CONFRONTING WHITENESS

A Spiritual Journey of Reflection, Conversation, and Transformation

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Preface

Why Whiteness?

In 2008, conservative and liberal commentators celebrated the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president of the United States as a sign that America had become a "post-racial" society. For example, the conservative radio host Lou Dobbs said, "We are now in a twenty-first-century post-partisan, post-racial society."[1] MSNBC host Chris Matthews said President Obama "is post-racial by all appearances. You know, I forgot he was Black tonight for an hour."[2] Dobbs and Matthews were not alone in their perspective. Opinion pieces in the *Boston Globe, Wall Street Journal,* and *New York Times* all used the buzzword *post-racial* to describe the election and to define "Obama's America." Polls, however, indicated that White Americans were far more likely than Black Americans to believe they were now living in a post-racial society.

The idea of a post-racial society was consistent with the beliefs most White Americans held for over a decade: that African Americans had achieved, or would soon achieve, racial equality in the United States despite substantial evidence to the contrary. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva states: "The white commonsense view on racial matters is that racists are few and far between, that discrimination has all but disappeared since the sixties, and most whites are color blind. . . . Whites seem to be collectively shouting, 'We have a black president, so we are finally beyond race.'"[3] Declaring Obama's election to be the advent of a post-racial society was

[1] Media Matters Staff, "Dobbs Calls on Listeners to Rise Above 'Partisan and Racial Element That Dominates Politics,'" *Media Matters for America*, November 12, 2009, online video.

[2] Rachel Weiner, "Chris Matthews on Obama: 'I forgot he was black for an hour,'" *The Washington Post* online, January 28, 2010.

[3] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America,* 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 25.

both false optimism and a denial of the problem of race. It not only proved to be false but performed a rebranding of the insidious myth of color-blind racism.

White Americans were living in denial, desperately hoping that the issue of racism had simply gone away. Unfortunately, few organizations or institutions were more susceptible to this false hope than the church, which clung to the myth of a post-racial color-blind society and fell victim to what Bonilla-Silva defines as the "sweet enchantment" of color-blind racism.[4] Commentators frequently quote Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s observation that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning.

In an unprecedented nationwide survey sociologists Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith found that the cause of division in American churches is the color-blind racism of White Christians. When they probed the grassroots of White Christian America, they found that despite recent efforts by some Christian leaders to address the problem of racial discrimination, White evangelicals are preserving America's racial chasm. In fact, they discovered that most White evangelicals do not believe there is any systematic discrimination against Blacks. Emerson and Smith contend that it is not active racism that prevents White evangelicals from recognizing ongoing problems in American society; rather, the movement's emphasis on individualism, free will, and personal relationships with God obscures the pervasive injustice that perpetuates racial inequality. The subjects told the researchers they believe that most racial problems can be solved by repentance and the conversion of the sinful individuals, a naive and deluded view.

Emerson and Smith determined that despite some positive trends and the best intentions of White evangelical leaders, true racial healing remains far off:

> We stand at a divide. White evangelicals' cultural tools and racial isolation direct them to see the world individualistically and as a series of discrete incidents. They also direct them to desire a color-blind society. Black evangelicals tend to see the racial world very

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[4] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich, "The Sweet Enchantment of Color-Blind Racism in Obamerica," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 634, no. 1 (March 2011): 190–206.

> differently. Ironically, evangelicalism's cultural tools lead people in different social and geographical realities to assess the race problem in divergent and nonreconciliatory ways. This large gulf in understanding is perhaps part of the race problem's core, and most certainly contributes to the entrenchment of the racialized society.[5]

Emerson and Smith's survey of evangelical churchgoers was revolutionary because it revealed that eleven o'clock on Sunday remains the most segregated hour due in large part to the color-blind racial attitudes of White American Christians. *Color-blind racism* is a term developed by sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva to label an ideology that "explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics . . . [where] whites rationalize minorities' contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations."[6] However, church segregation is not confined to White evangelical congregations; it also influences White mainline denominations and the larger church in America.

In *The Color of Compromise,* Jemar Tisby argues that the American church has been and remains complicit in all forms of racism.[7] However, many White-dominant congregations are reluctant to accept their role in the creation, development, and implementation of White supremacy in America. White congregations continue to perpetuate a White supremacist ideology by simply refusing to acknowledge their complicity in racism or by operating from a naive and dangerous color-blind racist perspective. Meanwhile Black communities in America continue to be affected by policies laden with White ideology. Color-blind racism often masks White racial identity and prevents White congregations from identifying their own Whiteness, thereby disabling any understanding of the complex realities of systematic racism or the way it continues to permeate the church and the other institutions of American society.

Over the past twenty years I have served as senior minister of three different churches in the Southern United States. All these churches

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[5] Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 91.

[6] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists,* 2.

[7] Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019).

have been White-dominant congregations, and in every context, the concept of racism has been a frequent topic of conversation as well as a critical factor affecting our ministry. In 2009, my wife and I entered a transracial adoption process and welcomed a Black daughter into our family. Becoming the father of a Black daughter radically changed my personal experience of race and my professional engagement with racial identity as a minister. In addition, it altered the understanding I had of my own racial identity and increasingly intensified my conversations about race as a leader in church, as well as my engagement on issues of racial justice in the wider community.

While I was experiencing my racial awakening, America had its own awakening to the continued impact of White supremacy and racial injustice. The same year my daughter was born, Michelle Alexander published *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.* Between 2009 and 2015, videos of the police killing Black citizens like Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, and many others horrified the nation and gave birth to the Black Lives Matter movement.[8] Then, on June 17, 2015, a White supremacist killed the pastor and eight members of the historically Black Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. This heinous act sparked a nationwide debate about the impact of White supremacy that evolved into strong opposition to the persistence of the symbolic vestiges of slavery, such as Confederate flags and monuments throughout the South.

During this violent and tumultuous time in our nation, I was leading conversations about race as a pastor in the White-dominant congregations I served. In 2015, I accepted the call to become the sixth senior minister of a large historic and influential progressive Baptist church in Charlotte, North Carolina. Even though the church was predominantly White in membership, the congregation had a reputation as a staunch proponent of racial justice whose members were trailblazers in the civil

[8] Black Lives Matter was founded in 2013 by three radical Black organizers—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—as a Black-centered political will-building and movement-building project called #BlackLivesMatter in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman. Today the Black Lives Matter Global Network is a chapter-based, member-led organization whose mission is to build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes.

rights movement, challenged the White supremacy of Jim Crow, and even championed forced busing to integrate the city's public schools. However, the church's reality was not always consistent with its reputation. Most of the church's positions and efforts on racial justice had been initiated by its clergy. Many members participated in these efforts and held similar positions, but other members remained free to maintain their own racist views. Therefore, the congregation was rarely forced to confront its own racial ideas or wrestle with its own racial identity. Further, during the long interim period between pastors, the church had become complacent, and its stamina for conversations about race and the work of racial justice had atrophied in the years leading up to my arrival. Many members were content to rest on their storied history and progressive reputation, imagining that the work of racial justice was something the church had already completed.

Recognizing these challenges as an opportunity for growth, one of our associate ministers, Rev. Chrissy Williamson, and I began developing a year-long faith formation program called "Awakening to Racial Injustice" that would include monthly events to help reeducate the congregation on racial justice for the twenty-first century. In addition to planning the church's formation journey, Rev. Williamson and I began preparing ourselves for the work ahead by attending a racial-justice training led by the Racial Equity Institute.[9] The training was transformative. However, the experience gained even more power and urgency because an African American man named Keith Lamont Scott was fatally shot by the Charlotte city police the same day we completed the training—and the morning before the kickoff of our Awakening to Racial Injustice series. In the following weeks civic leaders refused to release the video of the shooting, protests erupted in the streets, an uprising of activism took place, the city shut down, and the National Guard was be called in to protect buildings and property. None of our training had prepared us for this crisis and how it would affect the church.

The crisis in our city increased the interest in our Awakening to Racial Injustice series and elicited a desire for more serious conversations about

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[9] The Racial Equity Institute is an alliance of trainers, organizers, and institutional leaders who have devoted themselves to the work of creating racially equitable organizations and systems by helping individuals and organizations develop tools to challenge patterns of power and grow equity.

race in our church and around the city. However, despite the passion and seriousness with which White people pursued these conversations, they were impeded by fundamental issues such as color-blind racism that went unacknowledged by the participants.

According to Bonilla-Silva, color-blind racism has become the dominant racial ideology in America, and it serves to reproduce racial inequality through subtle, institutional, and supposedly nonracial practices that oppress Black people and other minorities. Color-blind racism makes conversations about race in White-dominant congregations extremely difficult. As Bonilla-Silva explains, "Color-blind racism forms an impregnable yet elastic ideological wall that barricades Whites off from America's racial reality . . . because it provides them a safe (color-blind) way to state racial views without appearing to be irrational or rabidly racist folks."[10] Practically, color-blind racism is evident in White individuals who say things like "I don't see color" or "We live in a post-racial society" or "We've made a lot of progress on the issue of race."

On the heels of the uprising over the police shooting of Keith Lamont Scott, in the middle of a year of racial awakening for the city and the church, Donald J. Trump was elected president of the United States of America. Trump ran an openly White-supremacist campaign, and his election presented a crisis of conscience for our progressive White-dominant congregation, which came to a head at an event that took place five days after the election. Months earlier I had invited Dr. William J. Barber—former president of the NAACP, prominent civil rights leader, and founder of the Moral Monday movement—to lead a revival and preach a "National Sermon on Race" at our church on the Sunday after the election.[11] Nearly one thousand people showed up to the service looking for some sense of meaning and hope, but afterward the church erupted.

Dr. Barber preached for an hour and a half, and the service lasted nearly three hours. In his sermon Barber attacked the color-blind racism of Americans that led to Trump's election. He quoted directly from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism without Racists* and narrated the long

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[10] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists,* 234.

[11] William J. Barber II, "Resiliency, Revival, and Redemption after Rejection," sermon, Myers Park Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina, November 13, 2016.

lineage of White supremacy in American history. He reminded listeners that President Woodrow Wilson had hosted a viewing of the KKK propaganda film *Birth of a Nation* at the White House, and Dr. Barber challenged racial disparities in education, healthcare, housing, and financial well-being. Barber explicitly condemned Trump's campaign as racist, misogynist, xenophobic, and un-Christian. He portrayed the American people as Israel in Samuel 8, longing for a king to be like the other nations. Then he compared Barack Obama to the prophet Samuel and Donald Trump to King Saul. Afterward he invited me forward to the center of the chancel, anointed me with oil for the work of resistance, and then asked me to help him invite all the other ministers first and then anyone else to come forward to be anointed as well.

Dr. Barber's sermon elicited a wide range of strong reactions, including White fragility, White guilt, and vehement White rage that surprised many leaders of Myers Park Baptist who imagined the church had dealt with race many years ago. At a regularly scheduled deacons meeting the day after Dr. Barber's sermon, church leaders denounced his message as a partisan political speech that was not appropriate for our church. A handful of deacons suggested the church should publicly forbid Dr. Barber from ever preaching there again. Many were upset about the way Dr. Barber had talked about President Trump, presumably because some of them had just voted for him five days prior to the service. I knew the deacons were going to need to have a serious in-depth conversation about why Dr. Barber's sermon caused such a negative reaction in a church that had a long history of working for racial justice.

In preparation for leading the deacons through this conversation, I remembered that we had a guest preacher back in October who had said in his sermon that Trump was "a narcissistic sociopath who wants to die alone in his own arms." The guest preacher's words about Trump were far more inflammatory than Dr. Barber's, but only one person contacted me after that sermon. The reaction to the two sermons was wildly divergent, and I believed the key difference was the race of the person who delivered the message: the guest preacher was a White professor and Dr. William Barber is a Black civil rights leader. Before the next deacons meeting I sent copies of both sermons to all the deacons and asked them to study them in preparation for discussion. At the meeting I began by reminding the deacons of our church's longstanding commitment to the concept of a free pulpit, which originated as a component of the concept of religious

freedom and the liberty of conscience with early Baptist pioneers John Smyth and Thomas Helwys. In establishing this concept at Myers Park Baptist, the church's first senior minister said: "A free pulpit is the very essence of religious and political democracy; . . . a free pulpit means a stimulating ministry; a free pulpit means encouragement to break new trails in thought and action; a free pulpit is a great bulwark against tyranny."[12] Drawing on the historic Baptist principle and the church's own conception of the free pulpit, I facilitated a discussion about the two sermons, admitting that I found some faults in both, and I asked the deacons to explain why they thought people reacted so differently to the two sermons. Some said it was the timing around the election, and some said Barber's sermon was more overtly partisan, but many said they simply did not know.

Finally, one brave deacon stood up and said, "Isn't it obvious? One is White and the other is Black—that's what made the difference here." His remark turned the entire conversation as the deacons had to reflect on the possibility that their own implicit racism may have been what caused the divergent reaction to the two sermons. At that point one of the oldest and wisest deacons stood up and reaffirmed the concept of the free pulpit and recounted the congregation's history of empowering soul liberty and the freedom of conscience in former senior ministers, as well as the story of Dr. Owens's support of the lesbian feminist theologian and Episcopal priest the Rev. Dr. Carter Heyward, who was invited to preach at Myers Park Baptist in the late seventies. The deacon then noted that the free pulpit existed as an idea in the mind of some members but had never been formally written as a statement for the congregation, so he proposed a team of deacons should write a formal statement reaffirming the church's belief in the freedom of the pulpit. This turned the meeting around and led the deacons to establish a taskforce charged with drafting of a formal statement on the free pulpit, which was approved by the congregation one year later.

The experiences I had leading the congregation during this time of racial reawakening led directly to the development of this spiritual formation and anti-racism training course. As the new senior minister of

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[12] Marion Ellis, *By a Dream Possessed: Myers Park Baptist Church* (Charlotte, NC: Myers Park Baptist Church, 1997). See also Myers Park Baptist's "Statement Affirming the Free Pulpit and Pew," approved December 11, 2017.

this historic liberal congregation that had been at the forefront of civil rights and the battle for desegregation in Charlotte, I saw that many issues surrounding race had yet to be identified. Most significant, we were suffering from blindness to our own Whiteness, including the way it undergirds and influences our faith as followers of Jesus. We needed a new conversation about race and racism. However, I thought it was important for this conversation not to be about racism in general, a sociological and historical phenomenon. Rather it should help members of a White-dominant church identify their own racial history and wrestle with what it means to be White. Therefore, I developed an intentional spiritual journey of anti-racism to aid people racialized as White to identify their Whiteness.

This course seeks to identify the persistent habits of Whiteness that are embedded in the practice of Christianity in White-dominant congregations. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva claims:

> High levels of social and spatial segregation and isolation from minorities creates what I label as a "white habitus," a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites' racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters. . . . One of the central consequences of the white habitus is that it promotes a sense of group belonging (a white culture of solidarity) and negative views about nonwhites.[13]

Tragically, White individuals and churches are often blissfully unaware of this white habitus and how it shapes their own identities, languages, spaces, spiritual practices, and congregational life, as well as their social and ethical relations with the community at large.

According to Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Marcia Mount Shoop, "Without intentional work by white faith communities to explore how we embody privilege and racialized biases in the habits of our faith, the transformative possibilities will be diminished and trivialized."[14] In order to explore White habits, Fulkerson and Shoop recommend "new postures for white churches [that] involve looking inward at the congregation

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[13] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists,* 151.

[14] Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Marcia W. Mount Shoop, *A Body Broken, A Body Betrayed: Race, Memory, and Eucharist in White-Dominant Churches* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 18.

itself instead of waiting for people of color to make real work on race possible."[15] They claim that "a new gesture might be to take an open stance toward exploring what it means to be white in American culture. These same gestures can be extended into congregations."[16] The concept of introducing "new postures" and "new gestures" that explore and identify Whiteness in the lives of individuals, the church community, and the culture holds tremendous promise.

Confronting Whiteness is intended as a new posture or gesture for the people of faith and the church. Participants will be exposed to personal postures and gestures embedded in the spiritual-formation process, such as the practices of contemplation and confession. These spiritual practices will help participants engage in and develop alternative habits that confront the White habitus and expose and undermine the power of Whiteness.

This course was born from my own personal spiritual journey of confronting Whiteness as a person, pastor, and father. During the journey I participated in the two-year Academy for Spiritual Formation through The Upper Room and a doctor of ministry program with St. Paul's School of Theology in Kansas City. All these experiences shaped this course, which has now been experienced by more than three hundred people. I am excited and prayerful for you to begin *Confronting Whiteness.*

[15] Fulkerson and Shoop, 19.
[16] Fulkerson and Shoop, 19.