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DON'T GO WITH YOUR GUT

Since graduating from college in 2004, I have traveled all over the United States to speak at churches, conferences, colleges, and seminaries about racism and the church and about the way forward that Jesus provides. On one particular occasion I was speaking at a building that has roots going all the way back to the oldest Mennonite congregation in America, founded in 1683. Located in the Germantown neighborhood in Philadelphia, this place had special meaning for me, because in the year 1688 members from this community signed the first written antislavery document. Therefore I saw it as an honor to deliver a lecture on race, racism, and the church from within the walls of this historic building.

After my talk and the subsequent question and answer session, I lingered for a while so that I could talk with attendees. An older white gentleman approached me and wanted to chat with me about my talk. He began by expressing his deep gratitude for everything that I had shared that night, but then he made an interesting comment that seemed to contradict his previous statement. He said that he agreed with 95 percent of what I said, except for my interpretation of what happened to Trayvon Martin. This talk occurred right in the middle of a tense racial division in our country, exposing that we could not come together and agree that what happened to this boy was wrong. For this gentleman, all of my

analysis of the history of race and racism was right on the money. But when that same lens was applied to a current issue, we seemed to fall back to square one.

I left this event with mixed feelings. I was well received there, but I struggled to understand how someone really could agree with the larger historical narrative I gave and then continue to read this specific instance in contrary fashion. This man, as far as I could tell, had good intentions and wanted to be against racism. While I have certainly encountered some people who have gotten really defensive or nasty, most people I have met are like this man, truly wanting to be part of the solution. Most people want to contribute constructively to dismantling the racial division that exists.

Although that is a great start, I've come to realize that is not enough. Even with that goal, I've seen the ways in which Christians continue to be deeply divided, particularly in their perceptions of racism in America, and seemingly unable to understand counter positions. When racial animosity explodes in our country, as it has in recent years in Ferguson, New York City, Baltimore, and Charleston, we are forced to talk about racism more publicly. When that happens, we find ourselves once again face-to-face with this stark reality: we do not even agree about what is going on, let alone what should be done about it.

To make any progress in understanding each other across racial lines, we in the church must begin to talk about our own socialization, which we have received from various communities. We need to wrestle with *where* our opinions have been shaped. Despite the fact that we might think that we came up with our own thoughts and perspectives, all ideas are developed in particular contexts and spaces. We are all socialized in some way, because we have all been part of real human communities. Communities and cultures shape us. These cultures partly shape our values, worldviews, and everyday norms and practices. Our ideas and assumptions do not just drop straight from heaven; nor do we develop them completely on our own, as though we are lone rangers in our intellectual development. No, each of us comes from somewhere (or from multiple contexts), and each of us has been deeply shaped by these contexts. We can choose whether to take those things for granted or

to critically receive them. Are we willing to wrestle, over and over again, with what we will keep, what we will discard, and what needs some adjustment?

What I want to consider in this chapter is how this very act of unwittingly accepting the dominant cultural view of things, especially as it relates to race, cripples our conversations on racism in the church. At a more basic level, relying on "intuition," which is actually formed by our racialized social contexts, has led many Christians to faulty understandings of racial dynamics. Many dominant-culture Christians never even imagine that they might need to interrogate their own intuitive responses to racism.

To break the cycle of ignorance to racism and faulty intuition, members of dominant groups must learn to *not trust their own gut*, as they have been socialized outside of the life experiences of marginalized groups. Instead, they must follow our Lord, Jesus Christ, who in his own day stood in solidarity with Samaritan outcasts, vulnerable women, the hungry, poor, and the socially rejected.

These points suggest that there are different ways of knowing, and it is our task to explore and pursue Jesus-shaped ways of knowing our world. Could it be that the social place in which we stand ought to be as close as possible to that of Christ's own life? Could it be that we would then see the world more truly and more clearly than we currently do?

WHAT IS SOCIALIZATION?

African Americans, as well as other people of color who have had to navigate life as minorities, often accept the reality that they have been socialized. Cultural socialization is much easier to understand and recognize when your way of doing things is constantly labeled and differentiated, and often mocked. When your traditions, wisdom, stories, and values are constantly scrutinized or pointed out, it is not hard to see that you have been raised in a distinct cultural context.

For white Americans, however, and anyone who has been part of a dominant culture around the globe, dominant-group socialization is normally not as obvious. Those living as part of a majority, dominant culture are less likely to be conscious of their own

socialization. Rather than thinking of their own lives as being shaped by a peculiar context or culture, people who constitute the majority of a society are often unconscious of these realities. Individualistic frameworks prevent people from seeing that their viewpoints are not quite as original as they would like to believe.

Many white Americans tend to think that everyone else is “cultural” or “ethnic.” They view themselves as just “average Americans” or “normal.” This is especially the case the more racially segregated one’s life is, because one’s own culture determines the norm and is thereby preferred in the public square, in local institutions and schools, and among peer networks. In such contexts, it’s not hard for people to blindly take for granted the racial character and particularity of their own social formation. They rarely have to think about it.

I can remember many times that white people have said to me things like “I don’t have a culture” or “I’m just a ‘normal’ American.” They assume that their interpretations of the world are the purely objective and universal perspectives that everyone else should adopt. Not being conscious of one’s own cultural socialization can lead to thinking that one’s perspective is not just *a* vantage point but *the* vantage point. Not recognizing that everyone has been socialized by society quickly results in assuming that our way is the right way, and hence God’s way. In America, the white dominant cultural way is often assumed to be the right way. The culture, values, and norms of the dominant group get translated into the universally right and moral way of life.

And therein lies the problem. White intuition, perception, assumptions, and experience—limited by homogeneous networks and socialized in dominant society—claim one thing, while black experience claims an alternative and diverging reality. This epistemological divide—that is, the partition between our different ways of knowing and perceiving—is an even greater reality in the church than among the rest of society.

To understand this, we must peek at various historical moments in America’s past, leading up to the present, and consider how the dominant group in America has been blinded by the ugly realities of the society of which they have been a part.

WHITE DOMINANT CULTURAL INTUITION IN AMERICA’S PAST

Throughout most of American history, the majority of white Americans, having been socialized by the values and perspectives of the majority culture, didn’t think we had a racial problem. The white community has hidden its own hand from itself, unable to see the racialized and often ugly and violent practices in which it was complicit.

Slavery

In the seventeenth century, masses of Anglo-Saxon Protestants on what is now American soil bought wholesale into the myth of race as a justification for enslaving African people. Ironically, many Europeans were not wealthy enough to even purchase slaves themselves. In fact, many Europeans in the colonies at that time were themselves indentured servants in no better situation than most Africans initially were. The motivation of wealthy European elites who could actually afford to pay for slaves was obvious; they could increase their production and labor while living more luxurious lives. But what was the motivation for poor European settlers, who wouldn’t even be slaveholders themselves, to accept a new racialized and hierarchical order of enslavement?

Part of the reason was simply that, no matter how hard things were, poor whites could count their blessing that they were not black! This offered them a small but important psychological status. That is right: the relative social status of being a part of the newfound “white male citizenry” proved to be more valuable and more important to many people than linking arms with the people who actually had more in common with them economically and socially. The invitation from the elite to participate in the relative psychological gain of white identity and social life outweighed the absolute realities with which these European men were living. The small advantage of white identity blurred the reasoning of these men.

Not everyone quietly accepted this new social order. Enslaved Africans at that same moment were, of course, well situated to call out these changes that qualified and questioned their humanity. It

goes without saying, yet must be said anyway: enslaved Africans knew they were more than property, no matter what was said or done to them.

Now, with twenty-first-century hindsight, we can all look back and agree that the white Anglo-Saxons, including Christians, got it terribly wrong. Looking back now, we say that it seems obvious that white people were blinded by their desire for social advantage and superiority. Most American Christians and others would now easily agree with the African perspective of the time and would claim that the African slaves got it right.

The Dred Scott decision

Let's leap forward a couple of centuries to 1857 and the *Dred Scott* decision at the tail end of the legal chattel slavery era in the United States. Of course our society has always had strange contradictions. Leading up to the late nineteenth century, the United States had been proclaiming universal ideals—such as “all men were created equal”—while simultaneously engaging in some of the cruelest forms of enslavement of African Americans. Dominant cultures have a way of disguising their own oppressive practices from themselves with strong proclamations of innocence and benevolence and universal principles of equality.

Flowing out of that historical context, the supposedly honorable and esteemed Supreme Court of the United States, called to uphold justice and equality, came to the overwhelming conclusion, in a 7–2 decision, that black people were not citizens and would never be. America was never really designed for black people, the justices believed, and therefore black people did not have the right to sue for their freedom when moving into free states. Of course, these men were all products of their time and social location, which many people quickly point out. I agree with those who make that claim, although I am suspicious of why people want to point that out in regard to the slavery era but not for themselves. Being a product of one's time doesn't absolve anyone. We are *all* people of our time. We either renew our minds and become transformed or we conform to the dominant ideologies that convince us that we are moral despite what is going on around us.

After the fact, just about all legal scholars agree that the *Dred Scott* decision was one of the most horrific decisions ever made by the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, at the time it was not obvious to most people who benefited from this arrangement that this was such a terrible decision. At the time, it seemed self-evident to most white people, and it was a boost to the southern way of life and the larger slaveholding economy. This decision had gone through the official legal process, and justice had spoken. White dominant-culture socialization blinded people's moral vision, despite folks like Dred Scott and others who offered a counter perspective.

Dred Scott was also a product of his time. Once again, we can look back and agree that black people at that time correctly understood the problem and that the perspective of the dominant culture was wrong.

Plessy v. Ferguson

The *Dred Scott* decision was not the only Supreme Court case that we all can look back on and agree was not pleasing to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Consider *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 as another example. During this 7–1 decision by our highest court, racial segregation was decisively affirmed as legal and as actually promoting of equality.

It is not surprising that most white Americans at that time affirmed the decision. The court merely reflected the popular sentiments of that time. White Christians were also conformed after the same racial patterns of society (or more truthfully, they were the ones laying the foundation for such sentiments). The church took up all sorts of segregated practices during this time, such as black Christians being made second-class citizens in sanctuaries and being confined to balconies and behind ropes. The history of deep racial division in the church that we know all too well flowed out of white Christians affirming racially segregated life as the divine order of things.

Looking back now, most white Americans would agree that the court decision was a terrible one and that white Christians should not have promoted such legalized segregation. While most white Christians reflected the common sentiments of their time, black

Christians continuously and prophetically called out these realities. In that way, white Christians had other Christian voices to which they could have opened themselves up. Most chose not to.

Civil rights movement

Jump forward to the racial unrest of the mid-twentieth century, which climaxed during the civil rights movement. Most of us have seen the black-and-white footage of black schoolboys and schoolgirls being hosed down against walls and sliding down the street, and of the dogs set loose on them by police during the Birmingham demonstration in 1963. Maybe your mind conjures up the vivid images of Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama, where peaceful black marchers, most of them Christians, were violently attacked by state troopers and senselessly beaten. Most American Christians look back at the mid-twentieth century and say that racism was a huge problem. Lynchings of black people were still very prevalent, many black people were prevented from voting, and white supremacist segregation was the law of the land.

Guess what? When polled in May 1946, nearly seven out of ten white Americans surveyed believed that “Negroes in the United States are being treated fairly.”¹ Yes, you read that right: in the midst of Jim Crow segregation, the terror of the KKK, the open torment and intimidation by the White Citizens’ Council, and the regular violence against black people in America, who had no protection or judicial recourse, most white Americans did not think there was a racial problem. Yes, these numbers included Christians too.

That almost seven out of ten white Americans could think that black people were being treated fairly at such a time of unrest and suffering calls into question the capacity to which any dominant cultural group can discern an oppressive moment with even a little objectivity. Of course, the majority of the black community knew that they were being treated unfairly. In fact, many black Christian leaders were simultaneously attempting to lead the way toward the

1. Rita Simon and Mohamed Alaa Abdel Moneim, *Public Opinion in the United States* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 13; Hazel Gaudet Erskine, “The Polls: Race Relations,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1962), 139.

“beloved community.” This vision for a beloved community was the language that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. frequently employed when prophetically reimagining a new humanity in which racism, classism, and violence would be no more, and where instead there would be mutuality and interdependence.

In contrast, we must seriously wrestle with the fact that so many from the dominant group, in the midst of racial segregation and oppression, could convince themselves that things were already fine and equal for all. This fact is significant background for understanding dominant-group intuitions and assumptions.

FROM IMPAIRED INTUITION TO SOLIDARITY

What I have tried to do is highlight the dominant culture’s failed intuitions throughout the history of the United States. White socialization claimed equality and justice at every stage while also shielding itself from its own oppressive practices and the perspectives of oppressed groups. I want to state an obvious interpretation of this phenomenon in our past and then suggest a Christian practice that recalibrates the witness of the church toward a more faithful trajectory.

First, however, we need to acknowledge that most white Americans (Christians included) have been blind to the racism and oppression that has been so prevalent on this soil for the first 350 years, ever since Jamestown was formed. Most people in the church, whether white or people of color, now agree that from 1619 to the mid-twentieth century, the majority of white Christians, as a part of the dominant group in our society, consistently interpreted things wrongly with regard to racism. The vision of America as a place of justice and equality prevented most people in dominant culture from clearly seeing actual on-the-ground realities. Dominant culture as a social location was actually the *worst* vantage point for deciphering what was going on. It is a given today that dominant society’s intuitions were impaired at that time. Almost everyone, except for the very fringe of society, will agree that the majority of white people got it wrong.

As racism mutated in different eras in America, each adaptation proved to be just as deceptive for those in the dominant

group—not because of their race, but because of their social networks and social location. What we are considering now are the implications of 350 years of misperception by those within dominant society. The dominant group has been unable to recognize, see, or know racial injustice in America because their socialized intuitions shielded them from seeing the concrete realities.

Why does this matter? Well, as I mentioned, polls continually demonstrate that race tends to be a decisive factor in interpreting current, highly charged racial incidents in our country. In many ways, very little has changed in relation to our inability to agree on what is happening in the present. Likewise, I have seen online and in person many people interpret what is going on from the social position of dominant culture. Many white people have quickly dismissed black Americans' experiences of racism in American society. Their own experience and intuition continue to tell them that race is not a significant factor in this country.

Given our history, do we really believe that a people group that benefited from the racial system—socially, economically, politically, or merely psychologically—and whose intuitions were repeatedly wrong for the first 350 years has now suddenly, 400 years in, gained an advantage in interpreting these moments over those whom have been historically oppressed? Even more implausible is that, at this exact moment, the majority of black people who have been right about their own experiences for the past 350 years also instantly, and all at the same time, lost their ability to interpret their own experiences.

Is it likely that the white dominant group and the black marginalized group instantaneously swapped roles regarding who perceives injustice more precisely? Or is it more plausible that dominant culture remains at a limited vantage point for determining what is happening today? To affirm that white people are suddenly getting it right and that black people have simultaneously lost their capacity to interpret their own experiences seems an unhelpful response not based on serious reflection of our past nor the testimonies of African Americans in the present.

The issue before us is the epistemological divide that exists between the dominant group and those living on the underside

of the social hierarchy. Those oppressed by dominating and controlling powers tend to hold a different view of the situation than those benefiting from life in a culture and community that violates other people (whether directly or indirectly).

One of the first people to articulate this idea was theologian José Míguez Bonino. He helps us think about how epistemological views are similar to geographical, location-based views. In both cases, one's location (whether social or physical) provides a particular vantage point from which to view an event. Just as with physical location, some social locations offer better vantage points on reality than others. Míguez Bonino asserts, "A social location determines a perspective. It conceals some things and reveals others. We have sometimes referred to this in terms of 'the epistemological privilege of the poor.' The poor are not morally or spiritually superior to others, but they do see reality from a different angle" than those in power do.² Therefore, I am suggesting that people on the bottom are better situated to know what is real, and that what they know to be reality is closer to the real thing than the perceptions of those in a dominant social position.

This epistemological advantage, or privileged viewpoint, exists in several ways. First, without the self-interest to remain in denial about social oppression, the proximity of the oppressed to the realities of their own lives puts them at an advantage. Next, most people who are a part of subdominant cultures not only engage deeply with their own viewpoints but also, for survival's sake, must constantly be familiar with the rhetoric, ideologies, and perspectives of the dominant group. This thorough engagement is rarely reciprocated by those in dominant culture, which means that the subdominant group has the advantage of understanding the viewpoints of both sides much more than those on top are able to (an example would be my conversation with my white pastor friend over a cup of sweet tea in which I explained his limited and optional engagement with black community and culture).

Finally, sometimes the very angle from below provides a glance at the ugly underbelly of imperial power, in which the "good face"

2. José Míguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983), 34.

that it presents to the rest of society is absent. When marginalized people are pushed off ancestral lands and onto reservations, stolen from homelands and enslaved in people's homes, mistreated and othered in their own communities, or told that they will never belong, the dirty secrets of the dominant group are revealed in very vulnerable ways. Subdominant groups need not depend merely on stereotypes created from a distance about "the other" when they are able to share personal stories and experiences within their communities that, when collected, reveal troubling widespread realities. Altogether, the oppressed have an epistemological advantage that allows them to see things more clearly than those whose vision is blocked by denial and distorted by faulty claims of objectivity.

Some people think that because our judicial system has made a verdict on an issue—decisions that are usually in full agreement with dominant cultural norms—justice has spoken and the discussion should be over. This flows out of a naive assumption that our legal system is actually the source that dispenses justice, rather than God.

Black people, however, often know that a verdict and the true reality do not coincide. Jesus' own experience of being arrested at night, put through an unfair trial, and then given a state-sanctioned execution should be the interpretive key for Christians in understanding the inability of empires to dispense true justice. To make my point plain: the judicial system is complicit in the epistemological failures of dominant society. Rarely does the judicial system run counter to the larger and broader mainstream opinions. This doesn't make everything the judicial system does wrong, but it certainly is a far cry from the kind of justice and righteousness that we as Christians are supposed to pursue. Judicial complicity in the dominance of our social hierarchy, especially in light of the system's history, must leave us deeply skeptical about any government's ability to truly let justice roll down like waters.

What we are moving toward as a solution is completely counter-intuitive. Those on the margins or in the cracks of society often found themselves intimately sharing life with God in the form of Jesus Christ, who chose to especially identify himself with such

rejected people. Jesus did so to the point that he himself became "the stone the builders rejected" (Psalm 118:22 NIV). In 1 John 2:6 we are reminded of the New Testament challenge to follow after Jesus—as his disciples, to "walk just as Jesus walked." In following Jesus' footsteps, we have a new pattern that can help us break out of the cycle which leads to blinders around racism and to faulty intuitions. Those in dominant culture are now freed to commune with oppressed people and to learn from them how to see a truer social reality, one closer to the vantage point of our crucified Christ. The challenge here is to trust the intuition of oppressed people over against one's own gut and experience, which has proven to lead dominant groups astray.

White American Christians in our society must do something seemingly absurd and unnatural, yet very Christian in orientation: they must move decisively toward a counterintuitive solidarity with those on the margins. They must allow the eyes of the violated of the land to lead and guide them, seeking to have renewed minds no longer conformed to the patterns of our world.

BONHOEFFER'S HARLEM EXPERIENCES

On February 4, 1906, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born to an elite, upper-class, and well-connected German family. To his father's surprise (and probably horror), Dietrich decided to pursue a profession doing theology. Bonhoeffer's understanding at this early time seems to be exclusively informed by a highly sacramental Lutheran theology. Add to that his highly nationalistic orientation, which uncritically combined German identity with Christianity, and it becomes clear that Bonhoeffer began as a theologian well poised to bolster and uphold the soon-to-come Third Reich. In his early years, he even evoked Constantine's legacy, assuring his people that in the symbol of the cross, "only in this sign will you be victorious!" During one lecture series, Bonhoeffer argued for setting aside Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as something to live by, and suggested that loving enemies in an actual national conflict is impossible. His life experience as a social elite, with a theology informed by an unexamined nationalistic and dominant cultural ideology, had Bonhoeffer on a trajectory of becoming a

well-respected theologian in both the pre-Nazi context and the Nazi era that was just around the corner.

The Christian journey can easily move from cheap grace to costly grace, however, because all things are possible with God. That certainly was the case for Bonhoeffer. After he traveled the world and finished up his dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, in Berlin in 1927, Bonhoeffer decided to put off concluding his postdoctoral work so that he could travel and learn more. In the 1930–31 academic year he found himself once again in the classroom, but now in New York City, studying at Union Theological Seminary. As a German-trained theologian, he initially scoffed at the political orientation of the praxis-focused Union students, who in his mind didn't really know how to do real theology. But while he was at Union, Bonhoeffer made several important friendships that would change him. Those friendships would increase his own capacity to perceive our troubled society as a disciple of Jesus for the rest of his life.

One of those friends was Jean Lasserre, a student from France. Despite the obstacles that French and German students would have had at the time, because of the conflicts between their homelands, Lasserre and Bonhoeffer made it work. Lasserre introduced Bonhoeffer to a pacifist Christian perspective shaped by the Sermon on the Mount, and this quickly began to challenge Bonhoeffer dramatically on many fronts. The life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ would become central and ongoing frameworks for Bonhoeffer going forward. This turn toward the Sermon on the Mount meant that discipleship and formation in the way of Jesus would become central themes for Bonhoeffer, especially in his final days and writings.

It was Franklin Fisher, however, a Negro student from Alabama, who provided Bonhoeffer with an invaluable gift. Though Bonhoeffer was generally disappointed by American churches, his ecclesial and Christological questions were about to get flipped upside down. Fisher was one of the few black students at Union Seminary at the time, and he would later have direct involvement in the civil rights movement, alongside Martin Luther King Jr. At this time, however, Fisher was an intern at Abyssinian Baptist Church

in Harlem. This was and still is a famous black congregation. At that time it was being pastored by Adam Clayton Powell Sr., and was known for its social and political engagement and for being a beacon of justice during an extremely troubled time in the African American community. The challenges of the early twentieth century called for bold and courageous faith that took visible action in the community.

This community would prove to be liberating for Bonhoeffer. Fisher invited Bonhoeffer to break a taboo by crossing racial boundaries of belonging, not only into the black Harlem community, but also within the black church. And it was here, among a marginalized group trying to survive the struggles of white supremacy, white terrorism, and the Great Depression, that Bonhoeffer met the Jesus who stood in solidarity with oppressed and suffering people. This was a life-changing, reorienting encounter with Jesus and with the black community that worshiped and followed him.

As the pastor, Adam Clayton Powell Sr. was not afraid to preach Jesus and his kingdom of justice. Bonhoeffer was captivated by the "black Christ" and the vehicle of black preaching that introduced him to Jesus anew. Bonhoeffer began purchasing albums of Negro spirituals, as he was drawn to their piety and spiritual depth. He would later share them with his students back in Germany. Bonhoeffer began reading black intellectuals like W. E. B. DuBois and Harlem Renaissance thinkers, who stretched his social imagination. Bonhoeffer became a lay teacher for Sunday school kids in the church. He traveled to Howard College (now Howard University) to meet some of the gifted black intellectuals he had read and studied. Seeing the racialized criminal system at work, Bonhoeffer wrote to friends in Europe to advocate against the Scottsboro trials and the terrible racial injustices that America permitted to occur. He even once experienced being denied service at a restaurant with a black friend. These experiences and others helped reorient Bonhoeffer's whole faith toward following Jesus, obeying the Sermon on the Mount, and living in solidarity and relationship with this oppressed black community. Harlem and this black church gave him new eyes.

Unfortunately, most people are not familiar with this period in Bonhoeffer's life. American dominant culture is primarily obsessed with his participation in the resistance of Hitler's regime in 1933 and onward until his death. What gets lost is that Bonhoeffer was able to speak and see the injustice and evil of the Third Reich in a way that most of his German theological colleagues could not at that time. Most of them were still rooted in the same nationalistic entanglements with Christianity with which Bonhoeffer began. They could not see the racial problem in its depth. They had been socialized, largely through a distorted Christianity, to *not* perceive the depth of the problem until it was too late. Bonhoeffer had learned to see Jesus anew and to understand what was going on in his society by following Christ into solidarity with the oppressed, whether black Christians in America or Jews in Germany. This counterintuitive solidarity gave him new eyes to see and evaluate the world.

Bonhoeffer stumbled upon a counterintuitive Christian solidarity and faith, an intimate experience of placing his body among those on the underside of the racialized hierarchy. He would continue to wrestle with Christological questions, understanding more and more the significance of Jesus who suffered and rose again, but all from the vantage point of those systemically marginalized in society. His commitments to accept the costs of discipleship would ultimately end his life, as he was arrested and then later hung in a concentration camp.

Bonhoeffer wrote a powerful letter to his inner circle of trusted friends and family right before his arrest and eventual state execution in a concentration camp. In the letter, we can get a sense of the transformation that he continued to go through, up until the very end. His transformation is one the whole church must go through if we are going to be faithful in responding to the racialized hierarchy that we have created, permitted, accommodated, or consented to for so long. Bonhoeffer wrote:

It remains an experience of incomparable value that we have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the

suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering. If only during this time bitterness and envy have not corroded the heart; that we come to see matters great and small, happiness and misfortune, strength and weakness with new eyes; that our sense for greatness, humanness, justice, and mercy has grown clearer, freer, more incorruptible; that we learn, indeed, that personal suffering is a more useful key, a more fruitful principle than personal happiness for exploring the meaning of the world in contemplation and action.³

DR. KING'S LIFELONG JOURNEY

On January 15, 1929, Martin Luther King Jr. was born. Actually, he was initially named Michael, and continued to be called Mike by many close friends and family. King was also born into relative wealth, at least in relation to most black people at the time. In Atlanta, King was raised in a neighborhood called "Sweet Auburn," a stable, middle-class, African American community filled mostly with black professionals. King's family found themselves part of this middle-class neighborhood because his father was a pastor, which would have certainly been one of the most stable and reliable vocations for a black person at that time. Martin Luther King Jr. entered Morehouse College at the young age of fifteen.

Receiving these social and economic advantages exposed King to so much more than he would have otherwise. It expanded his horizons and stretched his social and theological frameworks. Coming from a line of preachers, King also had a pastoral vocation in his sights. Rather than stay in the South, he headed up north for graduate school. His northern education included Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and a PhD program at Boston University. Understanding King's life and significance must begin with recognizing the complexity of his life as a black man who had advantages that most black people in the twentieth century could not access. In 1954 King and his wife, Coretta, moved to

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 52.

Montgomery, Alabama, where he began to pastor Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. He was only twenty-five years old when he took on the responsibility of pastoring this middle- and upper-class black community. Initially King had no intention of leading any civil rights movements, and instead was focused on finishing his dissertation, growing church membership, and establishing himself as a pastor.

This deeply segregated city was thrown into the national scene one year later when Rosa Parks, an activist and secretary for the local chapter of the NAACP, courageously challenged the humiliating, racialized bus seating in Montgomery. She refused to get up and give her seat to a white man on her ride home. This public action was supported by the local black clergy, and then by the broader African American community. The Montgomery Improvement Association, created to support Parks's action, appointed a young and talented new minister, Martin Luther King Jr., as its president and spokesperson. King initially did not accept the invitation. Eventually he did, however, and this position would soon have him front and center in the public square.

King's hesitancy is important to note. His goal as a pastor had been relative comfort, especially if he could keep his head down and not attract too much attention from the white establishment in the South. King's decision to be a spokesperson for the movement, however, resulted in almost immediate trouble for him and his family. He began receiving death threats, crosses were burned in his yard, and bricks were thrown through his front window. Merely mimicking the faith of his parents would no longer suffice, not through this storm. King would have to move from theory and propositions in his head to an active faith in God that would carry him through.

This happened for him after an anonymous midnight call, only two months into the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The caller said, "Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you; before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery."⁴ This shook King, and he was on the verge of giving up. Then, in what would

4. Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 124.

be a critical moment in his life, King had a profound encounter with God in his kitchen over a cup of coffee. King later recounted:

With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone." At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.⁵

It took a year of boycotts, but eventually the buses were desegregated. Beginning in the 1960s, King would become increasingly inspired by the young people involved in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, who radicalized nonviolent resistance and protest by putting their very bodies on the line through sit-ins, freedom rides, and other creative protests to accomplish their goals. With such inspiration, in 1963, King and his organizational team, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), implemented "Project C," which was designed to create citywide "confrontation" and disruption in Birmingham, Alabama. Birmingham was such a violent and racist city, with so many bombings and other incidents of violence committed against black communities and churches, that its nickname was "Bombingham." King and the SCLC moved away from simply attacking segregation to putting economic pressure on the city. That success, followed by the

5. *Ibid.*, 125.

1965 protests in Selma, Alabama, which focused on protecting the voting rights of African Americans, points toward King's ever-increasing analysis of the problems that America faced. In 1963 King might have spoken about "a dream," but his optimism was turning into a more truthful assessment of our racialized and hierarchical society. His perceptions were now shaped by his grassroots activity on the ground.

After securing voting rights legislation in 1965, the SCLC immediately turned its attention to northern cities, particularly Chicago. These cities represented the complexity of our racialized and classed society because they were not benefiting from the desegregation of businesses and schools in the South. So in January 1966, King and his family moved into a slum apartment on the south side of Chicago. His decision to move into the neighborhood, and to live in solidarity with oppressed black people in the North, demonstrated how far he had come from "Sweet Auburn" and his early goals of merely living a quiet and comfortable life as a pastor in the South. He was now ready to struggle with these residents against sophisticated racialized systems and economic pressures that were crushing them daily. He found that addressing the northern housing patterns was much more difficult than desegregating the South.

His failures in the North could point to the fact that the "Chicago Plan" worked too well. For example, when he and others demonstrated in Gage Park, an exclusively white community, they were met with all the hatred and violence that they had come to expect in the South—and much worse. Cars were burned, guns were fired, and King was struck in the head by a brick. Watching the video footage of King during this time, you can see the deep fear he had as he walked through this community in the North and realized he could die at any moment. This was in the late 1960s, more than ten years after the Montgomery demonstrations. The only difference between the South and the North, he discovered, was that he hadn't earned any sympathy from white America for his actions in the North like he had in the South.

King's tone and vision would continue to morph and adjust as he made sense of northern injustice, racism, and white apathy. He

began to connect the dots of white supremacy and violence around the globe to the black experience in the United States. He courageously began speaking out against the Vietnam War, delivering one of his most radical messages ever, entitled "Beyond Vietnam," at Riverside Church in 1967. King began naming the "Giant Triplets"—racism, materialism, and militarism. These three issues, he believed, were intertwined and central influences over American life.

The late 1960s also birthed a powerful black consciousness movement. King began to understand how much antiblack ideology and sentiments had shaped black self-identities and psyches. Speaking to a crowd, he declared, "Somebody told a lie one day. They couched it in language. They made everything Black ugly and evil. Look in your dictionaries and see the synonyms of the word Black. It's always something degrading and low and sinister. Look at the word White, it's always something pure, high and clean. Well I want to get the language right tonight." And therefore King encouraged the crowd to affirm their humanity to themselves: "I'm Black and I'm beautiful!"⁶

In early 1968, King began unrolling the Poor People's Campaign, which was a devastating condemnation of American economic life. By tackling poverty, King desired to bring economically oppressed people together into solidarity, whether they were black, Native American, Hispanic, Asian, or white. With consideration of the overlaps of race and class, King decided to turn his attention to the protests unfolding in Memphis. He deeply desired to be present and in bodily agreement with black sanitation workers who were seeking equal pay and safer working conditions. It was a spontaneous trip, and some of his colleagues advised against it, but King felt he needed to stand with these poor black workers.

Unfortunately, white supremacist hate caught up to Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis. He was assassinated on April 4, 1968, because of his firm solidarity with the oppressed. Beyond his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, we find a disciple,

6. "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: 'I'm Black and I'm Beautiful' [VIDEO]," NewsOne video, January 20, 2014, <http://newsone.com/2843703/dr-martin-l-king-jr-im-black-and-im-beautiful-video/>.

preacher, and activist. He certainly stumbled and failed along the way, yet he persisted in trying to understand and challenge the hierarchies and systemic violence that shaped everyday life for millions of people. For King, Jesus led into a counterintuitive path from relative comfort and job security to true solidarity with the oppressed of the land. From that vantage point, he continually grew throughout his life to see things as they truly were and to know how Jesus provided another way of life.

This call to *not* go with your gut—to move toward an intimate, transformative, and relational solidarity with marginalized and oppressed people—is not easy. It requires learning to see again, from oppressed people's perception of things, rather than through one's own lens. However, I believe that Jesus' own emptying of himself and taking on the form of a slave models for us the way forward (Philippians 2:5-8). We are called to imitate the same Jesus who is alive and still leading his followers alongside the oppressed of our day.

Discipleship is the cure for dominant cultural blinders that leave people's intuition and vision impaired and unreliable. *Not* going with your gut, when it is socialized by dominant culture, and moving toward counterintuitive solidarity with the oppressed, must be understood as a Christian discipline, as necessary a practice for Christian formation as is praying, gathering in Christian community, reading Scripture, sharing resources, worshiping, and giving thanks. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is drawing all of us to see things "from below."

5

WHITENESS MATTERS

No matter where I have lived, I have eventually had to come to terms with the reality that racial hierarchy is always present, and that whiteness, without fail, matters.

After graduating from college, I was immediately hired to be the pastor over the youth ministries at Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. This is an urban Anabaptist community pursuing racial reconciliation and holistic ministry in the neighborhood.¹ It is not a perfect community, but it is striving after Jesus. I learned a lot during my time there, from both the highs and lows of church ministry and community life. While I was there, I was at the forefront of engaging racialized obstacles that prevented us from embodying our own vision to become the new humanity in Christ. In many ways, it was the perfect place for me to find my own voice, gifts, and passions.

Living in Harrisburg also provided a great space for reflection for me. It is the capital of Pennsylvania, but it is much smaller than

1. Contemporary Anabaptism grew out of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement that emerged as the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation. Anabaptists insisted on centralizing discipleship to Jesus, breaking the church from top-down state power, and creating voluntary communities of mutual aid that renounced violence, among other things. The theology, practice, and customs of Anabaptist Christian communities today are inspired by this Jesus-shaped movement of radical reformation, seeking to keep it a living tradition for the contemporary context.