and college students study King’s letter as a primary document in twentieth-century American history, the theological reasoning he was responding to gets little attention. Christians in America would do well to study the ministers’ joint letter in our Sunday schools; in so many ways, it sums up our habit of resisting challenges to America’s racial politics.

In the opening lines of their “Good Friday Statement,” sent to Dr. King April 12, 1963, the ministers note that they have already written “An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense,” a statement sent to him January 16, 1963. They do not try to defend the world that white supremacy built. In fact, they had acknowledged the existence of “various problems that cause racial friction and unrest.” But they object firmly to the way in which Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement had been confronting Jim Crow laws, demanding change through nonviolent direct action. However just the cause, they insist, it should be “pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets.”

Such was the “common sense” of most Christians in 1960s Birmingham. Realists in the tradition of theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr, these Alabama clergy understood the messiness of politics and the necessity of engaging immoral society for the sake of social change. But they thought they understood how change must be pursued: legally, and with deference to the order that white supremacy built and Bull Connor controlled. Anything else, however peaceful it might seem, contributed to hatred and violence in their assessment.

Dr. King objected—and his polemic response is what we remember half a century later. But the fact that the ecumenical leadership of the faith community in Alabama at the time felt self-assured in making this statement is a testimony to how prevalent their political realism was across theological traditions.

In mid-twentieth-century Alabama, as is often the case today, the religious leadership of American Christianity had more in common with the religious leadership of first-century Jerusalem than with the movement of Jesus. In the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion, the Roman authorities arrest Jesus, but they are ready to release

him after examination. “I find no basis for a charge against this man,” the chief law enforcement officer in Jerusalem says. But the religious leaders insist, “Crucify him!” (Luke 23:4, 20). The religious leaders, even more than the secular, insist that “law and order” must crucify our Lord.

Why were a Roman proconsul in the first century and the Supreme Court in the twentieth century quicker than the local religious leadership to side with the way of Jesus? For the Gospel writers, this question is at the heart of what it means to receive the message of Jesus.

All four Gospels record a version of a story about a persistent woman who insisted on anointing Jesus before he went to Jerusalem to face the systems of his day and suffer their most extreme punishment. In Luke’s account, she interrupts the rare dinner that Jesus ate with religious leaders to wash his feet with her tears, dry them with her hair, and anoint his feet with an expensive perfume.

Her act of devotion is offensive on several levels to the Pharisee who is hosting Jesus. Socially, men in first-century Palestine took their meals separately from women. Her presence among men interrupted the social order of Jesus’ day. But her transgression moves quickly beyond the socially unacceptable to the immoral. “If this man were a prophet,” Jesus’ host says of him, “he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner” (Luke 7:39).

Like Dr. King two thousand years later, Jesus is numbered with the transgressors. However good his intentions, he is associating with the wrong people and going about things the wrong way. But the Gospel writers are clear: this persistent woman who insists on anointing Jesus sees something that the religious leadership has missed—Jesus is the king of the universe.

It’s no accident that this anointing is prelude to Jesus’ civil disobedience in Jerusalem in all four Gospels. No doubt this persistent woman is crossing social and moral lines when she pours fragrant oil over the feet of Jesus. But she is also engaging in an explicitly political act. In ancient Israel, kings were set apart as political leaders of God’s people through ritual anointing.

In America’s democracy, we affirm the election of presidents with an inauguration that culminates in the oath of office. In the Bible, kings don’t take an oath; they are anointed. Jesus rides into Jerusalem in an inaugural parade to the adulation of adoring crowds because others believe, as this persistent woman did, that Jesus is King, the Messiah. To worship him is to celebrate the justice of a whole new political system.

This is why, in Mark’s Gospel, the story of this persistent woman anointing Jesus ends with these words from Jesus himself: “wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told” (Mark 14:9). There is no way to preach the gospel without proclaiming that the unjust systems of this world must give way to the reign of a new King. Just such political religion landed Jesus on the cross, and it is little surprise that religious leaders who have accommodated themselves to the world that white supremacy built would adopt crosses of their own to kill movements that challenge that system. But as in the Gospel stories, persistent women continue to cross dividing lines to worship the God who saves us from racial politics.

For me, her name was Ann Atwater. She adopted me as her own, ignoring the social and moral boundaries of the South she grew up in. But that was not all. She also insisted that I know King Jesus—the Lord for whom

friendship is always political because we live in a world where friends get hurt by injustice. To be a disciple of Jesus and a son of Ann Atwater, she told me, is to be in a quarrel with the world. Yes, our greatest weapon is love. But when we love in public, it looks like a disruption. Wherever I preach the gospel, Grandma Ann's disruption of America's racial politics must be told.

### **Group Activity**

In the spring of 2018, the Poor People's Campaign organized the largest wave of nonviolent civil disobedience since the sit-in movement of 1960. Watch this short video of the actions together:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=dA3APIQeIAU&t=5s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dA3APIQeIAU&t=5s)

### **Scripture Passage**

*Mark 14:3-9*

While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Does the position of the clergy in Birmingham on social change sound familiar to you? Who do you hear making similar arguments today?
2. What motivates Jesus and the woman at Bethany to challenge the status quo? What motivated Ann Atwater?
3. Is disruption central to the gospel that you've heard and believed? Can you tell the gospel story without telling the story of Mary at Bethany?
4. As you conclude this study, what are you taking with you? Are there commitments you've made that you'd like to speak aloud to this group?

### **Reach Out and Touch**

Reach out to someone in your community who has engaged in civil disobedience to challenge injustice. Ask them if you could meet with them to better understand why they were willing to risk their own freedom to protest systemic injustice. Listen closely. Prayerfully consider ways you can bless their persistence and join their struggle.

### **Further Reading**

This study has been adapted from *Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom From Slaveholder Religion*. Read the whole book for resources on how the faith Ann Atwater embodied can transform our souls, our congregations and society as we repent of the habits of slaveholder religion.

# PHOTOS



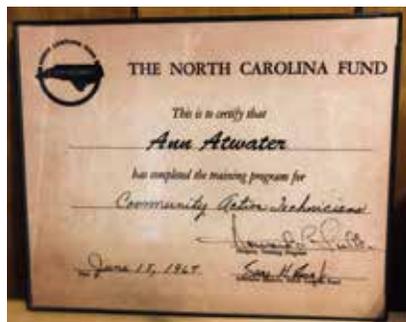
C.P. Ellis and Ann Atwater, in the Durham Herald Co. Newspaper Photograph Collection #P0105, North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



Ann Atwater organizes neighbors.



© Photo by D.L. Anderson



Ann Atwater canvassing for Operation Breakthrough. Photograph by Billy E. Barnes, in the Durham Herald Co. Newspaper Photograph Collection #P0105, North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.