

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.

Philadelphia. Its size makes the racial divisions in the area more visible. On any given day, you might find yourself frequently and quickly crossing back and forth into different racialized spaces. Uptown Harrisburg is a historic black neighborhood. Midtown and downtown are mostly white and often well-off. And then there is Allison Hill, which is where I lived. It is a diverse, socio-economically challenged section of the city. Though mostly black and Hispanic, Allison Hill also has residents from other racial and ethnic groups.

Living in Harrisburg was a time for healing and affirmation of my personhood and psyche after three years of living in a white suburb outside of Philadelphia followed by four years as a minority on a mostly white, Christian college campus. On my block on Chestnut Street, I felt at home. I felt like I belonged. And I began feeling a bit more like a “regular person” again, like I had once felt growing up in Norristown: not constantly consumed with how my body was being differentiated and interpreted by others around me. The surrounding blocks where I lived were primarily African American, and it became an important space for me to consider and more deeply reflect on what it means to be black in America.

HARRISBURG INVASION DAY

On one occasion I remember leaving my house and hopping into my '92 Mercury Sable on a short commute to another part of the city. I began driving down Market Street, a major road in this part of town. As I headed toward downtown through Allison Hill, something quickly caught my attention. On my left up ahead, I saw a large mass of people. Tons of white people had gathered together in a large bunch on the sidewalk.

This was a bit odd. You don't normally see a lot of white people in this part of town. So of course my curiosity was piqued. The first thing I observed as I approached was that they were all wearing bright, loud, matching yellow T-shirts. They clearly didn't want to be missed. White people were here!

I was still confused about what, exactly, was going on. Was a large white youth group doing a week of service, possibly doing repairs on homes? As I got closer, I realized that that wasn't the

case. They had a large stash of grocery bags, and they were randomly passing them out to everyone who walked by. It was like an old episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, in which everyone in the studio suddenly became a winner. If you happened to be walking down the street at this moment, guess what—you got groceries!

Now let me be honest: I am not impressed with this sort of drive-by approach to service. There are much more strategic ways to get food to the people who need it than to randomly hand it out to every person walking down the sidewalk. When you just plop yourself in another community without any local guidance, this is what happens.

At first I didn't really care that much. I just thought to myself, “Silly church folk,” and shook my head. But everything changed for me as I drove parallel to the little show being put on. I was now close enough to read the words on their T-shirts. The words printed front and center on those bright T-shirts were “Harrisburg Invasion Day.”

Later I talked to some other Harrisburg residents about what I had seen. Apparently some mostly white churches from outside Allison Hill had collaborated to pull this off. Each year they worked together to plan and coordinate the “invasion” of our black and brown neighborhood for Jesus by handing out groceries to random people and holding a block party. They would quickly move in, do their good deeds, and then vanish just as quickly as they had first appeared.

I don't imagine that they understood how condescending and paternalistic their actions looked, and I am hopeful that this has stopped by now. Yet we must take seriously these questions: What caused them to think that they ought to invade another community's space in such a way? Why did they come without working with the already existing black and brown groups and leaders who have been engaging in creative and restorative ministry in the city? Were we, in their eyes, so helpless and needy that they thought the only imaginable solution was to coordinate a one-day drive-through “invasion” of our pathetic and pathological community? Why didn't they see those of us engaged in this work as a resource, as teachers to learn from? Why did they establish themselves as the

hosts and saviors of our community? Did they not see the residents of our community as having worth, able to offer them something that they needed as well?

This group was performing something very particular—what we could call “white Christian social practice.” It is precisely *my* need to add “white” before “Christian social practice” that must be investigated. I am sure that even calling a certain kind of social practice “white” will bother some people. Often when race is talked about in dominant cultural spaces, everything gets named except whiteness. Black and brown descriptions are used all the time. People have no problem describing a black person’s race in casual conversation. It matters what is said and what is not said. Race always means something in our language, even if we are unconscious of what we are implying.

Ironically, dominant society will proclaim colorblindness at one moment and then the next moment will have no problem calling out “black-on-black violence” instead of just seeing it as human-on-human violence. When something is believed to be problematic in African American communities, colorblind rhetoric disappears, and blackness is quickly named without reserve. I have never heard anyone talk about the problem of “white-on-white violence” even though, according to statistics, this type of violence occurs at very similar rates as that of black-on-black violence.

What is important for us to consider now, however, is this: What precisely does it mean to be white in our society? What is whiteness, and what is its socially constructed function in society? In the church we must learn to change our view of racism in society as merely a “black issue.” Instead, we must look at the other end of the racial hierarchy to explore those who have been operating out of superiority, dominance, and control as a collective in the United States. In this chapter I suggest that whiteness matters.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE WHITE?

So what does it mean to be white? Saying that someone is white is saying more than just that someone is of European descent and heritage, though that is normally all we mean when we use the term. There is a gap between how we use the term *white* and the

way that whiteness functions on people’s behalf in society. *White* is the pseudoscientific and socially constructed category used to centralize power among a certain portion of humanity and at the direct harm and cost of people of color, especially Native American and black life in America. And it is not a static category. Whiteness subtly shifts and changes over time as necessary.

To be white is not only to be Euro-American; it is also to identify with, and participate in, the life of a sociopolitical collective that created this artificially constructed racial identity to accomplish something. People move from identifying with a particular European people group—for example, the Irish—to identifying as a white person for a reason. This is a decision European immigrants made over and over again in America, such that the definition of and borders around who was white continuously expanded. In the seventeenth century, only Anglo-Saxon Protestants were considered white, but the definition eventually grew to include Irish Catholics, Italians, and other groups who were initially excluded. This was politically strategic. It formed a large enough collective power in society that continuously reproduced a system of advantage for whites at the direct expense of people of color. At the very minimum, being white has meant benefiting from and obtaining an ongoing preference and advantage in a nation and economy built on the stolen land of Native Americans and the stolen labor of African Americans. Being white usually means never having to think about it that way during one’s day-to-day life.

America is a thoroughly racialized society dominated and controlled by white people in a manner that advantages them because of their whiteness. Even poor whites, who are economically deprived, will find at critical moments that, all things being equal, being white is more socially advantageous than being black. And many people don’t realize just how socially constructed a white identity is, and how it has been conveniently changed over and over again to let some people in and to exclude others. What defined a white person several centuries ago is not what we mean by it now. It conveniently mutates according to the political whims of the dominant society of each generation.

It is important to remember that there is no authentic, biological substance to the idea of race.² Europeans constructed black and white categories for a reason. Whiteness mattered because it provided economic, social, and political benefits. For example, immigrants in the early twentieth century understood very well what white status meant if obtained, and therefore they went to court arguing to be recognized under the law as such. As the authors of *The Color of Wealth* write:

Court decisions on white status were based on a mix of supposedly scientific criteria and the common understandings of the day, leading to a mess of contradictions. Syrians were deemed white in 1909, 1910, and 1915, but not in 1913 or 1914. Asian Indians won white status in 1910, 1913, 1919, and 1920, but not in 1909, 1917, or after 1923. The persistence of immigrants in suing for whiteness is evidence of the financial and social benefits that came with white status. After all, no one sued to be considered Asian, much less black.³

Even today, I'm pretty sure when people get pulled over by a cop, they are not thinking, "Well geez, I really wish I could put on black skin right now; that would really work to my favor!" People can talk all they want about reverse racism, but when the rubber hits the road, most people know deep down that racial profiling, in all its different manifestations, would disadvantage them if they were black. In the dominant culture of America, blackness has been the antithesis of whiteness, its polarizing opposite. It has been placed at the far bottom of the social hierarchy that, consciously or unconsciously, places whiteness at the top.

Whiteness matters when it advantages those seen as having pure European ancestry. Whether you are considering government leadership, the heads of corporations, or even Christian organizations, it becomes clear that white people are disproportionately represented across the board. They often get their positions because they know someone—a friend, church member, or relative—who

2. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 115–20.

3. Meizhu Lui et al., *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide* (New York: New Press, 2006), 250.

is positioned to help them and not necessarily because they are the most qualified person for the job. Whiteness can't promise a good life, but it does provide a social system that operates to most Euro-American persons' advantage.

Many people are unaware of the various white advantages that have been offered legally in our country, falsely thinking that slavery was the only significant differentiation. In reality, things like redlining, housing discrimination, and other historic racialized practices offered great advantages, socially and economically, to white households. Just one example is the Homestead Act of 1862, which "gave millions of acres to white settlers. . . . Overall, 1.5 million families got ownership of 246 million acres of land from the various homestead programs, nearly as much land as California and Texas combined. One study estimates the number of Americans living today who are descendants of homestead recipients at forty-six million."⁴

What people do not understand is that African Americans were simultaneously being denied access to these large wealth-accumulating programs. The authors of *The Color of Wealth* note that an 1826 law prevented African Americans from preemption rights, and that in 1857 the U.S. Land Office denied public land grants to African Americans.⁵

Millions of white families have benefited from the Homestead Act or even the GI Bill, both of which were often denied to African Americans who migrated all over the country for better opportunities in America. White Americans have benefited from some of the largest government handouts in history (beyond, of course, the stolen land and stolen labor). And even for those who have not directly received any of those white benefits, just being white meant access to live in, do business with, and benefit from communities that had created their wealth through such racially stratified and oppressive practices and policies. My brief account doesn't even scratch the surface of the ways that the white dominant group has received concrete social, political, and economic benefits from racial oppression.

4. *Ibid.*, 241.

5. *Ibid.*

DISADVANTAGE, OVER-ADVANTAGE

In American society we commonly talk about “disadvantaged communities.” What is odd is that we rarely explore the implications of the existence of disadvantaged groups in relation to what it means to be white in America.

If there are systemically disadvantaged people, then there must be *over*-advantaged people. How often do we talk about particular people and communities as “over-advantaged”? We feel free to talk about how someone is from a “disadvantaged” neighborhood or school, but we do it as though that community lives in a social vacuum. It is as though someone just happens to be structurally disadvantaged.

Talking about whiteness can seem a bit innocuous, because we usually don't talk about it in terms of the apparent systemic social advantage and hierarchy. And even if we were to talk about such realities, we are nonetheless taught to get all the advantages and privileges we can grab hold of in America. We can begin an honest assessment of the situation only when we acknowledge this fact: the systemic advantages from which you unconsciously benefit are simultaneously harmful to someone else.

Let's consider how a system of advantaging whiteness harms the well-being of black people. In a University of Chicago study, resumes were sent to employers in response to employment ads in the newspaper. The resumes were fictitious ones created for the study. The researchers sought to measure racial bias by sending out some resumes with names traditionally associated with black Americans and other resumes with names traditionally associated with white Americans.

The researchers found that fictitious job applicants with common “white” names needed to send out ten resumes to get a call back, while applicants with traditional “black” names needed to send out fifteen to get a call back. It is important to understand that this was done with all qualifications in the resumes being equal. Also realize that employers had not even seen the applicants face-to-face. Advantages and disadvantages are distributed

according to racial categories before someone even walks into the room.⁶

Along the same lines, another study explored the impact of race and criminal records on employment opportunities. The researchers focused on the earliest stages of the employment process (so again, there are even more opportunities for race to play a role later on as well). Researchers had male study participants go to various businesses and fill out applications. The goal was to see who either got an interview on the spot or later received a callback, both of which were considered to be positive responses.

Researchers chose a pair of white men and a pair of black men to play the roles of ex-offender applicants and applicants without any criminal convictions. They found that the white men without a criminal conviction had a 34 percent positive response. White men with a conviction, however, only had a 17 percent positive response. We can see from this that criminal convictions hold a deep stigma in our society, cutting white men's positive response percentage in half because they had to “check the box.”

But the most alarming result was the black men's positive response percentage, particularly for those without a conviction. Black men *without* a conviction only had a 14 percent positive response. This means that white men *with* a conviction have more positive employment responses than black men *without* a conviction.

Let that sink in for a moment.

Finally, black men with a conviction only had a 5 percent positive response in the initial stage of the employment process. Blackness and criminality, when combined, create social death for many people.⁷

This type of study (of which there are many, with each study individually only scratching the surface of the issue) easily reveals

6. Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, “Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination” (working paper no. 9873, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, 2003).

7. Devah Pager, “The Mark of a Criminal Record” (Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Madison-Wisconsin, 2002).

the significance of a racialized system of advantage and disadvantage. Whiteness matters. The manner in which black men in the employment process are being discriminated against—not to mention other racial minorities and women—directly benefits white men, because now they have a greater chance at getting a job because of the lack of opportunity experienced by racial minorities. And yet dominant culture never talks about American society as a racialized state that is dominated and controlled by white people and that advantages whiteness, often through subtle and possibly unconscious bias. Clearly this preference for white men in the employment process is just one more example of how whiteness matters in our society.

THE DILEMMA OF NICE WHITE PEOPLE

These realities are often hard to accept. For white people to acknowledge these social advantages in regard to their families, friends, coworkers, church members, and themselves is difficult. The stumbling block for many people is the conviction that their social networks couldn't *possibly* be racially prejudiced because they are full of such nice people. How could such nice people be racists?

I struggled through this question when I was wrestling with racism on my Christian college campus. It was one of the friendliest places I had ever been. It could almost at times seem unreal, with all the waving and smiling going on around me. These cultural manners seemed odd to me at first. Yet this was the same space in which I experienced the most severe and hostile racism. Strangely, in this nicest of places I was repeatedly treated like a thug or a threat. I found myself foolishly trying to prove my humanity over and over again to each new group of white people I encountered. What a draining experience that was!

So why did so many nice, friendly white people, whose stereotypes of black men I had eventually broken, continue to gaze at other black bodies with that same distorted vision? For many of my white peers, interaction with any one black person didn't necessarily challenge their stereotypes. Instead, they seemed to have a preset way of making sense of each individual black person's

unique and distinct personality. I believe this was done by categorizing those in their relational networks as an exception to their rule. Rather than breaking the racist rule altogether, many white people view any particular black person they come to know as an exception to the rule. This means that, for many white people, black people in general are still lazy, less smart, threatening, and immoral—even as they perceive that there are exceptional black people they know personally who don't fit that description. And these aren't the mean and nasty folks we are talking about; these are often extremely nice white people.

I learned some important lessons about how white people themselves are often perceived by others during my seven years of living predominantly within white cultural spaces (three years in high school and four years in college). In high school I learned that young white kids who smoked weed or did much more serious drugs were not considered to be a threat to the fabric of society, as black youth who do drugs are. Instead, the white kids were seen as “experimenting”—you know, “just being kids.” These habits didn't stigmatize their humanity. They could still be considered generally good kids of societal worth even while everyone knew that they were regular marijuana smokers. Dominant culture valued their humanity no matter what they got into. Despite the high levels of drug use I saw happening around me, there was no war on drugs going on. No white suburban neighborhoods were being put under surveillance, and no white kids were being stopped and frisked on their walk home. And there certainly were very few arrests (I can't remember any white teens being arrested for drugs even once during my time at this mostly white, middle-class school). Regardless, it was clear that the culture interpreted white teen bodies as basically innocent and harmless, except for the most severe and extreme situations.

My time living on a Christian college campus allowed me to see deeper within the logic of whiteness. I saw how a culture of niceness could be combined with the dangerous ideologies that are death-dealing to communities of color. In particular, the unrelenting white gaze on black bodies, although leveled by friendly people, unveiled for me the ways that blackness meant, for many,

guilty until proven innocent. It was a culture in which racial minorities frequently had to prove themselves worthy of respect.

Again, when I talk to white Christians, many seem to have trouble believing that someone from their neighborhood, church, school, family, or social network could have antiblack racist perceptions. The folks in their networks are all just so *nice*. Somehow, American society has allowed the idea to prevail that it takes mean people to perpetuate white supremacy. We have bought into the idea that our friendliness is evidence that we couldn't have adopted subtle antiblack ideologies so common in dominant culture. For too long, too many have assumed that nice white people couldn't be complicit with a white-controlled and white-dominated society, because they are so fun to be around.

But the truth is that white racism doesn't exist only in the KKK bogeyman of the past. Instead, it is pervasive within the air of dominant culture in subtle, nuanced, and often unconscious ways. To acknowledge this doesn't mean that your network is full of mean people. I don't question the fact that many white people are extremely nice, but I still believe that most are socialized by and participate in a white dominant culture that has become adjusted to white supremacy and racial marginalization.

White racism has always been veiled by "civil" culture. The first necessity is to interpret society's way of life with high ideals. More than just nice, it is civil, fair, equal, and just. In our day, the colorblind rhetoric is a mutated form of this approach. Notice that it is primarily white conservative Americans, and decisively not African Americans, who praise colorblindness as our path toward a better future. Dominant culture has an advantage in disseminating its ideas and claims, and it has done a masterful job at defining how it wants to be interpreted.

One of the central concepts around race, communicated over and over again by dominant culture, is that we ought to be colorblind and that talking about race has no place in our society. But two hands work collaboratively in our white supremacist culture, and the "colorblind" hand is just one of them. The other hand of a white supremacist culture deals out highly racialized practices. This is ideological work being done behind its own back. It's like

those who lie so much and so pathologically that they are able to convince themselves of their own lies. That is how American dominant culture frequently works. American life is saturated in racial practices and sentiments. Most white people live extremely racialized and segregated lives, even when they live in diverse neighborhoods (though that itself is rare). And our society is so permeated with racism that we can actually predict many people's life experiences and opportunities based on their race.

The depth of our racialized society is beyond most of our comprehension. And this is precisely because the first hand has done such a powerful job in normalizing our racialized lives. White supremacy thrives off unexamined claims of colorblindness while simultaneously engaging in highly racialized practices.

WESTERN FIRST, CHRISTIAN SECOND

One of the challenges we now face is that the culture and norms of the white dominant group are always presumed to be right and moral, and not in need of patient and careful investigation. This is evident wherever Western European colonizers and missionaries have imposed their culture and values through mission and church life. Today, you could go to every continent on the earth on any given Sunday and find Western-style church buildings with organs and pianos on opposing sides of the pulpit and with pictures of white Jesus prominently positioned. The pastors and most of the church members will likely be wearing nonindigenous clothes, their Western best: suit and tie or dress. Familiar melodies of Western hymns will play a significant role. And oddly, many of the Christian people of the town will bear Western names. Why do they do all this? Well, it is because they have been given the gospel of Jesus Christ, right?

Well, not quite. The missionaries came promising Jesus. But Christianity was so entangled in Western culture that the missionaries imposed Western civilization on people in the name of Jesus rather than vulnerably bearing witness to the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus in word and deed and then letting the Holy Spirit do its work. It seems that it was not Jesus' body at the center of Western Christian life and imagination. Instead,

as Willie James Jennings has put it, "The body of another has remained at the center of our relational imagination, the body of a powerful, white, Western man, the image of self-sufficiency, social power, and self-determination."⁸ Missionaries often tried to make indigenous people become Western first, Christian second.

If you think that this claim is a bit much, we must ask, whose body were people being converted after? Into whose likeness were they being formed? Upon conversion, indigenous people often had to get Western haircuts, wear Western clothes, learn Western languages, and even change their names to Western ones. Often they were severed from their indigenous roots, culture, and community altogether. All things had become new, but people were rarely being taught to embody the way of Jesus through loving their enemies, caring for the Samaritan-like other, liberating the oppressed, and being peacemakers, all things Jesus actually taught. Indigenous Christians have often adopted these aspects of Jesus' ministry subversively and despite the emphasis of the Western missionary church.

This was all doable because Jesus himself had been converted into a Western European male. That's right: Jesus' image was forced to conform to our white supremacist arrangement. Especially prominent in America are the images of, and belief in, a white Jesus. European nations had reenvisioned Jesus through a Western and white prism rather than through Jesus' own Jewish body, culture, and background. Jesus only makes sense as a Messiah in Scripture through the story of Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets. According to Jesus in Luke 24, the Hebrew Scriptures (particularly the Mosaic books and the Prophets) all concern him!

So why was Jesus, the poor Messiah from Galilee, transformed into a white man? Well, if Jesus is the revelation of God and the clearest picture of who God is, then his image has powerful significance. In transforming Jesus (both physically and culturally) into a white man, people of European descent gained a controlling interpretive grip not only on Jesus but also on the God revealed in Christ, and therefore on all the church.

8. Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 286.

It is no wonder that European countries took up similar and troubling national ventures after the Protestant Reformation. England led the way in global conquest. Germany eventually synchronized Christianity with Germanic nationalism to the extent that the church easily fell susceptible to Nazism. America engaged in conquest and slavery, all because of the belief in its divinely manifested destiny. In each case, however, each modern Western nation began to identify its own national project as being divinely chosen to be the "New Israel." Everyone thought that they had claim on Jesus and God's will and were now the saviors to the world.

Combine that Western savior complex with a dominant cultural group with real power and you have a recipe for social disaster. Dominant groups anywhere in the world are prone to overriding the narratives of marginalized people with their own perspectives. A popular African proverb articulates it perfectly: "Until the story of the hunt is told by the lion, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." And with social power and position, a dominant group is uniquely able to marginalize other voices. They take for granted their own ideas and perspectives because they are backed by a majority. From there they lose sight of the fact that their particular view is just as socialized and contextualized as everyone else's. Not keeping sight of their own specific cultural influences leads to assuming that their views are "universal," "right," "neutral," and "objective." The development of whiteness grew out of a people who saw themselves as benevolent saviors to the world. Then, having consolidated enough national might to act on it, they went out and conquered other people. They did all this while continuing to see their own group as innocent in the midst of ongoing oppression and violence, and they believed they had a universal standpoint from which to objectively label the rest of the world.

These assumptions run directly against Christian practice and teaching, which affirm humanity's finiteness, limitedness, and the fact that we can now only see dimly. Dominant groups are always in danger of thinking that their perspective is synonymous with God's perspective. They frequently lack the humility to question their own ways and to be vulnerably open to the marginalized people in their society.

If dominant groups tend to universalize their norms, and if they sense that they are God's divinely elected nation, then you can expect overconfidence in interpreting social realities. I believe this overconfidence is one of the main reasons that white Christians were some of the loudest advocates for slavery and Jim Crow as they are today for black and brown incarceration, anti-immigration reform, and the labeling of most practicing Muslims as "terrorists." Often it has been the small, outsider white Christian traditions that have at least partly perceived some of these failures in white perception. This was true of the Mennonites and Quakers of Pennsylvania in 1688, who wrote the first petition against slavery.

We haven't yet realized how dangerous it is to conform our lives and our minds to the patterns of this world. And we don't yet know what it will require to have our lives transformed and our minds renewed. Until we do, many in the church will lead the way in "white is right" thinking.

WHITE IDENTITY

Having significant conversations around white supremacy and racism with other Christian leaders who are deeply engaged in anti-racism work is valuable to me. During the writing of this book, I had one such opportunity. I was invited to gather with about three hundred Christian leaders engaged in a variety of faith-based justice work in the United States and around the world. Some were particularly invested in issues related to immigration, some committed their lives to issues of war and violence around the world, and others tackled sexual violence and patriarchy or fought for livable wages for people struggling to get by. It was great to be around all these folks who took up the call "to act justly and to love mercy" in all that they did (Micah 6:8 NIV). I was particularly glad that there was going to be an invitation-only lunch convening to discuss racism and racial justice work.

About fifty people gathered together in a room. I was grateful to be in the room to hear the wisdom from civil rights veterans like C. T. Vivian, and to rub shoulders with young activists from Ferguson and Baltimore who have been at the center of our

current movement. I met folks who have been quietly working in their neighborhoods, as well as popular pastors who have inspired thousands of others. The conversation that we had was wide ranging. We had small table talk and shared stories. We let our elders pass on the wisdom that they had to those of us coming up. We also had a pretty lively discussion around the meaning of whiteness and its incompatibility with Christian orientations. It was great to be in the room, and to participate in a conversation where we were not trying to explain the basics of racism. Instead, we were having fairly advanced conversations around what it means to follow Jesus in our moment, considering white supremacy's present challenges and the obstacles before us.

When I left the conversation, I felt good. I had walked out of the room and into the hall when I was stopped by one of the attendees of our racial justice conversation. She was a middle-aged white woman, one of the few white people in the room. Most of the conversation partners were black, brown, Native American, and Asian. She asked me if I had a moment, and of course I said, "Sure." We sat down on a bench and she proceeded to ask me how I thought the conversation went. I might have hesitated with an answer, probably not sure how to respond to that vague question, but she immediately followed up with a more clarifying inquiry. She asked, "What did you think about how people were saying that white people couldn't be Christian?"

That isn't exactly what people were saying, but I knew what comments she was referring to.

Beginning with some basic concepts, I explained that whiteness is a social construction. If you go back to the fourteenth century, you can't find anyone identifying a people group as white. Whiteness, I explained, was created for the purpose of consolidating power and dominance over other people groups. Hence, as a social construction, whiteness is specifically about domination and violence.

As I was explaining these ideas, tears began rolling down her cheek. It became very clear to me at this point that she didn't belong in the advanced conversation on race that we were having. She was just a beginner, even though she had come thinking she

was ready to participate and contribute. Her response revealed a common response that many white people express when confronted with racial realities: extreme fragility and sensitivity. Sometimes this fragility comes out in defensiveness, anger, and outright dismissal rather than crying. Either way, it reflects a deep discomfort with encountering even basic conversations on race. These conversations were far from her normal day-to-day life.

Rather than treat her like a child unable to deal with these important conversations, I decided to dig deeper. I explained that part of the reason that she was crying was because her identity was deeply but unknowingly intertwined with whiteness. If she didn't identify so deeply with whiteness, then my explanation of how and why whiteness was developed would not have been so troubling to her soul. Therefore, I followed up by explaining that she really didn't belong in the room with the others and that she had a lot of work to do to catch up to where she ought to be in conversations around race and racism. She nodded in agreement. She admitted that she wasn't as far along as she thought she was and that she needed to do a lot more self-study and self-reflection around white supremacy and her own identity.

Later in the day I found out from someone else that, indeed, she wasn't even invited to be part of the invitation-only conversation on race in the first place. I found the whole experience telling of how whiteness works in society. Not respecting the space for people of color and trusted allies to come together, encourage one another, and challenge one another is typical. Assuming that one's intrusion into an uninvited space is harmless and innocent is a common routine. Also, whiteness has people enter spaces presuming they know everything about a community even though they have never studied the people group and its concerns in depth. This often results in the feelings and experiences of the white person becoming the central focus, displacing the concerns of people of color who have been suffering under white supremacy for centuries.

This woman cared deeply about doing justice; otherwise she wouldn't have been there at all. She was open and teachable, so I pray that she continues to grow and learn. Like most white people,

she needs to do the hard work of understanding race and racism's development in our country. Particularly, she needs to learn what it means for her to identify with whiteness and participate in white dominant society while claiming to follow Jesus. Performing and identifying with whiteness ends when we drop everything to be with our Christ.

NAMING THE POWERS

In this chapter I have tried to do the simple, prophetic task of naming the powers at work in our world. Our society is structured in hierarchy in such a way that whiteness has mattered most. Though it is common for white people, especially white evangelicals, to talk about being colorblind, there is often no hesitation to speak about black problems. This turns our attention away from the social construction of whiteness. Racial terms are commonly used in white rhetoric. Race isn't actually avoided, but discussion about racism is. When race is talked about in white dominant culture, naming and discussing the life of people of color (and often their problems) is the extent of racial talk. There isn't much room for discussing whiteness, whether historically or in its present sociological form.

Jesus himself has been distorted and then employed to do work in oppressive systems. Of course, the true living and resurrected one is not the manipulated Jesus, who has endorsed violence and oppression for centuries. God, who is reconciling the world back to God's self, was revealed in a particular Form and in a particular Way. The Form and Way are that of Jesus of Nazareth, who invited people to repent from the old social order and to turn toward God's kingdom by following after him. Jesus emptied himself and took on human form.

And yet it was not a universal form, according to Paul; it was the embodiment of a slave. Jesus aligned himself with and called to himself a people among "the least of these." The "called-out ones" of Jesus (*ekklesia*) were gathered from the margins of society, from which a new community could be fashioned. Of course, Jesus invited the rich and the powerful to repent as well, and to join what God was doing, but for them this meant a radical reorientation

of life. This new community would be distinct because, according to Jesus, it embodied a different kind of life from that of the Roman oppressors. The Romans “lord over” others, but “it must not be this way” for Jesus’ followers (Matthew 20:25-26). To follow Jesus meant to renounce domination and alignment with the worldly powers. Instead, people who followed Jesus exemplified justice, mercy, and faithfulness in their lives, the weightier matters in the Scriptures that are often neglected (Matthew 23:23).

In America, whiteness matters, but not so among God’s church, a distinct and alternative community. Following the crucified Christ radically aligns the church with those of low position in society (Romans 12:16). Following the crucified Christ isn’t about ignoring the social meaning of crucifixion; rather, it recognizes that Jesus joined the thousands of Jews who were crucified by Roman powers during the first century.

In this, God has invited us all to come alongside the crucified of every time and place. From that vulnerable space, the Spirit renews our minds and transforms our lives to understand God’s power and wisdom. This has nothing to do with the dominant way of seeing things, and everything to do with following Jesus. For the church, what matters most is not whiteness but the revelation of God found in Jesus’ body, life, teaching, death, and resurrection as detailed in Scripture and encountered in Spirit. This means that white Christians must renounce the desire to control other people’s lives and must reject the innocent savior complex, which sees everyone but oneself as in need of transformation. When deliverance and intervention is needed, the church looks to God.

6

BLACK LIVES MATTER

Every day I live with the realities that come with being a young black male. I live with the irrational fear, the stereotypes, the clutched purses. I live with the perpetual threat of being suspected for a crime because I’m black at the wrong time or place, which is technically anytime that cops are looking for a black body to fit their description. In chapter 1, I told the story of the time that my brother was arrested because he “fit the description.” That can happen to any young black man, anywhere, at almost any time.

Being black is draining. Blackness continues to be described pejoratively in America. Black skin in our world has been designated as a marker for all things bad. To be a black American is to have to constantly tell yourself that you are somebody, that you are made in the image of God, that you are creative and intelligent. Not doing so will result in drowning in the oceans of negative words about your existence and “your kind.”

According to dominant culture, we are lazy, irresponsible, culturally depraved, lacking in morals, and our own worst enemies. Through white-controlled news media organizations like Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC, through most television and movies, and through everyday advertising campaigns and common cultural ideas, black people’s humanity is constantly and unmercifully