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The Church's Lament: Moving the White Church from Grief of Complicity to Lament

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THE CHURCH'S LAMENT: MOVING THE
WHITE CHURCH FROM GRIEF OF COMPLICITY TO LAMENT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

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for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Global Perspectives

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DEDICATION

To my grandmothers, Frances Bogart and Elois Carlson. They taught me that fighting for social justice and loving the church are not mutually exclusive.

To my parents, Dennis and Mary Bogart. They have loved me well and continue to teach me how to love the church well.

To my husband, Scott. His love strengthens me. He chose to journey alongside me and became a social justice warrior as well.

To my children, Cameron and Jill, Grace and Jacob, and Gwen. They have each wisely chosen their own paths to loving people and the church.

To my new granddaughter, Iris Hamilton. I have held you in my heart as I have written my dissertation, knowing already that you will be a warrior in your own right. Be strong, faithful, and loving. Your heritage is with you, Jesus will never leave you, and Nana Kiki will love you without end.

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Finally, to the Black women and non-Black women of color who are antiracism activists on social media, in academia, and politics: I have learned so much from you and you don't even know it. You have given me strength and courage to "gather my people" in hopes of moving the church of Jesus forward to racial reconciliation.

EPIGRAPH

I need a love that is troubled by injustice. A love that is provoked to anger when Black folks, including our children, lie dead in the streets. A love that can no longer be concerned with tone because it is concerned with life. A love that has no tolerance for hate, no excuses for racist decisions, no contentment in the status quo. I need a love that is fierce in its resilience and sacrifice. I need a love that chooses justice.

—Austin Channing Brown, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*

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GLOSSARY

Black People: For this dissertation I have elected to capitalize Black people while leaving white people in the lower case. This was a conscious choice made to center Blackness as opposed to the traditional centering of whiteness.

Evangelicalism: A section of Protestant Christianity which embraces four main characteristics – Conversionism, Activism, Biblicism, and Crucicentrism.

Grief: Deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement (being deprived of something of someone). (Merriam-Webster)

Guilt: A feeling of deserving blame for offenses: self-reproach. (Merriam-Webster)

Lament: To express sorrow, mourning, or regret for — often demonstratively. (Merriam-Webster)

Non-Black People of Color: People who are not considered “Black” but whose ethnicity and skin color has been classified as other than “white” under social constructs. For example: Asian, Hispanic, Latinx, and Native American.

Oppression: An unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power. (Merriam-Webster)

Privilege: A right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor. (Merriam-Webster)

Reconciliation: An ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance, and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect God’s original intention for all creation to flourish. (Brenda Salter-McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation begins with the presupposition that leaders and members of the white, evangelical church are aware that there is an ongoing racial struggle in the United States, and in the church. Beginning with the theory that the church is in denial regarding historical complicity toward racism and white supremacy, this paper uses Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Grief Stage model to explore how the white church has become stuck in the early stages of grief (denial and anger). This exploration reviews historic and current examples in which white Christians have been complicit with systematic oppression against Black people and non-Black persons of color in the United States. There is an exploration of biblical, psychological, and sociological examples of lament, which align with Kübler-Ross's depression stage of grief, and helps people and communities to become "unstuck" from the relentless, early grief cycle. It is the argument of this dissertation that only through lament can people finally move forward into acceptance of their role in reconciliation. Lament allows the white church to fully repent and move into their role in order to begin the work of reconciliation.

CHAPTER 1:
EXPLORING THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Celebrated Catholic activist, Dorothy Day, famously wrote, "As to the Church, where else shall we go, except to the Bride of Christ, one flesh with Christ? Though she is a harlot at times, she is our Mother."¹ As a critic and champion of the church, she summed up the complicated relationship many Christians, and former Christians, have with the church in the United States. White Christians, in particular, often find themselves at odds with their faith traditions as they become more aware of their privilege and complicity in systems of oppression and white supremacy in the United States. In the age of Black Lives Matter and the national immigration crisis, racial issues threaten to divide the church in ways that echo the Civil Rights Era and the battle for the abolition of slavery. There is underlying anxiety in the church, rarely spoken aloud that white social dominance is coming to an end. In the introduction to their book, *Can "White" People Be Saved?: Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission*, editors Johnny Ramirez-Johnson and Love L. Sechrest highlight this issue by stating, "... fear of living in a radically multiethnic country is strong enough to drive members of the body of Christ to embrace profoundly un-Christian behaviors and actions."² Those who choose to

¹ Dorothy Day, "In peace is my bitterness most bitter," *Catholic Worker* 33, no. 4 (January 1967): 2 (1-2). A similar quote is often attributed to Augustine, but no one has actually been able to find a source that proves it belongs to him.

² Love L. Sechrest, Johnny Ramirez-Johnson, and Amos Yong, *Can "White" People Be Saved?: Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 7.

wade into the battle of the church's complicity toward systems of oppression and privilege will encounter denial, anger, and declarations that Christians are doing good in the United States and the world.

To be fair, white Christians already expressing the denial and anger are not resisting the call to racial reconciliation and justice toward the oppressed. There are multiple books and articles relating to racial reconciliation, particularly on the Christian market. These are initiating conversation, which makes sense considering the history and the current racial conflicts in the United States. Regardless of politics, Christians share a common theology of justice and reconciliation. Unfortunately, as pastor and author, Ken Wytsma, notes, "The truth is, we all love justice, until there's a cost."³ People of color already understand this cost and live with it every day. White, American Christians have difficulty seeing the cost paid by people persons of color and are often ignorant of the ways in which the white Christianity contributes to racial injustice. As a result, Christian leaders find themselves wondering if it is within their power to lead their churches toward 1) an understanding and acknowledgment of complicity with systems of white privilege and supremacy in the United States; 2) a place of repentance and lament for that complicity, and 3) a passionate advocacy for reparation and reconciliation.

Kate's Story

Kate is the associate pastor of a moderate-sized, overwhelmingly white, progressive, evangelical church in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Her call to

³ Ken J. Wytsma, *The Myth of Equality: Uncovering the Roots of Injustice and Privilege* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 4.

ministry has been entangled with a deep desire to minister to the oppressed and marginalized, especially people of color, of which there is a small percentage in the city where she lives. Kate therefore draws on her own family history to help navigate her way in the church.

Kate's mostly white family was made somewhat multi-ethnic through marriage, foster, and adoption. At a young age, she learned about racism as she witnessed overt attacks directed toward her family members. She previously believed that this exposure to ethnicity put her in a different place than her white friends and she secretly viewed herself as more aware of racism and oppression than the average white girl.

As a young adult, however, Kate noticed inconsistencies in what her family and church community considered racist. There was tolerance to racist jokes among certain white families and friends, and stereotypes were subtly perpetuated. It seemed her family held two sets of rules: one for when her relatives of color were present and a different set for when they were not. She also noticed inconsistencies within herself. Kate realized that she had become complicit in maintaining subtle and not-so-subtle racist tropes and structures. Although she cherished the work her family had done to "help" people of color through adoption and fostering, Kate began to face the reality that even that care given to people of color by her community and family had a paternalistic component.

This growing awareness of Kate's family background pushed her to study and learn about white privilege, and how systems treat people of color differently than white people. She began to read about and explore issues of racism in the United States, from past to present, particularly within American, white churches.

When the country experienced turmoil as a result of the deaths of Trayvon Martin (Sanford, Florida) and Michael Brown (Ferguson, Missouri), Kate engaged with the citizen protest group, Black Lives Matter, and built relationships with other clergy members within the group. In the midst of her growth, Kate developed an expectation that her fellow Christians would be as eager to learn some of the things she was learning. Many of the historical facts, as well as the current systemic realities, were entirely new to Kate and her friends, which birthed in her what she could only describe as a prophetic calling to share with the church the things she had learned and continued to learn.

To her dismay, Kate found that people in her church, including other leaders, tended toward two responses: denial and anger. She recounted her first conversation with the pastoral staff at her church:

“I had prepared a presentation based on what I had been learning. I included information from books I had been reading, stories I had been told personally, and ideas I had for an adult Bible study on the topic of privilege and oppression. Greg, one of our associate pastors, spoke up before I finished my introduction.

“‘Kate, it is a well-known fact that racism is a heart issue that racism only happens when people sin and break the laws we now have to protect people,’ Greg said. ‘I know that a few social justice-type folks want us to see racist evil everywhere, but that is simply not a biblical model for us to follow. Once people come to know Jesus, they are changed. We need to focus on presenting a gospel message, not stirring division in our church.’

“Agreeing with Greg, our children’s pastor, Jean, added, ‘I tell our children that everyone can succeed if they work hard as unto the Lord. I feel like it is time for people

of color to let go of the past and move forward in unity. None of us have been a part of slavery, but we all know the white church played a big part in ending slavery and ushering in civil rights. My own grandfather marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. Maybe you could create a positive historical study about people like him instead of causing division in the church.’

“I waited for our lead pastor to speak up, as we had discussed this issue many times. After a few minutes he said, ‘Kate, you know I sympathize with you on this. I agree that the church has, in certain cases, been complicit in racism. I appreciate that you have worked hard on this presentation, but I feel that nothing would be gained by stirring up a fruitless debate that focuses on past behaviors. Maybe in February we can have an African American pastor speak on a Sunday night for Black History month. Let’s table this until then.’”

Kate felt overwhelmed with guilt and frustration as she realized these people in her faith community preferred to remain in denial rather than explore the possibilities of repentance and reconciliation. When she spoke with her counselor, Kate realized that her church community showed classic signs of being stuck in the early stages of grief. She knew from experience that processing grief to the ultimate point of acceptance was messy and cyclical work. Kate felt hopeless, wondering if her work would ultimately affect change and whether her voice would even matter in this huge discussion. She became disheartened by the church's response to Black Lives Matter, the immigration crisis, and the missing and murdered indigenous women. She wondered how working against these things could be perceived as not part of the church’s gospel mission. Would Kate ever witness a time when the church would actually be the church for the suffering?

Despite feeling helpless, Kate knew she could not abandon her hope for the church. Returning to Scriptures of lament and repentance, Kate searched for a biblical model that the white church could utilize to work through not only grief regarding complicity with oppression, but also the loss of privilege and the remaining status quo that allows white Christians to remain comfortable in their denial. Through her studies, she realized that individuals, and the church as a whole, must be allowed to process this grief as if experiencing a terminal illness diagnosis. They grieve until reaching a place of acceptance.

My Story

Kate's story is a composite of my own story and the stories of other Christian leaders with whom I have worked in the churches we have served and loved for much of our lives. It is important to discuss my social context, as it has a direct bearing on the way I have interpreted my privilege and complicity with systems of oppression within the church. I am a white, cis-gender woman living in a progressive, yet mostly white city. At 50+ years old, I have lived my entire life in the post-Civil Rights era. For most of my life, I have been affiliated with evangelical churches that embrace Wesleyan holiness theology and have long encouraged women to participate in all aspects of ministry. If I evaluate my life and privilege according to the 50 items listed in the "Knapsack of Privilege," developed by the celebrated anti-racism activist and scholar, Dr. Peggy McIntosh,⁴ I can only describe my life as deeply privileged.

⁴ Peggy McIntosh, Ph.D., is the former associate director of the Wellesley Centers for Women and is the founder and senior associate of the National SEED Project on Inclusive Curriculum (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity). McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" first appeared in Peace and Freedom Magazine, July/August 1989, pp. 10-12, and later published in the

Like Kate, I grew up in an ethnically diverse family, despite living in a very white, rural community. My close proximity to relatives of color and the racism I witnessed in their lives developed within me a passion to fight on behalf of people of color and the marginalized. I also lived under the illusion that I somehow had a better understanding of racism and oppressive systems than other white people and, as such, I was less complicit than other white people. I was one of the “good ones.” Though I considered myself to be anti-racist, I was blind to the racist behaviors and thoughts that stemmed from my own privilege. It was not until after deep spiritual work and entering graduate school as an adult in my middle years that I began to notice my own implicit biases and the paternalistic components of my upbringing.

Despite my own denial and even defensive anger, a seed of reality was planted. My seminary class in American Church History, taught by highly regarded Native American activist, Dr. Randy Woodley, shattered my perceptions as I learned how the white church has been complicit in systems that have served to actively oppress any person in the United States (and beyond) who is not considered “white.” I began my journey through the stages of grief, joining other white, Christian leaders who had awakened to the same realizations. The most difficult thing for me to come to grips with was the idea that I am both a “good” person who wants to fight oppression and a person whose privilege makes me complicit in that very oppression.

McIntosh’s paper, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies*. Working paper (Wellesley College. Center for Research on Women); no. 189. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College, Center for Research on Women, 1988. McIntosh’s “knapsack” has become a widely used educational tool to reveal to white people blind spots regarding personal and systemic privilege. See Appendix A or click this link to see the list of privileges in a single pdf document.
<http://hd.ingham.org/Portals/HD/White%20Priviledge%20Unpacking%20the%20Invisible%20Knapsack.pdf>

The audience for this dissertation is people like me (and Kate) as opposed to the other leaders in Kate's story. This work is an exploration of the problem of racism and complicity in the white church that many of us already know exists. We know and grieve, yet we feel stuck and a bit hopeless as to how to lead our communities and churches forward from denial to a place where we can participate in reconciliation efforts. In this dissertation I will confront the reality of Christian complicity with racism and structures of oppression, and explore the process of moving from hopeless to hope-filled.

Author and social commentator, Jemar Tisby, wrote, "Historically speaking, when faced with the choice between racism and equality, the American church has tended to practice a complicit Christianity rather than a courageous Christianity. They chose comfort over constructive conflict and in doing so created and maintained a status quo of injustice."⁵ There is significant discomfort in confronting our own biases and complicity.

As Tisby notes, however, there is good news when recognizing our past choices and contributions to oppression. If Christians have chosen complicity to the disease of racism in the past, we now have the choice to confront and fight the disease that infects our country and our churches.⁶ This choice includes processing inescapable grief over past and present complicity, as well as the loss of privilege, and surrendering to lament. This is the way to move forward toward acceptance and, eventually, become agents of reconciliation.

While issues of systemic oppression, privilege, and racism are found within all denominations and movements of the white church, because of my social context, this

⁵ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 17.

⁶ Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 19.

dissertation will focus primarily, but not exclusively, on the problem as it relates to white evangelicals.

The Problem

In his eloquent book, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*, Michael Eric Dyson begins,

America is in trouble, and a lot of that trouble — perhaps most of it — has to do with race ... When we survey the land, we see a country full of suffering that we cannot fully understand, and a history that we can no longer deny ... For better and worse, our national moral landscape has been shaped by the dynamics of a Christianity that has from the start been deeply intertwined with religious mythology and cultural symbolism.⁷

It is not that white Christians and churches in the United States are unaware of the trouble of which Dyson speaks. One can scarcely look at social media, read a newspaper, or watch a movie on Netflix without seeing the reality of the racial divide in this country. The problem this dissertation explores, rather, is that most white, American evangelicals, perhaps ignorant of the depth of systems and privilege, have become stuck in the early stages of grief, as defined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her seminal book, *On Death and Dying*.⁸ Grief, noted in the glossary, is defined as “deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement (being deprived of something of someone).”⁹ White Christians are aware of the racial divide and, at a deep level, feel the distress of that divide. At a deeper level still is the suspicion that truly exploring systems will create even greater

⁷ Michael Eric Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), 3.

⁸ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying - Kindle Edition*, 50th Anniversary Ed. (New York, NY: Scribner, 2011).

⁹ “Definition of GRIEF,” *merriamwebster.com*, accessed October 8, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/grief>.

“loss” of privilege and sense of self. Rather than move toward that pain, white Christians remain stuck in denial and defensive anger. Being stuck leaves the white, evangelical church unable to move forward towards acceptance so that white Christians can join in the efforts toward meaningful reconciliation.

Kübler-Ross’s stages of grief — denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance — have helped millions of people recognize the way bodies, minds, and communities process grief relating to tragedy, illness, and death. According to Kübler-Ross, the heart of this process, particularly concerning death, is fear.¹⁰ Since the introduction of Kübler-Ross’s stage theory, psychologists and sociologists have discovered that these stages are also reflected in grief related to abuse,¹¹ and organizational or life changes, situations where people may not even realize that they are grieving.¹² Wherever there is personal loss, whether real or perceived, there is grief.¹³ For white Christians, this loss is reflected in the discomfort that arises when faced with realities that challenge Christian ideas of goodness or righteousness. How can a righteous person be party to systems of oppression? How can a person consider themselves as “good” when they are complicit to racism? As a result, denial and anger are preferable to the inevitable feelings of guilt, which accompany the realization that I benefit from

¹⁰ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 19.

¹¹ Jill Theresa Messing, Rebeca Mohr, and Alesha Durfee, “Intimate Partner Violence and Women’s Experiences of Grief,” *Child & Family Social Work* 20, no. 1 (2015): 30-39. doi:10.1111/cfs.12051.

¹² Deone Zell, “Organizational Change as a Process of Death, Dying, and Rebirth,” *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science; Arlington* 39, no. 1 (March 2003): 73–96, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/236360233/abstract/4149782D2F5F498APQ/1>.

¹³ Marc C. Smaldone, and Robert G. Uzzo, “The Kübler-Ross Model, Physician Distress, and Performance Reporting,” *Nature Reviews Urology* 10, no. 7 (2013). *Academic One File*.

unearned privilege for which I did not ask, in systems that I did not build, and through oppressions which horrify me to the core.

The idea of grief related to the sin of racism begs the question, is it grief or is it simply a matter of guilt? As noted in the glossary, guilt is defined as “a feeling of deserving blame for offenses: self-reproach.”¹⁴ Since grief is defined, as noted above, as “deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement (being deprived of something of someone),”¹⁵ it stands to reason the grief and guilt can be felt simultaneously. Both share a sense of sorrow and painful regret. For example, a person who strikes another with their car in an accident experiences guilt for the damage caused by their actions, and also a sense of grief for the pain and loss they have caused another person. With regard to racism and oppression, it is possible to feel both guilt and grief over all losses involved.

The Church in Denial: Whiteness and White Privilege

In Chapter Three of this dissertation, there will be a deeper exploration regarding the consequences of white evangelicals having become stuck in the stages of denial, anger, and to some extent, bargaining. At this point, however, it is important to take a step back and examine how the United States has developed systems of oppression and white privilege, as well as the ways in which these systems have continued despite challenges to racism throughout history. In this chapter, I will look at white privilege and white supremacy, as well as ways in which the stages of denial and anger, in particular,

¹⁴ “Definition of GUILT,” *merriamwebster.com*, accessed October 8, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/guilt>.

¹⁵ “Definition of GRIEF,” *merriamwebster.com*.

manifest in the white evangelical church. As Barna researcher, Brooke Hempell, notes, “More than any other segment of the population, white evangelical Christians demonstrate a blindness to the struggle of their African American brothers and sisters. This is a dangerous reality for the modern church.”¹⁶ This blindness to suffering and struggle is the epitome of denial. White, evangelical Christians have mostly chosen to ignore the voices of the wronged and their descendants.

For example, many in the white, evangelical church have aligned themselves politically and theologically with those who perpetuate systemic racial injustice, and they deny that oppression exists. Recently, a group of Christian leaders, led by Evangelical pastor and teacher, John MacArthur, released a formal “Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel.” While the statement touches on a number of topics, one sentence highlights the group’s ultimate mindset of denial regarding historical and current systems of oppression:

We reject any teaching that encourages racial groups to view themselves as privileged oppressors or entitled victims of oppression. While we are to weep with those who weep, we deny that a person’s feelings of offense or oppression necessarily prove that someone else is guilty of sinful behaviors, oppression, or prejudice.¹⁷

This denial reflects what writer and anti-racism activist, Reni Eddo-Lodge, calls a “gulf of an emotional disconnect.”¹⁸ According to Eddo-Lodge, the disconnect is “the conclusion of living a life oblivious to the fact that their skin colour (sic) is the norm and

¹⁶ Brooke Hempell, “Black Lives Matter and Racial Tension in America,” Barna Group Research: Culture & Media, May 5, 2016. <https://barna.org/research/culture-media/research-release/Black-lives-matter-and-racial-tension-in-america>.

¹⁷ “Affirmations and Denials: XII Race / Ethnicity,” *The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel: For the Sake of Christ and His Church*, S J & G, 2018. <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/>.

¹⁸ Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), xiii.

all others deviate from it.”¹⁹ People like MacArthur and other white evangelical leaders live in the entitlement that allows them to deny that those suffering and feeling offense are necessarily the arbiters of the sin of racism.

The denial of the lived experiences of people who suffer in systems of oppression displays not only a distinct level of privilege but also a lack of education concerning the history of how whiteness became the ideal in Western culture and the United States. While not every white, evangelical Christian lacks this education, exploring the culture of whiteness in the United States provides a platform for discussing the denial and anger that has surfaced within white evangelical culture. White Christian leaders who no longer want to live in entitlement will find historical exploration of whiteness and systemic injustice helpful in moving themselves and their communities forward.

What Is Whiteness?

Before the 1990s, much of the study regarding racism and equality focused on the exploration of what it means to be African American, Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, or Native American. That, however, has changed in the past two decades. In the mid-1990s, social scientists began to take a scholarly interest in what became “Whiteness Studies.” A deeper exploration began regarding several areas: what it means to be white, how whiteness impacts society, the validity of white privilege as a recognizable concept, and whether or not whiteness is the “problem” when it comes to racial strife. The majority of this study genre centered on how whiteness, as an identity, was constructed (particularly in the United States).

¹⁹ Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, xiii.

This study genre included how these groups and nationalities, who may have been considered “other” or non-white, came to be recognized as white.²⁰ For example, English prejudices against Irish Catholics made their way into the United States, and these stereotypes and biases remained the norm throughout much of the 19th century.²¹ American historian, Nell Painter, explains, however, “Irish immigrants quickly recognized how to use the American color line to elevate white – no matter how wretched – over Black.”²² Coming to the United States afforded these immigrants the opportunity to escape slave status likened to that of American slaves and work their way into positions where they could compete for a variety of jobs and live as free citizens.²³

It may seem that this would have made Irish-Catholic immigrants more sympathetic to the plight of the Black and indigenous slaves in the United States, but that is not the case. When exhorted by white citizens to support the abolition movement, the Irish immigrants chose the benefits of citizenship. The *Boston Catholic Diary* published a piece declaring that slavery was, of course, unjust, but “infinitely more reprehensible (are) the zealots who would madly attempt to eradicate the evil by the destruction of our federal union.”²⁴ By the middle of the 19th century, Irish Catholics had aligned themselves against abolition. They attacked Black Americans, despite themselves having been

²⁰ Peter Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies I, The New History of Race in America,” *Journal de la société des américanistes* 95, no. 95–1 (July 23, 2009): 117. <http://journals.openedition.org/jsa/10769>.

²¹ Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People*, Reprint ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 132-147.

²² Painter, *The History of White People*, 143.

²³ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 3.

²⁴ Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 17.

ranked at the same level by Anglo-Saxon Americans.²⁵ After the abolition of slavery, during the Reconstruction Era, Irish Catholic labor unions joined with anti-Reconstructionists against Black laborers to restore white supremacy throughout both the South and the North.²⁶

Through whiteness studies, the idea that *white* has often been considered more than a skin color has become part of anti-racism education. There are certainly opponents to whiteness studies, mainly because the entire concept is elusive enough to be considered vague by sociologists and other social scientists. The criticisms vary from concern over the use of “critical conceptions of power”²⁷ to the appearance of partisan sociology “defined as the fervent, passionate, often militant, and sometimes blind support of, and allegiance to, one cause (the dismantling of whiteness) to the exclusion of all other causes.”²⁸ These critiques hold validity, particularly when political agendas become involved in tracing whiteness and supremacy in this country. David R. Roediger, a highly regarded professor of American Studies and History, acknowledges anti-racism agendas in the political arena but counters them with an explanation regarding the way public officials and opponents of the anti-racism movement in the 1940s accused non-Black activists of holding unpatriotic leanings and Communist sympathies. This harassment

²⁵ Ibid., 48-49.

²⁶ Ibid., 199-202.

²⁷ Ladelle McWhorter, “Where Do White People Come From? A Foucaultian Critique of Whiteness Studies,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 31, no. 5–6 (September 1, 2005): 552. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453705055488>.

²⁸ Jack Niemonen, “Public Sociology or Partisan Sociology? The Curious Case of Whiteness Studies.” *The American Sociologist; Washington* 41, no. 1 (March 2010): 71, ProQuest.

continued through the Civil Rights Movement and into the 1970s and 1980s.²⁹ The battle regarding racism and oppression has always maintained a political component on both sides.

Currently, when talking about race, the term *white* is ubiquitous. Throughout one's lifetime, a person is asked to identify their race on some form or paperwork. One of the categories offered on these forms is "white." Other identifiers include "Black/African American," "Asian," "non-white Hispanic," people seem to know who is white and who is not. Steve Garner, lecturer in Sociology at Aston University in London, explains that, despite this common knowledge, there is no singular definition or precise meaning for the term.³⁰ Yes, skin color certainly plays a role in the determination of who is or is not considered white, but in the exploration of the history of whiteness, it becomes clear that whiteness, as a construct, is only determinable in contrast to those who are considered non-white. Garner, a recognized scholar in the area of whiteness and white privilege, writes, "Whiteness as an identity exists only in so far as other racialised (sic) identities, such as Blackness, Asianness, etc., exist."³¹ The words white and Black have not always been used to identify human beings. It was not until the 16th century that scientists began to refer to people as "white."³²

²⁹ David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 235-244.

³⁰ Steve Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.

³¹ Garner, *Whiteness*, 2.

³² Garner, *Whiteness*, 64.

German art scholar, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), is credited with the early fetishization of white beauty.³³ Relying on marble statues of Greek and Roman men, Winckelmann specified those characteristics which determined beauty (the Roman profile for example), and those that did not (Chinese eyes and Kalmuck “flat noses”).³⁴ Greek statuary was originally painted in full color, succumbed to Winckelmann’s aesthetic of white plaster or marble as the ideal of beauty remained the standard for artists, even to the point that original Greek statues were “cleaned” in order to remove the color and render them white.³⁵ Artists and art historians have continued to depict whiteness as the standard of beauty for centuries, influencing not only aesthetics but scientific disciplines as well.

Johan Friedrich Blumenbach, a German medical doctor, is an early scientist credited with introducing the classification of color to racial studies in 1775.³⁶ He believed that white skin was the first skin color and created a hierarchy of five colors ranging from white (1st) to Black (5th). In his third edition of *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*, having conducted a broad range of research via skull measurements, hair color, and skin tones, Blumenbach wrote with deep regard for the aesthetic beauty of the “Caucasians,” in which he included Europeans, Eastern Asians, and even Northern

³³ Painter, *The History of White People*, 60.

³⁴ Ibid., 61. The Kalmuk are a traditionally Buddhist Mongol people who now reside in Kalmykia, near the Caspian Sea.

³⁵ Ibid., 63.

³⁶ Ibid., 75. Painter also discusses the work of Petrus Camper, Francois Bernier, and Jean-Baptiste Chardin, all of whom contributed to the work of constructing race as a biological determination, and the labeling of “whites” as Caucasian.

Africans.³⁷ By determining human beauty to be linked to racial science, Blumenbach set in motion a false narrative of racial biology and anthropology that has since been thoroughly debunked by the American Association of Physical Anthropologists (AAPA).

In 1997, the AAPA influenced the United States government to begin removing the use of race as a data category, recommending instead that they substitute ethnic categories.³⁸ Yet, as celebrated author and activist Debby Irving discusses in her book, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, somehow there remains the idea that race is a biological rather than a social construct. Irving recalls her profound shock at finding out through a racial studies course, taken well into her middle years, that race was not a biological construct but rather a social one. When expressing her shock to her 15-year-old daughter, she learned that her daughter had been taught the concept of race as a social construct not a biological construct at the very beginning of her freshman year science class.³⁹

Biology is not the determinant of racial identity. According to American studies scholar, George Lipsitz, “Race is a cultural construct, but one with sinister structural causes and consequences.”⁴⁰ This statement is more than hyperbole. Going back to Garner’s statement above, when whiteness delineates the population into two groups of

³⁷ Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*, 3rd Edition (1795), In *The Anthropological Treatises of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach*, 264-265.

³⁸ Painter, *The History of White People*, 390-391.

³⁹ Debby Irving, *Waking Up White, and Finding Myself in the Story of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Elephant Room Press, 2014), 45.

⁴⁰ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 2.

those who are white and those who are not, a binary is set up leading to an us-versus-them mentality. This binary inevitably designates who is preferred and who is not.

There is no one particular way to be white; however, there is an absolute hegemony to whiteness that weaves a clear trail through society, particularly in the United States. For example, noted sociologist, Matthew Hughey, explains, “While a range of ‘whitenesses’ exist, white actors [people] across formally different settings hold similar notions of an ideal and hegemonic whiteness.”⁴¹ Celebrated professor and author, William Dyer, notes, in his groundbreaking text, *White*, “As long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it.”⁴² There is nothing strange or unique about being white. White is not typically seen as a race at all, especially by white people themselves. This lack of distinctive cultural identity allows white people to assume a sense of power and privilege that is not available to any other race or ethnicity. Again, Dyer notes, “The idea of whiteness as neutrality already suggests its usefulness for designating a social group that is to be taken for the human ordinary.”⁴³ When the neutrality of whiteness developed into a societal system, white supremacy and privilege became much deeper and more dangerous than the racism of individual persons.

⁴¹ Matthew Hughey, *The Construction of Whiteness: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Race Formation and the Meaning of a White Identity*, 1st Edition, ed. Stephen Middleton, David R. Roediger, and Donald M. Shaffer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 203. The editors of this book use the term “white actors” to describe white people whose actions and attitudes are being captured to evaluate the hegemony of whiteness.

⁴² Richard Dyer, *White*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 2017), 9.

⁴³ Dyer, *White*, 47.

Racial Hierarchies

When the United States was founded, the people able to construct and participate in government were property-owning, white males. People of color, women, and the poor were excluded in the writing of the Constitution and envisioning the future of the country. Whether intended or not, racial, gender, and class hierarchies defined society the United States. Those hierarchies have been reproduced throughout our history and perpetuated through laws and systems. As explained in the earlier example of Irish Catholics, it has been through those hierarchies and laws that white supremacy has been maintained over racialized groups via means of enforcement, which has included manipulation to “compete with each other for white approval.”⁴⁴

This historical perspective is troubling and, therefore, often removed from textbooks and discussions relating to American history. History textbooks tend to address only the popular highlights of racial justice, focusing on abolition and the Civil War, then fast-forwarding to the Civil Rights Movement without touching on the intervening years of racism and white supremacy. Historian James Loewen explains, “Textbooks deprive us of our racial idealists, from Highgate and Flourney, whom they omit, through (John) Brown, whom they make fanatic, to Lincoln, whose idealism they flatten ... Abraham Lincoln, racism and all, was Blacks’ legitimate hero, as earlier John Brown had been.”⁴⁵ Current and past textbooks downplay the complexity of racial history in the United States. This tendency toward downplay is somewhat understandable when thinking about

⁴⁴ Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 3.

⁴⁵ James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 198.

white supremacy and whiteness as a system of privilege and injustice. It creates deep anxiety and discomfort for even the most aware. Garner again explains, “Studying whiteness links the realm of individual prejudices with systemic patterns of discrimination that began before we were born and *whose impact is still felt today.*” (author’s emphasis)⁴⁶

Even the passing of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution had little effect on the racial hierarchies. Black people were still considered sub-human, and white men held all of the power. Every attempt at the advancement toward equality for people of color (particularly Black people) set off what Carol Anderson, professor of African American studies, calls “white rage.” Anderson writes, “White rage is not about visible violence, but rather it works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies. It wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly ... Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively.”⁴⁷

This is not to say that white rage against the threat to supremacy and privilege has not resulted in violence. It has. The more chilling effect of these words is the reminder that violence perpetrated against people of color and their white accomplices has always had the support of those in positions of power as well as the laws and policies those supporters have put in place.

The vehement and thorough backlash against the Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* 347 U.S. 483 (*Brown*), issued in May of 1954, was at the heart of white political agendas to diminish Black people and non-Black people of

⁴⁶ Garner, *Whiteness*, 5.

⁴⁷ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2016), 3.

color. In response to the *Brown*, Senator James Eastland of Mississippi declared, “We will protect and maintain white supremacy throughout eternity,” a sentiment echoed by Mississippi governor Fielding Wright who added, “regardless of the consequences.”⁴⁸

None of that violence (following *Brown vs. the Board of Education*) would have happened...and certainly would not have been given the broader societal stamp of approval if the respected elements of white society – governors, legislators, U.S. Senators, congressmen, and even, more tepidly, the President of the United States – had not condoned complete defiance of and contempt for the Supreme Court and the Constitutional provision that its decisions are the law of the land.⁴⁹

Knowing that it would take time to overturn laws that defied *Brown*, legislatures in many southern states continued to pass and enforce segregation laws. Until 1963, “not one single Black child attended a public school with a white child in South Carolina, Alabama, or Mississippi.”⁵⁰ Between 1954 and 1970, states such as Virginia spent large amounts of money and time defying *Brown* in order to deny equal, integrated education for African American students. The devastation upon the lives of the students whose education was interrupted, or sparse, at best, had repercussions which lasted for decades. The return of these students to school did not make up for the education or self-esteem they lost in these battles. Massive numbers of Black students became discouraged and dropped out. As noted earlier, this breach in education and literacy has had a lasting effect on the Black community. However, Carol Anderson explains,

It was not just Black America, however, that suffered. The cost of this was of human lives and talent. The brutally relentless tactics of stall and defy, then stall and undermine – tactics that went on for at least four decades –

⁴⁸ Anderson, *White Rage*, 73.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

left the United States with millions of citizens who lacked the education needed to become competitive in a global, technology-driven economy.⁵¹

The hole in the education system has left the United States lagging behind other developed, global countries.⁵²

Some believe that the laws and rules currently in place protect people of color from racism, but this disregards the many societal structures built on white supremacist ideals which have never been addressed. Laws are only as effective as the people enforcing and interpreting them. Structures that are not dismantled and rebuilt remain firmly ensconced in white privilege. Systemic oppression based on white supremacy is not simply, as some may believe, a thing of the past.

Since 2008, multiple states have pushed and/or passed requirements for a government-issued photo identification (ID) in order to register to vote. These requirements affect students, senior citizens, and people of color the hardest. Obtaining an ID is often costly, cumbersome, and reveals more discriminatory requirements such as proof of address in the form of a bank or utility statement and documentation of a social security number. Government offices that issue IDs in areas heavily populated with people of color have shortened their hours or closed, forcing citizens to travel to other counties to obtain their ID in order to vote.⁵³ Anderson writes, “The Brennan Center for Justice estimates that as many as 12 percent of eligible voters nationwide may not have government-issued photo ID, and that percentage is likely even higher for students,

⁵¹ Ibid., 86.

⁵² Anderson, *White Rage*, 87.

⁵³ Ibid., 145.

seniors, and people of color.”⁵⁴ Despite these restrictions, the Supreme Court, in *Shelby County v. Holder*, removed protective provisions from the 1965 Voting Rights Act, declaring these portions “obsolete” because “[t]he conditions that originally justified these measures no longer characterize voting in the covered jurisdictions.”⁵⁵

In recent years, politicians have publicly expressed their ideas of white supremacy. In March of 2008, for example, Patrick Buchanan published this statement:

America has been the best country on earth for Black folks. It was here that 600,000 Black people, brought from Africa on slave ships, grew into a community of 40 million, were introduced to Christian salvation, and reached the greatest levels of freedom and prosperity Blacks have ever known.⁵⁶

Prior to the 2012 re-election of President Barack Obama, in a statement to the Washington Post, Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina described what happened among voters in 2008 and beyond as “We’re not generating enough angry white guys to stay in business for the long term.”⁵⁷ It is, then, inevitable that such views held by political movers and shakers will result in policies and laws favoring white people and continuing to oppress people of color.

Studies in the early 2000s showed that home loan applications, which were equal in all ways except race, were denied at a rate twenty percent higher for Black and Latino

⁵⁴ Anderson, *White Rage*, 144.

⁵⁵ Wendy B. Scott, “Reflections on Justice Thurgood Marshall and *Shelby County v. Holder*,” *Louisiana Law Review*, 2015. 76 La. L. Rev. 121. <https://www.lexisnexis-com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/hottopics/lnacademic/>.

⁵⁶ Patrick J. Buchanan, “A Brief for Whitey,” March 21, 2008. <http://buchanan.org/blog/pjb-a-brief-for-whitey-969>.

⁵⁷ Rosalind S. Helderman, “As Republican Convention Emphasizes Diversity, Racial Incidents Intrude,” *The Washington Post*, August 29, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2012/08/29/b9023a52-f1ec-11e1-892d-bc92fee603a7_story.html?utm_term=.1798bb3592ae.

applicants than for white applicants.⁵⁸ The American Dream states that all who are citizens have an equal opportunity to achieve if they work hard enough, but this is not true for people of color. Just the denial of a home loan severely impacts opportunities such as education, safety, and even nutrition. Garner explains,

Decision making on one issue (housing) has a series of ramifications that hinder people from being as geographically and socially mobile as they would like, worsening their living conditions by making it more likely that the area they live in will be downgraded, pay higher local taxes and all the associated things such as the heightened probability of crime, poorer-performing schools, etc., thus limiting their life chances.⁵⁹

Limiting where a person lives does not only diminish their equity assets, it diminishes every aspect of their lives.

White Privilege, White Supremacy, and White Power

William Dyer suggests that the exploration of white privilege, supremacy, and power begins by asking: “Do I know I am white? Do I have any idea what that means?”⁶⁰ This is different from trying to understand what people of color face in the United States. These questions require each white person and church or other community to explore and own up to what Dyer refers to as the “peculiarity of whiteness.”⁶¹ White peculiarity in the United States revolves around socially constructed prejudices and the actions that come from those prejudices within the dominant culture group.

⁵⁸ Garner, *Whiteness*, 16.

⁵⁹ Garner, *Whiteness*, 18.

⁶⁰ Dyer, *White*, 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

Whiteness studies offer the opportunity to see whiteness as a racial identity with political and cultural history, regardless of the collective tendency to see white people as somehow raceless. Just as with any other racial identity, whiteness intersects with other identities such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic class, and national heritage.⁶² Looking at whiteness as a whole does not negate the complexities of these intersections any more than it negates similar issues within groups of people of color. There is, however, a commonality in the white experience that, as Matthew Hughey states, is “produced vis-à-vis the reproduction of, and appeal to, racist, essentialist, and reactionary inter- and intra-racial distinctions.”⁶³ In a cyclical manner, white privilege and supremacy perpetuate white privilege and supremacy, even with the advancement of people of color or in the seeming disadvantage of certain white, social groups.

It seems simplistic to say that white privilege begets white privilege in light of all of the complexities of society but consider the relatively tiny sphere of children’s literature. According to children’s librarian, Allie Jane Bruce, statistics kept by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) show that, as of 2014, the percentage of books by and about people of color is only 14 percent.⁶⁴ While there has been a marked increase in recent years in the percentage of children’s books by and about people of color, the percentage is nowhere near representative of the non-white children in public schools. Bruce also notes that, as of 2015, while 50.3 percent of public-school children

⁶² Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 59.

⁶³ Hughey, *The Construction of Whiteness*, 204.

⁶⁴ Allie Jane Bruce, “On Being White: A Raw, Honest Conversation,” *Children & Libraries; Chicago* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 3. ProQuest.

were non-white, 82 percent of public-school teachers were white.⁶⁵ This demographic does not appear to be changing. Approximately 80 percent of all current teacher-education students are white, and 88 percent of their teacher-education instructors are also white.⁶⁶ Looking at these statistics, one can begin to extrapolate the white influence which remains over people of color, particularly in terms of representation and authority. As explained by noted sociologist, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, literature which normalizes whiteness creates a racial grammar that organizes racialization and white superiority on a subconscious level.⁶⁷

Without literature, media, or cultural expression to create a normative culture of color, children struggle to see beyond the white privilege power structures, which are much more obvious to people of color than to white people. Every child, regardless of color, is born into an environment filled with biases, prejudices, and social expectations.⁶⁸

Returning to McIntosh's "Knapsack of Privilege," it becomes clear that a culture in which whiteness is dominant perpetuates social expectations and prejudices that regard white as the norm and other racial identities as "other." These socially constructed norms work, for most people, below the conscious level. A boy child, for example, subconsciously develops the idea that only girls play with dolls because that is what he has seen on television, in movies, and even in social interactions with his siblings or

⁶⁵ Bruce, "On Being White," 3.

⁶⁶ Robin DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016), 1.

⁶⁷ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "The Invisible Weight of Whiteness: The Racial Grammar of Everyday Life in Contemporary America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 2 (February 1, 2012): 173–194. <http://doi/abs/10.1080/01419870.2011.613997>, 177.

⁶⁸ DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White?*, 16.

friends. While there is no inherent truth to this norm, it becomes internalized without discussion. This internalization is the way racial norms exist as well.

Anti-racism educator, Robin DiAngelo, states that the lens through which we view cultural norms are inseparable from our social frames of reference, such as class, gender, race, and so forth.⁶⁹ She writes, “Our parents might tell us that aspects of identity such as race and gender don’t matter, but this is not enough to inoculate us against all of the other messages circulating in the culture.”⁷⁰ Messages of socialization create systems based on that socialization, which, in a dominantly white culture, become structures of white privilege and supremacy.

Individual Prejudice Versus Structural Oppressions

According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of prejudice is: “preconceived judgment or opinion; an adverse opinion or leaning formed without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge.”⁷¹ As DiAngelo notes, “Prejudice occurs at the *individual level*; all humans have learned prejudices.”⁷² Acting unfairly toward another person or group because of personal prejudices is discrimination. Every person likely engages in discrimination at some point. This discrimination is what some confuse with oppression, but it is not necessarily oppression at all. Oppression is what occurs when people who belong to a dominant group (one which carries the power to oppress other groups) act on

⁶⁹ DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White?*, 39-40.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷¹ “Prejudice,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed November 5, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prejudice>.

⁷² DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White?*, 30.

prejudices to discriminate against people from non-dominant groups. Thus, prejudice + discrimination + power = oppression.⁷³

Prejudice and oppression are not the same thing. Discrimination and racism are also not the same thing. For example, a white person living in a mainly Black neighborhood may be on the receiving end of certain comments or attitudes that denigrate them for being a white person, but that is not racism because that white person can walk to the next neighborhood knowing they will find others who are a part of the same dominant culture to which they belong. The discrimination is situational, not structural because the Black people in that neighborhood do not carry the power in this society. Only oppression, and thus racism, includes social and/or institutional power dynamics. Accusations such as “reverse racism” are a fallacy because Black people and non-Black people of color do not hold the necessary social, systemic, or institutional power in the United States to oppress white people. A person of color may discriminate against a white person, but the power dynamics between the dominant culture and non-dominant culture make it impossible for that person of color to oppress. Journalist and author, Leonard Pitts, Jr., writes,

To be Black in modern America is to feel the touch of hidden hands pressing down upon you. You know they’re there. Their effect is clear in government and university statistics documenting that, in terms of education, employment, housing, justice, health, and other quality-of-life indicators, people like you lag behind the nation as a whole. You know the hands are there, but when you turn around to catch them in the act of pushing you down, you encounter only white people with ‘Who, me?’ expressions on their faces.⁷⁴

⁷³ DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White?*, 45.

⁷⁴ Leonard Pitts, Jr., “Crazy Sometimes,” in Paula S. Rothenberg, *Whiteness: The Power of Privilege, Essential readings on the other side of racism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2008), 138.

White people can be blind to the systems of oppression that privilege them, but Black people and non-Black people of color cannot. They live with that oppression, whether white people recognize it or not.

Recognizing the racial power dynamics in the United States is key to understanding white responsibility when it comes to moving forward toward reconciliation. The roots and systems of white privilege and supremacy run deep in this country. Oppression stemming from these roots and systems are historical, institutional, and ideological.⁷⁵ Institutions, interconnected and woven into societal norms do not require individual people of the dominant culture to act unfairly or unjustly for the system to be unjust. Harlon Dalton, law professor and Episcopal priest, explains, “White skin privilege is a birthright, a set of advantages one receives simply by being born with features that society values especially highly.”⁷⁶ Black people and non-Black persons of color have also become socialized toward institutionalized racism. Celebrated author and activist, bell hooks, writes, “Systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism, and racism actively coerce Black folks to internalize negative perceptions of Blackness, to be self-hating ... Yet, Blacks who imitate whites (adopting their values, speech, habits of being, etc.) continue to regard whiteness with suspicion, fear, and even hatred.”⁷⁷ These deeply imbedded systems of oppression operate far below the conscious level for both white people and people of color.

⁷⁵ DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White?*, 50-52.

⁷⁶ Harlon Dalton, “Failing to See,” in Rothenberg, *Whiteness*, 18.

⁷⁷ Bell Hooks, “Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” in Rothenberg, *Whiteness*, 18.

Change cannot happen overnight. Individual victories such as electing the first African American president, can give the illusion of progress and cause people to ease up on the pressure for change. Because of the ideological aspect of oppression, privilege and supremacy not only permeate society but tend to be obscured by the rationalization that individual effort and talent can and have overcome these hardships. Harlon Dalton explains, “All of us, to some degree, suffer from this peculiarly American delusion that we are individuals first and foremost, captains of our own ships, solely responsible for our own fates.”⁷⁸ This individualism not only allows us to rationalize both white complicity and the Black struggle but also begins to hint at why the white, evangelical church can remain in denial of systems that exist. Unless individuals and communities are looking for them, the systems can be ignored.

DiAngelo and Garner employ the metaphor of an ocean current or a river to describe the privilege of the dominant group in society. DiAngelo describes the current as going in the direction of the dominant group, setting up “society to affirm, accommodate, and reward the norms of our group.”⁷⁹ Privilege is distinguishable in that it is usually not recognized by those who experience it. The dominant social group assumes everyone has access to this privilege or that it is a result of hard work or good luck. Garner writes, “There is no such thing as a neutral white person in this process because it is a social process ... an individual cannot remove him or herself from it solely by wishing it away or changing behavior as an individual.”⁸⁰ It makes sense that white people go with the

⁷⁸ Dalton, “Failing to See,” 15.

⁷⁹ DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White?*, 52.

⁸⁰ Garner, *Whiteness*, 18.

flow of privilege. Even upon recognizing such privilege, attempts to change are useless until systems of supremacy are changed. In his book, *The Racial Contract*, Jamaican-American philosopher, Charles Mills, noted the difficulty of changing such systems, saying that a system of white supremacy, “not only privileges whites, but is run by whites for white benefit.”⁸¹ Even white people who recognize privilege and value justice face an uphill battle in trying to change systems from which they benefit.

White Evangelical Denial and Anger

Why is it so hard for many white Christians to recognize systemic racism, privilege, and systems of oppression? Activist and campus pastor, Michelle Lang, offers the theory that hegemony has become an idol in the American church. “Something has happened to us. We’ve inherited...we’ve absorbed a condition called racism, and every day we are consciously, or more likely unconsciously, living into it.”⁸² That unconscious living is what causes white Christians to ask, “What does this have to do with me?” especially if one is facing economic, class, or other struggles. Lang suggests that Christians may better understand the term “white centering / centering whiteness,” which she defines as, “based on the idea that the goodness and rightness of something is evaluated based on how close it is in proximity to whiteness or how acceptable it is to

⁸¹ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 1st ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 31.

⁸² Michelle Lang, *Elephants in the Church: Racism*, Elephants in the Church Series, Portland First Church of the Nazarene, 2019, <https://pdxfirst.org/messages?sapurl=Lyt6OTU2L2xiL21pLyt4c2RreWtyP2F1dG9wbGF5PXRydWUmYnJhbmRpbmc9dHJ1ZSZlbWJlZD10cnVl>.

white people ... whiteness is established as the norm, the constant, and everything else is relative to that.”⁸³

There is a false binary that has become a predominant message in American culture and, in particular, within the church. According to DiAngelo, this is the binary that says that if you are even a little bit racist you are a bad person, and if you are a good person, you cannot be racist.⁸⁴ According to McIntosh, white people are conditioned by society not to recognize their privilege and benefits. These privileges remain unconscious until an individual begins to look for them.⁸⁵ As DiAngelo writes, this unconsciousness can be attributed to a lack of racial literacy in which “simplistic answers clearly work for us and allow us to be comfortable in the face of so much racial inequality.”⁸⁶ Comfort and thriving are key ideas here. One need not be aware of her or his privilege to benefit from it. If every human carries certain prejudices, and if white privilege and supremacy exist, it stands to reason that all white people, at one time or another, have said or done something that could be considered racist. This does not make all white people inherently evil or “bad.”

On the flip side, becoming aware of one’s privilege and prejudices, and working to improve and grow, does not automatically categorize a person as better than someone who has not reached that place. For example, as part of this doctoral program, while in Hong Kong, I was disturbed to discover my own racial arrogance as I traveled about the

⁸³ Lang, *Elephants in the Church*.

⁸⁴ DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White?*, 109-110.

⁸⁵ Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in Rothenberg, *Whiteness*, 123.

⁸⁶ DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White?*, 5.

city of almost seven-and-a-half million people, most of whom are ethnic Chinese.⁸⁷ While I was respectful of the laws and customs with which I was familiar, not once did I see myself as strange or unusual, as the citizens of Hong Kong likely perceived me. I understood none of the languages spoken, besides English, yet assumed I could navigate throughout the city with little problem. Even though my family and I often eat Asian food at home, I found myself becoming bored with the offerings of Hong Kong restaurants. I was deeply moved by some of the religious rites at a local temple but did little to try to understand them. Even in cultural situations that took me way outside my comfort zone, I reminded myself that I would soon return to my “normal” ways. Much of this is me being an American, but what caused me the greatest dismay is the way I viewed myself as both “one of them” and also, if I am sincere, a bit better because of my whiteness.

I did not recognize any of this until I returned home and heard myself describing the city and the people, some of whom I came to care deeply about during our time there. I completely lacked the humility that I would counsel others to employ as they prepared to travel to another country. My privilege and socialized racial hierarchies were revealed. My first response was to justify and deny it as unimportant because I have “come so far.” As the guilt set in, I became angry because I felt shame. At that point, I had a decision to make. Would I move forward in my grief so that I could accept this failure and learn, or would I tell myself to let it go?

Facing privilege, as a white individual, is uncomfortable and challenges Christian ideas of goodness or righteousness. As a result, denial and anger are preferable to the

⁸⁷ “Hong Kong Population Review, 2018,” World Population Review, 2018, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/hong-kong-population/>.

inevitable feelings of guilt, which accompany the realization that I benefit from unearned privilege for which I did not ask, in systems that I did not build, and through oppressions which horrify me to the core. Few Christians deny that racism exists in the United States, but acknowledging benefit from the systems that racism built is much more difficult. It is tempting to resort to “colorblindness.” Rather than addressing privilege and the systems of racial disparity, white Christians insist on an inability to “see” color. Instead, they prefer to think of all people as part of the body of Christ, regardless of color.

Christians and churches who use the idea of colorblindness as a tool to promote a certain type of unity lay this responsibility at the feet of individuals who do not support such unity. Instances of racism become individual anomalies instead of structures to be torn down. The justification and denial appears in situations such as the following: a) persons of color are denied home loans because of a few ‘bad’ or sinful, racist people who broke the law; or b) protestors of violence should have complied with law enforcement, or other systems of authority; or c) Martin Luther King, Jr. was a great example of how to engage with systems of authority; or d) inner-city schools are not segregated because crime and lack of opportunities pushed people out of those areas. The reality is that perceived colorblindness in society and churches does not prevent discrimination. It promotes racial bias by ignoring the existence of inequality and privilege. As psychology professor, Diane M. Adams, explains, “This ideology refutes the existence of a power hierarchy in race relations, and the notion of inequity, or an uneven playing field.”⁸⁸ Denial of an uneven playing field happens in white churches

⁸⁸ Diane M. Adams, “The Unbearable Lightness of Being White,” *Women & Therapy* 38, no. 3–4 (October 2, 2015): 327–340. <http://www.doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2015.1059215>, 329-330.

where racial reconciliation is reduced to unity within the body of believers who are all loved equally by Christ.

The individualization of racial ideals is an excellent tool for denial. With individualization, one person is not responsible for the actions of even their own ancestors. Instead, individuality makes whiteness and privilege invisible. Adams writes, “The denial of White privilege and attempts to avoid the emotionally painful experience of White guilt are linked to the phenomenon of the invisibility of Whiteness.”⁸⁹ Unearned privilege is not really unearned, but the result of hard work and, possibly, fate. Instead of being responsible for the dismantling of privilege on a personal and systemic level, privilege simply fades back into invisibility. Whiteness once again becomes the norm, even in the church.⁹⁰

Individualism, as a crucial part of evangelicalism, feeds this denial in systems of injustice. David Bebbington, in his seminal exploration regarding the rise of evangelicalism, highlights the value that evangelical Christians place on individual responsibility over communal expressions of faith. Bebbington writes, “The call to conversion has been the content of the gospel. Preachers urged their hearers to turn away from their sins in repentance and to Christ in faith.”⁹¹ Conversion, as an individual act, is what sets a person aside to Christ, absolving that person of both personal and original sin.

⁸⁹ Adams, “The Unbearable Lightness of Being White,” 331.

⁹⁰ Paula S. Rothenberg, *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, 4th ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2011), 2.

⁹¹ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 3. Conversionism is one of four characteristics which Bebbington attributes as the mainstays of Evangelicalism. The other three characteristics are Activism, Biblicism, and Crucicentrism.

The focus on individualism and personal piety has become part and parcel of not only modern evangelicalism but United States society as a whole. As the theology of the Protestant Reformation expanded into revivalism, evangelical expression included the withdrawal from the “worldly realm” and a focus on internal piety.⁹² Author and pastor, Katy Drage Lines, writes, “While revivals drew people to personal repentance through both conviction and social peer pressure, they did little to incorporate a theology of broader salvation beyond the individual.”⁹³ Unfortunately, this individualism feeds denial on the part of white Christians, and redoubles the systemic injustice for people of color.

Pastoral theologians, Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill Austern, have noticed that people of color tend to analyze systemic injustice to see “oppressive structures and practices that one might otherwise miss.”⁹⁴ The way people of color view history and suffering provides a lens through which they can see how white supremacy and privilege are built into all aspects of the United States, including the church. Because of this, they engage in order to set about the crucial business of ending structural racism.⁹⁵ White Christians have generally not been taught to think about oppression in this way.

Recent racial clashes in the United States have revealed that many who align with the Christian faith continue to uphold the values of white supremacy and work to

⁹² Rodney R. Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 164.

⁹³ Katy Drage Lines, “Re-Imagining the Lord’s Supper as a Place of Belonging and Hospitality in the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ,” (DMin Dissertation, Portland Seminary, 2019), 13. <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/309>.

⁹⁴ Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill Austern, *Feminist & Womanist Pastoral Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 163.

⁹⁵ Mariana Ortega, “Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color,” *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (August 1, 2006): 56–74, <http://www.doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01113.x/abstract>, 68.

maintain systems and structures that support those values. As historians, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith note, “Racial practices that reproduce racial division in the contemporary United States ... are imbedded in normal operations of institutions...”⁹⁶ Even so, there is a belief among white Christians, particularly evangelicals, that it is enough to exhort people toward individual kindness and decry individual racism.⁹⁷ According to Professor Mariana Ortega, this emphasis on individual behaviors and attitudes ignores systems and structures, which have long been in place, and which continue to oppress and marginalize people of color.⁹⁸

The recognition of these patterns serves to exacerbate white guilt. On the one hand, this guilt creates a force for good, pushing many white Christians to honestly evaluate their privilege and look for ways to resist participation in structures of privilege and learn from people of color. On the other hand, white guilt can negatively spiral into shame and, again, denial. In *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown speaks to the importance of exploring the unconscionable places within, but not letting those places define who we are. These are the places that bring not only guilt but shame. As Brown puts it, “Guilt = I did something bad. Shame = I am bad.”⁹⁹

Recognizing one’s own privilege aligned with centering whiteness and its benefits leads to guilt that logically says, “This is not right.” Grief regarding the situation can lead

⁹⁶ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 9.

⁹⁷ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 76.

⁹⁸ Carolyn Renee Dupont. *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 12.

⁹⁹ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 71.

to lament, repentance, and transformation. It does not necessarily continue, however, that one must feel shame for that situation. Privilege, in and of itself, does not define a person as a white supremacist or even as a bad person. The spiral into shame tends to block transformation and press an individual to withdraw as far from the pain as possible – into denial. As noted above, denial perpetuates the cycle, and the individual or group remains stuck in the grief cycle. Many white, evangelical Christians find themselves in this place today. The sense that something is not right is a catalyst for grief.

Being part of the dominant group in a culture, experiencing privilege and benefitting from systems of white supremacy, places white Christians in the uncomfortable position of needing to acknowledge privilege and complicity in order to move toward change. They find themselves, however, repeating the cycle of denial and anger by doubling down on myths that have been created to push back against ideologies of white privilege and, particularly, Christian complicity. The following chapter explores one of the greatest of these myths, the myth of Christian intervention against racial injustice.

CHAPTER 2:
THE MYTH OF CHRISTIAN INTERVENTION

Introduction

According to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, denial and anger are normal and even healthy responses to life-altering information such as illness and impending death.¹ These normal stages of grief, however, become unhealthy when a person or organization becomes entrenched in denial and anger to the point they are no longer a gentle buffer with which to deal with reality.² Denial, especially, is a dangerous place in which to become stuck. Denial does not stop the illness from manifesting and growing, but it does keep the ill person from getting the care needed. Within the white, evangelical church, denial regarding complicity and loss of one's sense of self as a good or righteous person does not negate the complicity nor the loss, but instead exacerbates the complicity and deepens the sense of unrighteousness.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the white, evangelical church has been repeatedly faced with individual and corporate complicity in systems of racism and white supremacy yet has managed to maintain denial of that complicity. The Barna Group, leaders in research regarding Christianity and society, notes, “evangelicals ... were almost twice as likely than the general population to agree strongly that “racism is mostly a problem of the past, not the present” (13% compared to all adults at 7%, or “no faith” at 3%) ...

¹ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, Kindle ed., 50th anniversary ed. (New York: Scribner, 2011), 52, 63-64.

² Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 52.

Evangelicals are more than twice as likely as the general population to “strongly disagree” that people of color are socially disadvantaged because of race (28% compared to 12%).” These statistics indicate a denial that presents Christian leaders hoping to move the needle with the question, Why? The answer lies in the fact that congregations need to develop a better understanding of United States history and the white church’s role within that history.

The intention of this chapter to look back at the history of racism and the interventions or complicity of the white church in America. Reading historical perspectives of African Americans who either worked alongside or suffered at the hands of white Christians during the time of legalized slavery, abolition, and the fight for civil rights eliminates the “white-washing” of history as often told in our churches and history books. Historian James Loewen describes a form of this white-washing: “The very essence of what we have inherited from slavery is the idea that it is appropriate, even ‘natural,’ for whites to be on top, Blacks on the bottom... Textbooks...are not likely to analyze white racism as a factor in more recent years.”³ This essence has been a part of education in the United States since the beginning.

Exploring the history of complicity and intervention by the white church may also have the chilling effect of pointing out the lack of progress in the past three centuries. As noted in Chapter One, recent protests against the deaths of Black, brown, and Native American men and women, by police or government officials have opened a chasm in the United States and, in particular, the white church. On the one hand, more white Christians are becoming aware that a few bad racists do not perpetuate these actions, but

³ James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 144.

rather expose deeper systems of oppression. On the other hand, large numbers of evangelical Christians or those who claim to be aligned with the evangelical church continue to deny such systems exist while supporting institutions and leaders who hold the values of white supremacy and work to maintain the systems and structures that support those values. Religion author, Michael Emerson, notes, “Racial practices that reproduce racial division in the contemporary United States ... are imbedded in normal operations of institutions ...”⁴ Viewing the historical development of these racial practices and the involvement of white Christians in that development exposes the origin of the fractures which remain in place.

This chapter explores and evaluates the involvement of the white church (as a whole and, in particular, evangelicalism) in matters of racialization and racial justice in the United States. When breaking the history into three eras – early America through the post-Civil War Era, mid-20th century and the Civil Rights Era, and the late 20th century – patterns of institutional racism, white supremacy, and misguided attempts to speak on behalf of people of color emerge with an absolute clarity that may not be present without the filter of history. Ultimately, this historical reflection sets the groundwork for ways in which white Christians can lament and acknowledge how they and the predominantly white church have furthered racialization and systems that perpetuate injustice.

⁴ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 9.

The White Church and Slavery, Abolition, and the Post-Civil War Era

There is no singular story of how white Christians dealt with slavery. There were Christians active in the abolition movement, and there were Christians who justified slavery according to Scripture. Historian and author, Bruce T. Gourley, reminds us that both sides during the Civil War claimed God and the Bible as their moral justification.⁵ There were two camps of Christians (and Americans in general), and at the root of the battle between them was the humanity, or more accurately, the inhumanity, of Black people and other people of color.

Michael Emerson and Christian Smith posit that race developed as a social construct during the 16th and 17th centuries in order to “justify the overtaking and enslaving of whole people groups.”⁶ They used the evolution of how the dominant culture has treated certain people groups (Irish Catholics, Italian immigrants, and so forth) to support their theory of race as merely a social construct. This narrowed viewpoint, however, ignores a history in which one or more people groups have sought to subjugate another group according to racial features under the guise of religious fervor. As explained by political science scholar, Andrew A. Latham, between the 11th and 15th centuries, the Latin church launched the Crusades to regain power and hold land in the east. In this process, the Catholic church cast dark Muslims as a barbaric group intent on

⁵ Bruce T. Gourley, “A War That Endures,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 48, no. 2 (2013): 3, EBSCOHost.

⁶ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 8.

eliminating Christianity from the world.⁷ Denise Eileen McCoskey states that anti-Semitism of the early 1st century CE was simply a continuation of that racial prejudice, which had been present since the 5th century BCE.⁸ There is room for a well-reasoned conclusion that the racism which led to the capture and enslavement of Africans in the 18th and 19th centuries may have been a result of a social construct, but that construct is the result of a tendency in human nature to subjugate others in order to elevate oneself, similar to the playground bully.

This theological racism, which history scholar and author, Paul Harvey, defines as, “conscious use of religious doctrine and practice to create and enforce social hierarchies,” endowed white people with privilege while they “degraded and stigmatized Black people.”⁹ This endowment inferred that being white was associated with “godliness” and being dark connected with “ungodliness in ways that sanctified whites’ activities and damned people of color as subhuman.”¹⁰ While many white Christians were abolitionists who fought to end slavery, these same Christians continued to support racialization. “They were uncomfortable with these strange Africans,” notes Emerson and Smith, “and, to put it bluntly, wished them to go away.”¹¹

⁷ Andrew A. Latham, “Theorizing the Crusades: Identity, Institutions, and Religious War in Medieval Latin Christendom,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (March 2011): 224–225, EBSCOHost.

⁸ Denise Eileen McCoskey, “Diaspora in the Reading of Jewish History, Identity, and Difference,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 12, no. 3 (Winter 2003): 389-390, EBSCOHost.

⁹ Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁰ Edward Blum, “Blum on Harvey, ‘Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era’” H-Net, May 2005, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/512/reviews/744/blum-harvey-freedoms-coming-religious-culture-and-shaping-south-civil-war>, 2.

¹¹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 29.

Once slavery was outlawed, the presence of freed slaves in white churches created new tensions. Author and sociology professor, Art Budros, notes that, even as some white preachers proclaimed equality amongst the races, Black people remained restricted to certain areas of the church or meetings. If Black people were allowed to participate in the governance of the church or to preach, white church members became anxious and uncomfortable. Ultimately, these positions became more and more restricted.¹² Frustrated by denied participation and what Emerson and Smith describe as “unequal and restrictive treatment,” Black Christians in the post-Civil War era left white churches to form congregations of their own. This exodus, notes Emerson and Smith, was used by white congregants to justify segregated worship, claiming that Black freed people left white churches of their own volition so they must prefer to worship with “their kind.”¹³

Between the end of the Civil War and the enactment of Jim Crow laws (in the 1890s and 1900s), Black people and non-Black people of color were excluded from many activities of post-war America. Historians, Catherine Lewis and J. Richard Lewis, explain that by the time segregation was the law, customs and traditions had already determined that white people and Black people would exist in separate spheres, both in the South and in the urban North.¹⁴ Even the migration of freed Black people was limited. Law makers in Indiana, Illinois, and Oregon enacted legislation to keep them from moving into these states.¹⁵

¹² Art Budros, “The Antislavery Movement in Early America: Religion, Social Environment and Slave Manumissions,” *Social Forces; Oxford* 84, no. 2 (December 2005): 948, ProQuest.

¹³ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 39.

¹⁴ Catherine M. Lewis and J. Richard Lewis, *Jim Crow America a Documentary History* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009), 13-14 (xi-xii).

¹⁵ C. Lewis and J. Lewis, *Jim Crow America a Documentary History*, 14 (xi).

Noted historian, Kimberly Jensen, writes that Oregon's legislation in 1857 placed specific prohibitions "against African American, Chinese American, and 'mulatto' (mixed race) men." In 1866, further legislation laws were enacted to avoid birthright citizenship claims, claims Jensen. These laws made marriage between "Euro-Americans and African Americans, Chinese Americans, Native Hawaiians, and other Native peoples" illegal.¹⁶ By 1900, segregation was no longer a matter of discussion or debate. According to Lewis and Lewis, everything that could be segregated was segregated by law or by *de facto* action:

By 1900, the near-total disfranchisement of Blacks through legal and non-legal means was complete. Access to the legal system was denied or severely restricted. African Americans were separated or denied access on railroads and steamships and in hotels, restaurants, and places of entertainment and restricted to separate unions and working conditions. Housing was restricted, and many were prevented from entering certain cities and towns. Prisons, hospitals, and homes for the indigent were likewise segregated to a degree never before known in the South. Racially motivated violence and brutality was commonplace, most but not all within the borders of the South. Lynchings throughout the nation numbered 2,929 between 1882 and 1918, with no end in sight.¹⁷

This segregation created new conundrums for the white Christian conscience, explains ethicist and theologian, Katie Geneva Cannon. During slavery, many white pastors and politicians justified the enslavement of an entire people by stripping those with Black and brown skin of "every privilege of humanity."¹⁸ In the battle for abolition, many white Christians fought this justification by insisting that every person is endowed with full humanity, no matter their skin color. According to Harvey, white women, such

¹⁶ Kimberly Jensen, "Women and Citizenship in Oregon History," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 113, no. 3 (October 1, 2012): 270, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5403/oregonhistq.113.3.0270>.

¹⁷ C. Lewis and J. Lewis, *Jim Crow America a Documentary History*, 21 (xx).

¹⁸ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998), 39.

as Lucinda Barbour Helm, Bertha Newell, and Belle Bennett, all leaders in their respective state's Society of Southern Methodist Women, championed and worked for social reform.

This reform included the education and employment of poverty-stricken Black women while promoting anti-racism in their communities.¹⁹ These women worked with Black women such as Nannie Helen Burroughs, visionary and leader of the Women's Convention of the National Baptist Convention, to better the lives of African American women through education, job training, and spiritual discipleship.²⁰ Regardless of the partnership, white Christians were often guilty of what Nannie Burroughs called a "complicity of good white people" whose silence "emboldened our enemies until they attack us with impunity."²¹ While Black, female reformers, such as Mary McCloud Bethune, Lucy Laney, and Eugenia Hope focused on elevating Black women from poverty and subjugation, white Christians spread their compassion to all forms of social ill, often putting their energy into what historian and scholar, Nell Becker-Sweeden calls "white slavery in the form of women trapped in prostitution."²² According to Harvey, Burroughs, and her compatriots, did not suggest that it was wrong to help these women, but wondered (often loudly) whether or not the women who claimed to be partners in ministry were truly concerned with "the least of these."²³

¹⁹ Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 76-77.

²⁰ Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 71.

²¹ Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 71.

²² Dr. Nell Becker-Sweeden, "Field Interview," Email, April 25, 2017.

²³ Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 86.

White Christians in the Mid-Twentieth Century and Civil Rights Era

When faced with accusations of complicity and privilege, white Christians often respond by pointing to other white Christians who fought against slavery and battled for civil rights. Historian Jemar Tisby writes, “All too often, Christians name a few individuals who stood against the racism of their day and claim them as heroes. They fail to recognize how rarely believers made public and steadfast commitments to racial equality against the culture of their churches and denominations.”²⁴ This partial remembering is the form of denial evident among white Christianity today. As Tisby explains, “The same arguments that perpetuated racial inequality in decades past get recycled in present day.”²⁵ The 20th and 21st centuries are particularly misremembered in both American and Christian history.

In the early 20th century, many Christian leaders engaged in a diligent campaign to uplift their congregations and encourage action toward social change while maintaining a certain *status quo*. According to Harvey, Christian progressives “championed uplift and democracy while sanctioning hierarchies of race and culture, including pseudoscientific defenses of white supremacy.”²⁶ In 1920, for example, white women obtained the right to vote, but did not include Black women in their suffrage efforts. Victory for women became a matter of white supremacy and expediency for many of the suffrage leaders. Although given the vote, white women, as Harvey explains,

²⁴ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 20.

²⁵ Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 21.

²⁶ Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming*, 47.

did not have the support of most conservative churchmen, whose theology placed women and “negroes” in subordination to white men, both in the church and society, as a matter of God’s will.²⁷ He further quotes a Methodist clergyman as saying, “What sort of state of things would we have down South if all the negro women were put to voting?”²⁸ In essence, to appease certain white male dissenters, white women placed the well-being and citizenship rights of Black women (and men) behind their own.

In the 1930s and 1940s, women’s missionary societies, such as the Women’s Methodist Union (WMU) and the United Church Women (UCW), managed to develop venues for biracial and sometimes interracial cooperation.²⁹ Harvey explains that this was not without its fair share of struggles. In 1941, for example, the UCW began as an interdenominational fellowship whose board of directors included five white women and Mary McCloud Bethune. This organization found it “nearly impossible” to find white churches that would allow them to meet in their buildings due to their “interracial” activities.³⁰

True to its mission, this organization, and others like it, became active participants in the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite their interracial approach, however, white paternalism and Black suspicion remained in many places. Local and state chapters of the UCW highlighted programs and information that included helping the “Negro race develop a more Christ like attitude in achieving their goals,” and making

²⁷ Ibid., 69.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming*, 70.

³⁰ Ibid., 199-200.

“progress in developing a sense of responsibility among the Negroes.”³¹ Comments like this, and the attitudes behind them, revealed to the Black women of the UCW (and other similar organizations) that they were still not viewed as fully human by white Christians. Noted theologian and author, James Cones, writes that African Americans did not need this reminder. White people claiming to follow Christ participated in public lynchings and beatings of African Americans, especially across the South, while others remained complicit in their silence or in their call for “patience” on the part of African Americans.³²

Rarely did evangelical, white Christians participate in any activities related to the Civil Rights movement. Failure of white, evangelical Christians to stand against systemic injustice has remained consistent since that time. Becker-Sweeden notes, the Church of the Nazarene (along with other evangelical denominations) “has tended to be more politically averse ... we are silent and thus, by complicity, tend to side with those in power.”³³ According to Emerson and Smith, “Most evangelicals, even in the North, did not think it their duty to oppose segregation; it was enough to treat the Blacks they knew personally with courtesy and fairness.”³⁴ Systemic injustice was not on the evangelical radar. White evangelicals were mostly silent about Black suffering but, as Dupont notes, quite outspoken about issues relating to civil rights. They claimed that those issues were political and therefore not appropriate Christian discussion nor relevant to the faith.³⁵

³¹ Ibid., 200-201.

³² James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, reprint ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 32.

³³ Becker-Sweeden, “Field Interview,” 2017.

³⁴ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 46.

³⁵ Carolyn Renee Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 4.

Just as white Christians in the abolitionist movement “worked to end slavery and free slaves, not to unite Americans in common community,” white Christians in the Civil Rights movement “worked to gain rights and freedoms. Although (they) used the rhetoric of togetherness in their efforts, (the movement) was ... unsuccessful in its realization.”³⁶ It was an uphill battle against men like Sam Bowers, Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Noted professor and theologian, Charles Marsh, writes that the Klan believed they were called by God to “accomplish the urgent task of eliminating ‘heretics,’” meaning those who believed in the integration of the races.³⁷ Marsh writes that Bower and white supremacist “Christians” like him, believed in their calling of the “priestly task of preserving the purity of (white) blood and soil” through violence.³⁸ Of course, members and leaders of the Ku Klux Klan are an extreme example of how white people actively battled the Civil Rights movement. Marsh explains that other white preachers, such as Reverend Doug Hudgens, proclaimed God’s holiness, righteousness, and justice, but refused to see, much less preach, that a just God grieves with those who suffer, particularly the Black people who suffer.³⁹ Christian leaders like these created a disconnected sense of piety among white Christians, allowing them to pursue faithfulness while ignoring injustice and abuse of their Black neighbors.⁴⁰

While white Christians of the 21st century can look back on what happened during the Civil Rights Movement with certain moral clarity, Dupont notes that the same clarity

³⁶ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 48.

³⁷ Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 49.

³⁸ Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, 54-55.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

eluded white Christians living in that era.⁴¹ Some white Christian moderates, though not advocates for integration, did manage to speak up on behalf of free speech and human kindness toward Black Americans. This tepid advocacy, however, made little impact. According to Dupont, white Christians and their religion played an “important role in the fight *against* racial equality.”⁴² Religious leaders who spoke out against segregation or for equality were often publicly criticized by other Christians for focusing on political matters rather than evangelism and spreading the gospel. A noted scholar of American Religions and the History of Christianity, Curtis J. Evans, explains that many white, Christian leaders believed that taking a public stance regarding racial justice would distract from the “church’s primary task of preaching the Christian gospel.”⁴³ Dupont clarifies, “The façade of silence (among white Christians) cloaked a truth far more revealing: not only did white Christians fail to fight for Black equality, they often labored mightily *against* it.”⁴⁴

In contrast, according to Emerson and Smith, Black Christians, particularly in the South, “called, protested, boycotted, and died for an end to Jim Crow Segregation.”⁴⁵ Black women and men organized and connected people through phone trees, missionary meetings, and social gatherings, to spread information and establish effective boycotts,

⁴¹ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, 3.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Curtis J. Evans, “White Evangelical Protestant Responses to the Civil Rights Movement,” *Harvard Theological Review*, Last modified April 2009, <http://core/journals/harvard-theological-review/article/div-classtitlewhite-evangelical-protestant-responses-to-the-civil-rights-movement-a-hreffna-ref-typefnadiv/9D3691634896632B142432DF1D112422>, 249.

⁴⁴ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, 5.

⁴⁵ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 45.

explains Harvey.⁴⁶ For example, one civil rights leader and women's rights activist, Fannie Lou Hamer, gave up everything to further the cause of freedom and justice. Marsh writes that Mrs. Hamer tirelessly endured beatings, arrests, persecution, and ignorant disregard from white Christians, including those in political power, who felt threatened by her efforts at civil reform.⁴⁷ Mrs. Hamer, after being beaten nearly to death, and left in jail, "pondered the familiar paradox of white Christians who hate and mistreat Black people."⁴⁸ By the end of 1964, Mrs. Hamer, and others like her, realized that,

... Black people could no longer assume that the faithful exhibition of Christian virtue would convict white Southerners of their social sins and overhaul Jim Crow's mean rule ... If (Christian love) could cure the sickness, then Mississippi would be the most just and decent state in America considering that the (African American) people of Mississippi have ... loved with the hope that if they kept standing up in a Christian manner, things would change.⁴⁹

This realization that Christianity had little impact on the actions of white people is part of what celebrated theologian and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman, refers to as the disinherited experience. "There are few things more devastating than to have it burned into you that you do not count and that no provisions are made for the literal protection of your person. The threat of violence is ever present, and there is no way to determine precisely when it may come crushing down upon you."⁵⁰ Nowhere is the disenchantment of Black Americans with their moderate, white siblings-in-Christ more clearly stated than in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*:

⁴⁶ Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 178.

⁴⁷ Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 30-31.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁰ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, reprint ed. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 29.

First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council-er or the Klu Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive (sic) peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;' who paternalistically feels that he can set the time-table for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and constantly advises the Negro to wait until a 'more convenient season.' ... We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with.⁵¹

After their tireless efforts toward reform, Black Americans realized the majority of their (white) brothers- and sisters-in-Christ would always leave them exposed to this violence and may even perpetuate it. Dupont makes this clear, writing that white Christians "did not just guiltily 'come along' with segregation...rather, it served actively in the phalanx of institutions by which white domination perpetuated itself."⁵²

The Church and Racism in the Late Twentieth Century and Today

Despite the ratification of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the enactment of laws to protect people of color in America, the sense of being disinherited remained. Economic realities and political necessities weakened legalized white supremacy; white Christian morality did not. White Christians continued to resist the equality of African Americans "long after the end of *de jure* segregation and well after high profile civil

⁵¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 10-11, last modified July 24, 2014, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>.

⁵² Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, 12.

rights activities ceased.”⁵³ The most significant split in America remains that of race, having increased dramatically from 1960 to 2000.⁵⁴ Just because slavery and Jim Crow segregation no longer officially exist, it is dangerously naïve to negate the significant division between races in America.⁵⁵ Even after the granting of civil rights, Emerson and Smith explain, racial practices remained as “covert practices embedded in the everyday operations of American institutions, invisible to most white people.”⁵⁶

The ubiquitous image of a white Jesus aided in the perpetuation of white holiness and supremacy throughout most of the late 20th century. Historians Edward Blum and Paul Harvey write, “As the United States rose to superpower status in the twentieth century, it also became the world’s most active exporter of white Jesus imagery. Through films and art, American businessmen, moviemakers, and missionaries offered the world white Christ figures to consume and worship.”⁵⁷ For example, Warner Sallman’s *Head of Christ*, initially created in 1941, became “the most widely reproduced work of artwork in world history.”⁵⁸ Christians all over the world, regardless of color or ethnicity, grew up with this image of white Jesus hanging in their homes and businesses, subconsciously implying that whiteness was part of the sacred. Blum and Harvey reveal that “It (Head of Christ) was so iconic that to combat card-carrying members of the Communist party, one

⁵³ Dupont, *Mississippi Praying*, 13.

⁵⁴ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 8.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁷ Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 12.

⁵⁸ Blum and Harvey, *The Color of Christ*, 12.

American minister encouraged every Christian to carry a small print of Sallman's Christ in their wallets."⁵⁹

Even though the digital age has brought about new images of Christ in a variety of skin colors and ethnicities, Blum and Harvey explain that the image of a white Jesus remains embedded in American culture and psyche.⁶⁰ This flannelgraph Jesus does not resemble the Middle Eastern Jewish man whose subversive life provoked the religious and government leaders of his day alike. Theologian, author, and activist, Drew G. I. Hart, writes that Christians today often do not resemble that Jesus either:

Christian piety and oppression could so easily exist ... because the Jesus being referred to in America rarely had any resemblance to the subversive life embodied in the gospel narratives of Scripture. Rather than creating a new order, the American god has too often been the sustainer of this old order, white supremacy and all. The god passed down from generation to generation in dominant culture legitimized our racialized hierarchy ... Unfortunately, dominant cultural reflections on God rarely adhere with the revelations of Jesus as specifically attested to in Scripture.⁶¹

Many leaders within the evangelical movements tend to resemble right-wing politicians. As noted above, they also align themselves politically and theologically with those who perpetuate systemic racial injustice and deny that oppression exists.

Evangelical leaders who align themselves with the political right have set aside specific moral concerns to promote political leaders who uphold systems they deem valuable. As a scholar of rhetoric and public communication, Thomas A. Salek, points out that, "Despite being a divorced and religiously ambivalent man, Reagan became a

⁵⁹ Blum and Harvey, *The Color of Christ*, 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶¹ Drew G. I. Hart, *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2016), 72.

champion for the religious right by tapping into the notion of morality (Hart & Pauley, 2005). By aligning his political views and rhetoric with the religious right, Reagan successfully appealed to the growing evangelical base of the Republican Party.”⁶²

While evangelical influence seemed to wane at the end of the 1980s, it did not disappear. Evangelical groups, such as Focus on the Family, the Christian Coalition, and the Family Research Council, actively supported the campaigns of conservative Republicans during the 1990s and 2000s because their values aligned with those of evangelical Americans.⁶³ In the 2016 presidential election, white, evangelical Americans played a significant role in the election of Donald J. Trump. According to the Public Religion Research Institute, 81% of white, evangelical Christians voted for twice-divorced President Trump, despite the fact that he was accused of sexual misconduct and ethics violations.⁶⁴ In June 2019, journalist Peter Wehner recounts a statement from Ralph Reed, founder of the Faith and Freedom Coalition: “There has never been anyone who has defended us and who has fought for us, who we have loved more than Donald J. Trump. No one!”⁶⁵ White, evangelical Christians admit to sharing many of President Trump’s views regarding certain people groups. The Barna Research Institute notes that over 30% of white evangelicals polled claim that President Trump’s comments about

⁶² Thomas A. Salek, “Faith Turns Political on the 2012 Campaign Trail: Mitt Romney, Franklin Graham, and the Stigma of Nontraditional Religions in American Politics,” *Communication Studies* 65, no. 2 (April 2014): 174–188. EBSCOHost.

⁶³ Clyde Wilcox and Carin Robinson. *Onward Christian Soldiers?: The Religious Right in American Politics* (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 2010), 49, ProQuest.

⁶⁴ “White Christians Side with Trump,” *PRRI*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.prii.org/spotlight/religion-vote-presidential-election-2004-2016/>.

⁶⁵ Peter Wehner, “The Deepening Crisis in Evangelical Christianity,” *The Atlantic*, last modified July 5, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/evangelical-christians-face-deepening-crisis/593353/>.

Mexican immigrants and stemming the flow of Muslim immigration to the United States resonated with them and played a factor in their decision to vote for him.⁶⁶

Admittedly, not all evangelicals remain in lockstep with the current President over immigration issues. On June 25, 2019, Russell Moore, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC), posted on Twitter, “The reports of the conditions for migrant children at the border should shock all of our consciences. Those created in the image of God should be treated with dignity and compassion, especially those seeking refuge from violence back home. We can do better than this.”⁶⁷ A quick scan of responses to this Tweet shows the majority who responded did not agree with Dr. Moore, but given his status with the ERLC and the Southern Baptist Convention, there are clearly some who agree.

The unfortunate reality is that white Christians do not have to vote for racist policies or support leaders who fight against equality or even humane treatment for Black people and non-Black people of color in order to perpetuate racist structures in the United States. Reconciliation activists and theologians Mae Elise Cannon, Lisa Sharon Harper, Troy Jackson, and Soong-Chan Rah tell us, “By not offering the necessary counter-narrative, we end up endorsing a passive acceptance of the status quo.”⁶⁸ This is the sin of racism that white Christians perpetuate. Michelle Lang, states,

⁶⁶ “Why 2016 Headlines Had Little Impact on Voters,” *Barna Group*, accessed July 3, 2019. <https://www.barna.com/research/2016-headlines-little-impact-voters/>.

⁶⁷ Russell Moore, “The reports of the conditions for migrant children at the border should shock all of our consciences,” *@drmoore*, June 25, 2019, <https://twitter.com/drmoore/status/1143418475723055106>.

⁶⁸ Mae Elise Cannon et al., *Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 207.

The sin of racism has a unique chokehold in America, a spiritual chokehold, because it has created systems and ways of thinking that affect us in ways that most of us are not even conscious about ... You think you don't see color, that you aren't racist, but I'm telling you that you live in a system that does it without your permission. It is happening to you when you don't even know it.⁶⁹

White Christians need not hold racial division and inequality as their intention in order for their actions to perpetuate that division and inequality. The denial and defensiveness (the anger) that white Christians hold onto in order to avoid confronting the grief of this sin is all that these systems need to continue to thrive.

Conclusion

Tracing the involvement of the white church throughout the history of racial injustice in the United States reveals a pattern. Many well-meaning white Christians did not understand the reality of their complicity when choosing to remain silent amidst the face of oppression. They passively stood alongside those who chose complicity. Tearing down structures of white supremacy is frightening, uncomfortable, and, for some, undesirable. Eddo-Lodge explains that, among white people, fear is the root of this. "At the core of the fear is the belief that anything that doesn't represent white homogeneity exists only to eras it. That multiculturalism is the start of a slippery slope towards the destruction of Western civilisation (sic)."⁷⁰ This may not be a conscious thought among all white people, but it is there, increasing the complex relationship between grief and guilt. Therefore, some deem it more convenient to choose denial and remain in tacit complicity. While those of progressive denominations stepped into the fray, they often

⁶⁹ Michelle Lang, *Elephants in the Church*.

⁷⁰ Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, 118.

stepped on people of color in the process. Celebrated theologian, James Cone, explains that white Christians have done this by being “inclusive” on their terms, expecting Black Americans to integrate into white worship styles, white values, and conversations on white terms.⁷¹ As members of the dominant culture, white Christians use a language of rights to maintain the status quo, rather than setting aside their rights to include others, author and scholar, Daniel Tagliarina writes.⁷² He further explains that the “Christian Right’s” victimization claims of persecution and loss of rights framed as civil rights issues, further marginalize the profoundly oppressed groups in the United States. Such claims fail to recognize that a loss of social privilege does not equate to the oppression of people of color, nor does it encourage people of color to engage with them in relationships of trust.⁷³

White, progressive Christians may not be any closer to getting it “right.” These Christians are regularly guilty of what Mariana Ortega calls, “being knowingly, lovingly ignorant.”⁷⁴ It is not enough for white Christians to learn about people of color and attempt to share their voices, as it is too easy to fall into the trap of turning Black people and non-Black people of color “into something that can be used to further their own desires.”⁷⁵ A white Christian who is working toward understanding must check and

⁷¹ James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, Reprint edition, (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1997), 17.

⁷² Daniel Tagliarina, “Power, Privilege and Rights: How the Powerful and Powerless Create a Vernacular of Rights,” *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 6 (June 3, 2015): 1194, <http://www.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1047203>.

⁷³ Tagliarina, “Power, Privilege and Rights,” 1196.

⁷⁴ Mariana Ortega, “Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color,” *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (August 1, 2006): 56–74, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01113.x/abstract>.

⁷⁵ Ortega, “Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant,” 60-66.

question her or his motives and claims. This check is provided by the knowledge gained through reading, and also through relationships built with Black people and non-Black people of color. These relationships result in actual conversations that allow Black people and non-Black people of color to speak truth to their thoughts and actions.⁷⁶ It is through these relationships and conversations that denial and anger have the best hope of being swept away.

This chapter has focused on the myth of Christian intervention in systems of oppression and privilege that have existed in the United States before becoming an official nation. This myth, though a false construct, has allowed white Christians to claim denial of complicity that has, in turn, perpetuated racism throughout the centuries. The guilt and grief have become compounded resulting in deep stagnation. Chapter Three explores what stagnation in the denial and anger stages looks like today, along with many of the actions taken by white Christians and churches. This is best explained by Kübler-Ross's "bargaining" stage.

⁷⁶ Ortega, "Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant," 63-67.

CHAPTER 3:
MOTIVES, CONSEQUENCES AND BREAKTHROUGHS

Grief Cycles and Motives

There is a strong temptation to view the stages of grief as linear and progressive. This view could not be further from reality. In the forward to the anniversary edition of Kübler-Ross' *On Death and Dying*, Dr. Ira Byock explains, "... [the stages of grief] have been criticized for suggesting a formulaic progression of phases through the dying process. Anyone reading the book will recognize this characterization as a simplistic and inaccurate representation of what she described. In *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross made it clear that these emotional states and adaptive mechanisms occur in a variety of patterns."¹ At the same time, grief is cyclical, so it is also possible to become stuck in one stage or an ongoing cycle of two or three stages. Pastor and scholar, Rodger Murchison, writes, "You can recognize a person who is "stuck" in one of these stages when his or her attitude, behaviors, relationships, or even theology become defined by one of the stages of grief over a prolonged period of time."²

As indicated in Chapter One, it is my assertion that the white church, presented with the ever-mounting evidence of its complicity with white supremacy and systems of oppression, has become stuck in a cycle of denial, anger, and the occasional bargaining. Murchison explains this "stuckness" by writing, "a grieving person may have a difficult

¹ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 10.

² Rodger Murchison, "When the Grief-Stricken Get Grief-Stuck: Two Techniques to Help the Grieving Complete the Journey," *Leadership Journal* (2003): 92, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A100404529/AONE?u=newb64238&sid=AONE&xid=4ce4521c>.

time accepting the new reality and might not know how to move through the pain to begin a new life.”³ In the past, white Christians and their leaders have been complicit with systemic oppression in the United States by merely denying such systems exist.⁴ White Christian leaders declare that Christians should be colorblind. Many also attribute racial tension and oppression to an inevitable result of The Fall. As such, these leaders have allowed their congregations to believe that oppression such as racism is a matter of individual sin. If a white person feels their heart is clear of the sin of racism, there is no motivation to further research the outcries from people of color trapped within the systems that white people cannot readily see.

The realistic view of church history in the United States, as explored in Chapter Two, reveals a pattern of mostly well-meaning, white Christians who did not understand the reality of their complicity by choosing to remain silent in the face of oppression. It also spotlights those who chose complicity out of fear, discomfort and a lack of desire to engage, instead of working towards tearing down the structures of white supremacy. Over time, blindness to white privilege and supremacy has continued to develop among many white Christians, making it even more difficult to see the damage much less disrupt the systems.

There is a powerlessness that accompanies grieving, which causes those who grieve to look for ways to regain power, even if it is through utter denial. Psychologist Lucy Hope Poxon explains, “It seems likely that intense emotions such as anger, feeling exposed and vulnerable are experienced when powerless, and in order to reduce the

³ Murchison, “When the Grief-Stricken Get Grief-Stuck,” 93.

⁴ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 90.

distress the participants redress the power imbalance where they can.”⁵ White Christians who recognize complicity and the suffering of Black people and non-Black people of color experience a feeling that they are powerless to end the cycles and systems of oppression. The discomfort of coming face-to-face with one’s complicity and powerlessness can create a denial/anger cycle leading to a rigid pushback against the idea of white privilege, and particularly Christian complicity.

At this point, motives for being unable to move forward must enter into the discussion. I contend with other scholars that white Christians, faced with the white church’s complicity and perpetuation of systems of oppression against people of color in the United States, are grieving not only the general sense of that complicity but two much more specific losses at different levels.⁶ First, white Christians are grieving the loss of the idea of being “good.” Second, at a much deeper level, white Christians are grieving the loss of their entitlement to privilege.

Grieving the Idea of Being Good

As mentioned in previous chapters, there is what Robin DiAngelo calls “the good/bad binary.”⁷ She explains that this binary is “perhaps the most effective adaptation of racism in recent history,” because of the perception that “you could not be a good

⁵ Lucy Hope Poxon, “‘Doing the Same Puzzle Over and Over Again’: A Qualitative Analysis of Feeling Stuck in Grief.” University of East London, 2013, 87, <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/57984/>.

⁶ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 47. Rah, in discussing the funeral dirge, states that it “recognizes suffering but also recognizes sinful behavior that contributed to that suffering.” In grieving the loss of being good or righteous, we grieve our behavior and the pain it has caused. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 35. Dobbs-Allsopp speaks of the mental wounds caused by suffering and grief, noting that lament aids the process of binding such wounds.

⁷ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 71.

person and participate in racism; only bad people were racist.”⁸ Speaker and author, Austin Channing Brown, expands on this, “When you believe niceness disproves the presence of racism, it’s easy to start believing bigotry is rare, and that the label *racist* should be applied only to mean-spirited, intentional acts of racism.”⁹

This binary allows two critical things. One, it allows white Christians to look at their individual actions and attitudes and determine that they are not racist because they do not commit overtly racist acts. Two, it allows white Christians to engage in what Emerson and Smith call the miracle motif. “The miracle motif is the theologically rooted idea that as more individuals become Christians, social and personal problems will be solved automatically.”¹⁰ In other words, Christians are good people because they are new in Christ, therefore when more people are led to Christ, the fewer “bad” things, like racism, will exist. Unfortunately, this ideology completely ignores systemic racism and the ways in which white people are complicit. The rationale holds that even if individual Christians do “bad” things, it cannot reflect on the church as a whole. The authors of *Forgive Us* write, “Our captivity to the hyper-individualism of Western Culture may lead us to acknowledge that individual Christians have acted in an unworthy manner, but it often does not lead us to recognize our own complicity in corporate sinfulness.”¹¹

The words racism, racist, white privilege, and white supremacy are offensive, especially when directed toward “nice white people.” Austin Channing Brown explains,

⁸ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 71.

⁹ Austin Channing Brown, *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* (New York: Convergent Books, 2018), 101.

¹⁰ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 117.

¹¹ Cannon et al., *Forgive Us*, 206.

“It challenges their self-identification as good people. Sadly, most white people are more worried about being called racist than about whether or not their actions are in fact racist or harmful.”¹² For example, if a white person admits to racism or privilege, even on the smallest scale, the good/bad binary forces them to admit that they are a bad person. The grief of this is too much to bear, so they retreat into denial or defensiveness (anger) to resist having to acknowledge it. Criticism and rebuke is not received if this binary is not first resolved. Upon resolution, the realization that one can admit to racism or privilege without being a “bad person,” the same criticism and rebuke is heard from people of color with the understanding that the lived experiences of Black people and non-Black people of color are crucial to understanding how to end systemic oppression.

White Christians stuck in grief relate to the good/bad binary and often express denial in the form of intentions. When made aware of racist behavior, particularly micro-aggressions, the knee-jerk response may be, “But that was not my intention!” or “I didn’t mean to hurt anyone!” In *So You Want to Talk About Race*, activist and author, Ijeoma Oluo, makes the point that a white person’s intentions have little to do with how actions, attitudes, and words may have harmed people of color.¹³ Defending intentions is another way of centering whiteness as a form of denial. As Austin Channing Brown explains, “This is largely because those who believe in white innocence don’t have enough of a knowledge base to participate meaningfully in the discussion... They are unfamiliar with the lexicon on race, not realizing their words have particular meanings.”¹⁴ With either

¹² Austin Channing Brown, *I’m Still Here*, 104.

¹³ Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race* (New York: Seal Press, 2018), 221-222.

¹⁴ Austin Channing Brown, *I’m Still Here*, 105-106.

tears or anger, a defensive white person lashes out at the person, trying to explain why the actions or words were problematic. Sociologist and pastor, Michael Eric Dyson, offers the gentle rebuke that, if people of color are willing to risk white wrath by calling individuals or groups out for bad behavior, white Christians can listen and learn without devolving into defensive fragility.¹⁵

According to Kübler-Ross, when a person has a loss, they face the truth of what is happening in their lives, and they may only be capable of stepping away from denial and anger for a limited time. She writes, “They may briefly talk about the reality of their situation, and suddenly indicate their inability to look at it realistically any longer.”¹⁶ Therefore, white Christians should face the truth of their anger and denial regularly. Murchison notes, “The first thing we can do to help is to enable them to recognize the conclusion of the old life and the beginning of the new.”¹⁷ It is not the responsibility, however, of Black people or non-Black people of color to help white Christians face this truth. Instead, it is the responsibility of other white Christians to put this reality in front of those who are stuck and encourage them to move to a new phase of life and learning.

Grieving the Idea of Entitlement to Privilege

It is crucial to start this portion of the exploration with an understanding that privilege is not something a white person can simply give up or choose not to accept.

¹⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017), 95-96. Dyson, like Oluo, points out the white people are “emotionally immature about race,” and unable to handle even gentle rebuke without feeling victimized by having “hurt feelings.”

¹⁶ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 54.

¹⁷ Murchison, “When the Grief-Stricken Get Grief-Stuck,” 93.

DiAngelo explains, “The term *privilege* refers to the rights, benefits, and resources that are purported to be shared by all but are only consistently available to the dominant group.”¹⁸ She goes on to write, “In the United States, only whites have collective social and institutional power and privilege over people of color.”¹⁹ White privilege is so deeply embedded in the society and structure of the United States that white is accepted as the norm and center, while all else is compared to and defined by whiteness.²⁰

This level of privilege is not something a white Christian can just set aside. What can be set aside is one’s sense of entitlement toward that privilege. Pastor and author, Daniel Hill, explains, “Becoming a Christian who is also white should mean rejecting the ideology of white superiority. Our allegiance to Jesus should enable us to recognize that this ideology is antithetical to the Bible as is any system, ideology, or narrative that attempts to position one group of people as superior.”²¹

Grief comes when white Christians begin to set aside the bedrock notion of the United States that white people are superior, and people of color are somehow inferior. Shedding this notion of superiority is, on the surface, a relatively easy task. Removing the deeper level issue of entitlement to privilege is a more complicated task. Hill writes, “conversion gives us the *ability to begin* divesting ourselves from the grips of white superiority.”²² What follows the initial determination to walk away from white

¹⁸ Robin DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016), 52.

¹⁹ DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White?*, 89.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

²¹ Daniel Hill, *White Awake: An Honest Look at What It Means to Be White* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2017), 96.

²² Hill, *White Awake*, 97.

superiority and privilege is what Hill refers to as “disorientation.”²³ It is disorienting to become aware of the layers of privilege given to white people. The disorientation becomes more profound when the sense of entitlement to those privileges is challenged.

When making the determination to set aside entitlement to white privilege, each day is a new revelation of ways in which society deems whiteness the center of everything. It requires vigilance to recognize the privileges and set aside the feeling that white people merit those privileges. A deeper level of grief is experienced by white Christians with each recognition. Later in this chapter, and in Chapter Five, I will explore what Hill calls “awakening.”²⁴ For a moment, though, let us briefly reflect on how awakening to privilege and systems of oppression cause white Christians to act out of what many call “white fragility.”

White fragility, as DiAngelo defines it, happens “When ideologies such as colorblindness, meritocracy, and individualism are challenged (and) intense emotional reactions are common.”²⁵ To some, white fragility seems like an insult thrown at white people. The reality is that grief and fragility go hand in hand. Kübler-Ross describes that a person faced with loss can find themselves in a fragile state, which causes them to act in ways that are not necessarily typical. “The tragedy is perhaps that we do not think of the reasons for (person’s) anger and take it personally, when it has originally nothing or little to do with the people who become the target of the anger.”²⁶ This seems true for white

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Hill, *White Awake*, 141-159.

²⁵ DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White?*, 245.

²⁶ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 65.

Christians when made aware that they have been, knowingly or unknowingly, part of a sinful system that, as the authors of *Forgive Us* explains, “asserts that the full expression of the image of God can only be found in certain races.”²⁷ It makes complete sense that this considerable revelation causes white Christians to retreat into denial and anger. Being fragile is not the sin but failing to move forward perpetuates the sin. Fragility is denial and anger wrapped together and is an indicator that something needs to change.

Entitlement to white privilege allows white Christians to hang Sallman’s *Head of Christ* in homes and churches without a second thought to the message sent to those who enter that space. It allows white Christians to, as Austin Channing Brown explains, “ignore the personhood of people of color and instead make the feelings of whiteness the most important thing.”²⁸ Setting aside entitlement requires white Christians to end the season of silence. Author and activist, Drew G. I. Hart writes, of the “four hundred years of assault on Black humanity” during which “the white Christian community has allowed...powerful myths to crush the most vulnerable among us calling into question the degree to which the crucified one has been at the center of the church.”²⁹ Becoming aware of one’s complicity with oppression, recognizing one’s privilege, and understanding that one’s entitlement to privilege has bred silence in the face of suffering leaves white Christians with a large mass of grief to untangle.

²⁷ Cannon, et al, *Forgive Us*, 98.

²⁸ Austin Channing Brown, *I’m Still Here*, 89.

²⁹ Drew G. I. Hart, *Trouble I’ve Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism*, (Harrisonburg: Herald Press, 2016), 12.

What Does It Look Like to Be “Stuck?”

How can the white evangelical church see that they are stuck in the initial stages of grief? At the heart of it all, “stuck” looks like silence and complicity. Journalist Edward Gilbreath states, “When we silently enjoy the benefits of racism; when we do not protest injustice to those who are poor, powerless, and oppressed; when we decide it’s not our problem and go on enjoying the fruits of a racist system, then we too are racist.”³⁰ This stark statement eliminates the soft language of “being complicit” and calls out silence and complicity as racism. Does this mean that the silent, white evangelical community is, in effect, racist?

In the past, this was a much easier question to answer as racism among white Christians was detected by the overt action and attitudes such as using racial slurs, using the Bible to condone slavery and segregation, and even participation by white Christians in lynchings. Tisby writes, “Since the 1970s, Christian complicity in racism has become more difficult to discern. It is hidden, but that does not mean it no longer exists. As we look more closely at the realm of politics, we see that Christian complicity with racism remains, even as it has taken on subtler forms. Again, we must remember: racism never goes away; it adapts.”³¹ White Christians do not need to actively support racist structures in order to perpetuate racism as it adapts. Tisby continues, “Simply by allowing the political system to work as it was designed – to grant advantages to white people and to

³⁰ Edward Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical’s Inside View of White Christianity*, 1st ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 49.

³¹ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 155.

put people of color at various disadvantages – many well-meaning Christians (have been) complicit in racism.”³²

White Christians have participated in efforts to promote reconciliation. In the 1990s and early 2000s, organizations such as Promise Keepers developed programs to move the evangelical church toward a new era of racial healing. The efforts ultimately stalled as the call for reconciliation focused on the actions of individuals and racialized structures in the United States remained unaddressed. Emerson and Smith write, “A major step (toward reconciliation) demands recognizing social structures of inequality, and that all Christians must resist them together... The racial reconciliation message given to the mass (white) audience is individual reconciliation.”³³

American evangelicals are not the only Christians to lean toward individualism. Emerson and Smith further explain, “For progressives, as for evangelicals, the individual is central, progressives believe morality to be the prerogative of each individual.”³⁴ This is not just an evangelical issue; this is a white, American Christian issue. Tisby explains that Black, American Christians have a different view. “Speaking very broadly, Black Christians tend to agree that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is necessary for a saving faith. However, they also recognize that addressing America’s racial issues will require systemic change.”³⁵

³² Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 171.

³³ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 55, 67.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁵ Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 176.

Being stuck in denial and anger also has the unfortunate characteristic of blaming victims of oppression for their own suffering. Emerson and Smith offer the following five quotes as examples of white, evangelical Christians blaming Black people for the problem of racism:

[African Americans] have trouble getting out of that mindset [of oppression] and not seeing areas where progress has been made. They will attribute any problem to race where it may not be a racial issue at all. I may be a personal conflict and not have anything to do with race. (From an evangelical woman attending a Nazarene church.)

I see a little bit of a problem with a kind of reverse racism in the Black community. We reached a point where a lot of whites want to accept Blacks and give equal opportunity and so forth. I see some sort of resistance to that in the Black community. (From an evangelical Presbyterian woman.)

The problem is the Black people. A lot of the Black people do not to see white people even working with them...It's not so much white against Black, it's Black against white. (From another evangelical Presbyterian woman.)

I believe there are Black that hold a grudge about slavery still. None of us that are alive today, first of all, were alive then. So don't hold it against me for something that happened year and years ago. (From a nondenominational evangelical man.)

You have, unfortunately for the Blacks, a lot of leaders who want to keep them in this slavery stuff and make them think that the white man is trying to keep them down. I think they teach them this as a child...they won't forget it and leave it and move on. I never had slaves. Neither did my father. And I have no problem with a Black man, but what I do have a problem with is a lot of their agenda, what is told to them. (From a Pentecostal man.)³⁶

These quotes resemble the consensus among evangelicals, according to The Barna Group. "Evangelicals are more than twice as likely as the general population to 'strongly disagree' that people of color are socially disadvantaged because of race (28% compared

³⁶ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 81-82.

to 12%).” The report goes on to state, “Seven in 10 white people ‘*strongly*’ and ‘*somewhat*’ agree that prejudicial treatment of them is a problem in our society today (71%).”³⁷ According to Michael Emerson, and historian, J. Russell Hawkins, “Sixty-two percent of white evangelicals attribute poverty among Black people to a lack of motivation, while 31 percent of Black Christians said the same. And just 27 percent of white evangelicals attribute the wealth gap to racial discrimination, while 72 percent of Black Christians cite discrimination as a major cause of the discrepancy.”³⁸

The tendency of white Christians to blame the victims, Black people, and non-Black people of color, is considered by Poxon to be an “avoidant behavior.” According to Poxon, “this tendency to blame others can form an obstacle to adapting to negative life events (Garnefski, et al., 2002) which may offer an insight into how people get stuck.”³⁹ The avoidant behavior allows a grieving person some semblance of control over the situation, but contributes to their remaining stuck in the denial stage of grief. Emerson and Smith explain that, “The cultural tools and intergroup isolation of evangelicals lead them to construct reality so as to individualize and minimize the problem...suggesting social causes of the race problem challenges the cultural elements with which they construct their lives.”⁴⁰ As educator, Wendy Zagray Warren writes, “There seems to be a misconception that avoiding truth will somehow allow us to evade the accompanying

³⁷ “Black Lives Matter and Racial Tension in America,” *Barna Group*, accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/Black-lives-matter-and-racial-tension-in-america/>.

³⁸ Michael O. Emerson and J. Russell Hawkins, “Viewed in Black and White: Conservative Protestantism, Racial Issues, and Oppositional Politics,” in *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the Present*, 2nd ed., ed. Mark A. Noll and Luke E. Harlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 335.

³⁹ Poxon, “Doing the Same Puzzle Over and Over Again,” 93.

⁴⁰ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 89.

pain and shame.”⁴¹ Evangelical individuals and communities can develop avoidant behavior, which justifies silence. What is there to talk about if racism is only about individual actions and responsibility on the part of those claiming to be victims?

Consequences

Being stuck in grief may allow white Christians to temporarily evade the pain that inevitably comes with recognizing and admitting to complicity, but being stuck also leads to consequences that will be difficult to overcome. As Lang explains,

The early American church established as normal and acceptable the vehicle of racism as a way of life. We sold out part of our Christian convictions for the establishment of this place called America by choosing to enslave people ... We’ve inherited, we’ve absorbed a condition called racism, and every day we are consciously or more likely unconsciously living into it.⁴²

Denial and complicity on the part of white Christians support and maintain the status quo in the United States. Rather than resisting what the authors of *Forgive Us* call, “systems that are expressions of human sinfulness, expressions that are an affront to the holiness of God,”⁴³ white Christians have historically supported and perpetuated these systems. The white church, with all its power and privileges, has not developed a unified counter-narrative to white supremacy and white centering, so the status quo remains.

⁴¹ Wendy Zagray Warren, “Choosing to See: What’s a White Person Like Me Doing in a Reflective Place Like This?” In *What Does It Mean to Be White in America? Breaking the White Code of Silence, A Collection of Personal Narratives*, ed. Gabrielle David, Sean Frederick Forbes, Deborah Irving, and Tara Betts, 1st ed. (New York: 2Leaf Press, 2016), 449.

⁴² Lang, *Elephants in the Church: Racism*.

⁴³ Cannon, et al, *Forgive Us*, 97.

Separation and Loss

On July 4, 2016, Grammy award-winning, hip-hop artist, Lecrae, tweeted a photo of African Americans in a field picking cotton, with the caption “My family on July 4th 1776.”⁴⁴ As a Black Christian, most of Lecrae’s support, at that time, had come from a white evangelical fan base. After this tweet those white evangelicals supporters turned on him. White, evangelical Twitter exploded and, as Hill writes, white Christians “protested what they perceived to be an unnecessarily provocative message.”⁴⁵ Hill continues, “The charge leveled at Lecrae was the same charge that every Christian who does justice work in the name of Christ hears at some point: He was accused of making everything a ‘race issue’ instead of a ‘gospel issue.’”⁴⁶ Further, Tisby notes, “when Lecrae said he was praying for Ferguson, the first response in a long thread of replies reads ‘#Pray4Police’ as if in rebuttal to the need to pray for the Black people affected by the tragedy.”⁴⁷ In response to the backlash, Lecrae wrote an op-ed piece for the *Huffington Post* explaining his frustration. “I hit a serious low on tour at one point. I was done with American Christian culture. No voice of my own. No authenticity. I was a puppet...I’d seen so much fakeness from those who claimed to be my brothers and sisters that I didn’t even know how to talk to my Heavenly Father.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Lecrae, Twitter feed, July 4, 2016, Tweet.
<https://twitter.com/lecræ/status/750012773212401665?lang=en>.

⁴⁵ Hill, *White Awake*, 92.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 181.

⁴⁸ Lecrae Moore, “The Pains of Humanity Have Been Draining Me,” *Huffington Post*, October 20, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/i-declare-Black-lives-matter_b_5808be36e4b0dd54ce385412.

Lecrae's dilemma highlights the separation that is a consequence of white Christian complicity. Rather than extending compassion or understanding to Black people and non-Black people of color, the tendency is to retreat into calls for civility and "unity" in Christ. Calls for justice somehow become translated as anti-Gospel rhetoric. "Black Lives Matter" is translated to "All Lives Matter," or "Blue Lives Matter."

Idealizing working hard, as a way of healing the class struggle in America, is one of the most insidious deflections within discussions of racism. Writer and speaker, Ijeoma Oluo, responds that class issues cannot be solved without first addressing racism: "Racism in America exists to exclude people of color from opportunity and progress so that there is more profit for others deemed superior...in just about every demographic of socio-political-economic well-being, Black and brown people are consistently getting less."⁴⁹

Denying that racism and white supremacy is as gospel issue results in a schisms between white Christians and Christian Black people and non-Black people of color.

Michael Eric Dyson, offers this prayer in response to the separation:

I am beyond rage, Oh Lord, at the utter complicity of even good white folk who claim that they care, and yet their voices don't ring out loudly and consistently against an injustice so grave that it sends us to our graves with frightening frequency. They wring their hands in frustration to prove that they empathize with our plight – that is, those who care enough to do so – and then throw them up in surrender.

What we mostly hear is deafening silence. What we mostly see is crushing indifference. Lord, what are we to do in a nation of people who claim to love you and hold fast to your word and way and yet they let their brothers and sisters murder us like we are animals?⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race* (New York: Seal Press, 2018), 12-13.

⁵⁰ Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop*, 31-32.

Dyson's prayer is a stark reminder that racism is not just an issue to be debated. White Christians who remain stuck, and therefore complicit, continue to widen the schism and inflict pain on siblings-in-Christ. Brooke Hempell, Vice President of Research at The Barna Group, supports this:

More than any other segment of the population, white evangelical Christians demonstrate a blindness to the struggle of their African American brothers and sisters ... This is a dangerous reality for the modern church. Jesus and his disciples actively sought to affirm and restore the marginalized and obliterate divisions between groups of people.⁵¹

A further consequence of the white church's inability to move forward from denial and anger is how it compromises the witness of Christ's redemptive power. The authors of *Forgive Us* point out that "The model given in both Testaments is to live counter-culturally as a model and a blessing to the world around us... Instead of pointing out the sins of 'American culture,' shouldn't the church instead make confessing its own sins a priority?"⁵² The Church exists to point the world toward Christ yet, as Lang explains, "We laid aside the expressed will of God for our own outcomes."⁵³ The church in the United States centered whiteness and in doing so, the white church has participated in sin rather than standing as a witness against it.

One profoundly troubling consequence of the failure of the white, evangelical church to move forward may be the demise of the white evangelical church as we know it. Author and professor, MaryKate Morse, writes, "The battle for Christ's kingdom

⁵¹ "Black Lives Matter and Racial Tension in America," *Barna Group*, accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/black-lives-matter-and-racial-tension-in-america/>.

⁵² Cannon et al., *Forgive Us*, 29.

⁵³ Lang, *Elephants in the Church*.

today, for the hearts and minds of the next generation, is centered on racism.”⁵⁴ That next generation is concerned about the racist history of this country and the church. The Barna Group notes, “Millennials are most likely to support the message of Black Lives Matter (45%),”⁵⁵ and “Only 2 percent of Millennials haven’t considered the impact of slavery on Black Americans today.”⁵⁶ The Barna Group quotes Maria Garriott, author and consultant for Parakaleo, “Millennials recognize the world is multiethnic and wonder why their churches aren’t. They are hungry for authentic relationships, and a faith that actively engages with the world.”⁵⁷ There is a sense that, for the white evangelical church to survive, something must change. Tisby writes, “If the church hopes to see meaningful progress in race relations during the twenty-first century, then it must undertake bold, costly actions with an attitude of unprecedented urgency.”⁵⁸ Bold, costly actions will require reimagining the steps forward in ways that force the white church to become “unstuck.”

Bargaining or Baby Steps

The third stage of grief in Kübler-Ross’ model is bargaining. According to Kübler-Ross, “The bargaining is really an attempt to postpone; it has to include a prize

⁵⁴ MaryKate Morse, “The Greatest Obstacle to the Gospel Today: Racism and the White Church,” *Missio Alliance*, last modified December 14, 2018, <https://www.missioalliance.org/the-greatest-obstacle-to-the-gospel-today-racism-and-the-white-church/>.

⁵⁵ “Black Lives Matter and Racial Tension in America,” *Barna Group*.

⁵⁶ “Half of Practicing Christians Say History of Slavery Still Impacts the U.S.,” *Barna Group*, accessed July 29, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/slavery-still-impacts/>.

⁵⁷ “Half of Practicing Christians Say History of Slavery Still Impacts the U.S.,” *Barna Group*.

⁵⁸ Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 1.

offered ‘for good behavior,’ it also sets a self-imposed ‘deadline,’ ... and it includes an implicit promise that the (person) will not ask for more if this one postponement is granted.”⁵⁹ There are times when white Christians and the white church engage in bargaining as it relates to racism and white supremacy. While these instances do not appear to be as straightforward as Kübler-Ross’ formula above, they are nonetheless an attempt to bargain. It is not always clear with whom the bargain is made — possibly with God, or with persons of color or, more likely, with their sense of guilt.

In a bit of a crossover between denial and bargaining, the white Christian resistance to the message, “Black Lives Matter” is one example of the deflection used to avoid moving forward in sacrificial work. Many Christians struggle with the phrase *Black lives matter* because of its connection to the Black Lives Matter organization. Tisby writes, “The organization that developed to channel passion into long-term change includes a strong platform advocating for gay, queer, and transgender rights, a position that is contrary to a conservative evangelical definition of marriage.”⁶⁰ Even though Black Lives Matter, as a phrase and an organization, provides an opportunity to support communities of people who are victims of racist structures, the phrase “all lives matter,” is the compromise that white Christians have struck in an attempt to bargain. “All lives matter” is a sanitized version that feels like a good solution. Unfortunately, as Tisby continues to explain, “The American evangelical church has yet to form a movement as

⁵⁹ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 96.

⁶⁰ Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 180.

viable and potent that addresses the necessary concept that Black lives do indeed matter.”⁶¹

White Christian bargaining returns full circle to the good/bad binary discussed earlier. As a person or organization struggles to move forward in their grief, the cyclical waves of denial and anger can move rapidly from guilt to shame. As mentioned earlier, the discomfort of guilt can cause a spiral into shame, which is not productive. Hill writes, “Shame makes allowance for us to wallow in self-pity and to sink into a hole sustained by a looped message that broadcasts some combination of ‘I am bad/unlovable/stupid/unworthy/ unredeemable’... so unhealthy coping mechanisms quickly surface.”⁶²

One of these coping mechanisms is to seek ways to “fix it” without creating any further discomfort. This is, in essence, a promise to do good if all will be forgiven. Poxon likens this to doing the same puzzle over and over again. “Puzzling is likely to represent (the person’s) attempts to find meaning and resolve internal conflict.”⁶³ For example, a group of white Christians becoming aware of the church’s complicity in structures of white supremacy may determine that the only way to assuage guilt and begin to atone is to do something that will help people who have been oppressed by these structures. They create a fund to help local people of color, which is a noble idea. The problem is not the idea but rather, the execution. Birthed from shame comes a gesture that does not bring transformation, but instead, an attempt to bargain away the pain. The church and individuals write checks, and the matter is never thought of again until the next sign of

⁶¹ Ibid., 180.

⁶² Hill, *White Awake*, 104.

⁶³ Poxon, “Doing the Same Puzzle Over And Over Again,” 84.

discomfort. The privilege was maintained while “helping,” without any real sacrifice or any relationship(s) developed.

Bargaining and the resultant behavior may seem disingenuous or even passive, but it is a normal response to grief. Author and psychotherapist, Robin Grey notes, “Some people attempt to make a deal between themselves and a higher power in the face of irreversible change such as ‘If I promise to be good from this point onwards then maybe the consequences of the loss won’t be the same.’ It can take a long time for some people to begin to accept the reality of their loss and to begin to let go of all the strategies that they have used to deny the finality of change.”⁶⁴

White Christians grieving their loss, and complicity will naturally shy away from further pain until ready to move to the next stage toward acceptance. Shame must give way to guilt, which is no less uncomfortable than shame, but far more productive. Brené Brown explains that shame results in the notion that, “I *am* bad,” while guilt recognizes, “I *have done* something bad.”⁶⁵ To make this shift, Brown explains that a person must “own the story and...rewrite the ending.”⁶⁶ Lang offers excellent insight into this process, explaining, “It’s okay to say ‘I have been and am being shaped by a racist system that has centered white people from the beginning. Resistance is a search for deliverance from the system.’”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Robin Grey, *Bereavement, Loss and Learning Disabilities: A Guide for Professionals and Carers* (London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010), 38, ProQuest.

⁶⁵ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 72-73.

⁶⁶ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 80.

⁶⁷ Lang, *Elephants in the Church*.

Breaking the Cycle and Moving Toward the Next Stage

Stepping out of the denial-anger-bargaining cycle requires determination and a fair amount of courage. This process of stepping out is where white, Christian leaders become a crucial part of the process for the white, evangelical church. In order to break down systems of white supremacy and privilege, particularly within the church, those seeking to dismantle will first need to embrace the language that deals with the issues surrounding the systems. *Racism, privilege, domination, subordination, oppression, and supremacy* are difficult words to normalize in daily speech. Open dialogue must exist in order for the white church to identify the ideas and repercussions of each word.⁶⁸ As noted author and sociologist, Allan Johnson, details, “We can’t talk about it if we can’t use the words ... Once you name it, you can think, talk, and write about it, make sense of it by seeing how it’s connected to other things that explain it, and point toward solutions.”⁶⁹ This requires stepping out of what DiAngelo calls white, racial insulation in order to learn where racially coded language perpetuates systems of oppression. She writes that even in courses on multiculturalism or diversity, “it is far more the norm...to use racially coded language such as ‘urban,’ ‘inner city,’ and ‘disadvantaged,’ but rarely use ‘white’ or ‘over-advantaged’ or ‘privileged’” because the latter trigger defensiveness in the dominant culture — white people.⁷⁰ The first step toward breaking free from being “stuck” in grief is to become comfortable with the language that has triggered that grief.

⁶⁸ Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 8-9.

⁶⁹ Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 9.

⁷⁰ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 100.

It is also impossible to understand racism and racist systems without hearing from the people who are most affected by these systems. For the second step, Allie Bruce suggests that the most critical thing white people can do is become educated by reading books and articles, watching videos, following news sources that provide insight into the lived reality of persons of color, and listening. Rather than asking people of color to provide this education, Bruce stresses the importance of taking personal responsibility and doing one's own research.⁷¹

Tisby echoes Bruce's recommendation to become aware of historical and contemporary racist structures by employing what he calls The ARC of Racial Justice.⁷² "The ARC (Awareness, Relationships, Commitment) of racial justice helps distinguish different types of antiracist action. They are not formulaic; they can happen nonsequentially and simultaneously. Nor should this process ever be considered complete."⁷³ While these three parts of the ARC framework are all important, they cannot work without first expanding awareness. Tisby suggests watching documentaries about racial history, particularly in the United States; diversifying social media feeds to include racial and ethnic minorities, as well as alternative political viewpoints; exploring websites and podcasts that amplify racial and ethnic minorities; and doing your own internet searches before "asking your Black friend to explain an issue to you."⁷⁴

⁷¹ Allie Jane Bruce, "On Being White: A Raw, Honest Conversation," *Children & Libraries*; *Chicago* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 5, ProQuest.

⁷² Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 194.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

When expanding one's awareness of racial issues, there is a temptation to find the nearest person of color and treat them as a personal instructor regarding racism and oppression. Racism is a broad issue that one person of color cannot adequately address because they cannot speak on behalf of all people of color. People of color write thousands of books, articles, movies, plays, and internet memes, and they are available to all. It is the responsibility of each white Christian leader to become educated in order to identify and come to grips with personal "internalized notions of racial superiority and inferiority." As Allie Bruce suggests, this is best accomplished by seeking out like-minded others who can engage in honest evaluation and awareness-building exercises.⁷⁵

Tisby warns, however, that awareness is not enough. "No matter how aware you are, your knowledge will remain abstract and theoretical until you care about the people who face the negative consequences of racism."⁷⁶ Carolyn Dupont writes, there is a "continuing segregation of American life today — a reality nowhere more present than in churches."⁷⁷ Hill recalls the time when he realized that, "My closest friends were white. My most trusted mentors were white. The teachers and theologians shaping me were white. The authors planting new ideas in my mind were white. The church I worked at was white."⁷⁸ This is not an invitation to go out and "find a Black friend," but rather, to step out of what Tisby calls "homogeneous social networks" and develop interracial

⁷⁵ Bruce, "On Being White," 5.

⁷⁶ Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 195.

⁷⁷ Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975*, Reprint ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 13.

⁷⁸ Hill, *White Awake*, 7.

relationships by “finding new places to hang out” including grocery stores, restaurants, and other social spaces.⁷⁹

Once a leader is aware of their own biases and privileges, the systems built around white privilege and supremacy become more recognizable. The leader can then begin to speak the truth about those systems and move a congregation or community toward the same recognition. Short of a personal encounter with these systems, however, it can be difficult to convince white Americans, even in the church, to put in the kind of work required for such an understanding. The church or community will learn best by being exposed to the same things that shaped and informed their leader. Pastor and author, Soong-Chan Rah, writes, “Multicultural learning, then, must be experienced through the context of community. Learning in community occurs through shared experience.”⁸⁰ Increasing interracial community in the church creates a shift in thinking, but also a shift in the theological understanding of how others view history.

Black Americans and non-Black people of color have been taught to view history with a particular eye to the suffering of the marginalized and oppressed. Therefore, they carry that forward in their reflection of the gospel message today. Black Americans, in particular, identify with the suffering Christ through the lens of their historical suffering. James Cone notes, “The lynching tree — so strikingly similar to the cross on Golgotha — should have a prominent place in American images of Jesus’ death. But it does not.”⁸¹ When mourning the suffering Christ, white Christians seem to define that suffering as a

⁷⁹ Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 196.

⁸⁰ Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2010), 148.

⁸¹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 30.

one-time action performed to save individual souls from eternal torment, and to reconcile humans to God. Black Christians, however, deeply identify with the suffering of Christ as their own. Because of slavery and dehumanization of Black people, they identify with the one who was “despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity.”⁸² Christ’s oppression, dehumanization, and crucifixion at the hands of imperial Rome and others resonates with Black Americans as they have consistently been subjected to humiliation and suffering under systems of white supremacy. They cannot help but compare the lynching of nearly five thousand Black women and men at the hands of white people who identified themselves as Christians to the mob who called for Jesus’ crucifixion. The white Christian theology of suffering and redemption rarely ties the two together.

This chapter has explored what stagnation in grief looks like, as well as the ways in which white Christians can begin to recognize this stagnation and move forward. Because grief is cyclical rather than linear, this process of recognition and moving forward will necessarily be cyclical as well. Recognition is likely to bring new levels of denial and anger, but the hope is that each cycle will become shorter as an understanding of the need to acknowledge and change grows. White Christians have the opportunity to open themselves to a new way. This opportunity to shift ideology and theology creates the final push for the white church to move from being stuck in the early cycle of grief into the next stage of lament.

Lament involves several steps. As mentioned above, Rah, explains that lament “recognizes suffering but also recognizes sinful behavior that contributed to that

⁸² Isaiah 53:3 (NRSV).

suffering.” In grieving the loss of being good or righteous, white Christians grieve sinful behavior and the pain it has caused. Individuals and communities who understand white Christianity’s behaviors, biases, and complicity in oppression will take steps of lamentation to move in the direction of acceptance and racial reconciliation: 1) acknowledge the sin; 2) confess the offense with humility; 3) lament; 4) repent of the offense; and 5) change – begin new behaviors.⁸³ Chapter Four explores the idea that lament, especially corporate lament, as a community of believers, is crucial to reaching a place where reconciliation can happen.

⁸³ Cannon et al., *Forgive Us*, 207.

CHAPTER 4:
A CALL TO LAMENT – SHIFTING TOWARD CHANGE

Introduction

In *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross names the fourth stage of grief as depression. She explains that this depression is both a reaction to a “sense of great loss,” and a preparation for “impending loss.”¹ For white Christians and churches processing the grief of complicity and the impending loss of entitlement to privilege, this depression is best named lament. While depression is usually considered a “feeling,” and lament is an action or activity, there can be no lament without the sorrow that accompanies deep loss or tragedy. Lament is an expression of sorrow. Kübler-Ross explains, “If (the person) is allowed to express his sorrow he will find a final acceptance much easier, and he will be grateful to those who can sit with him during this stage of depression without constantly telling him not to be sad.”²

The intention of this chapter is to explore what it means to lament as it relates to white, Christian complicity with systems of privilege and racism in the United States. In this chapter, biblical lament serves as a model and guide, alongside input from the social sciences and modern psychology. The main purpose here is to determine the meaning of lament, how lament and repentance work together, and why lament is crucial as individuals and churches identify their privilege and place within oppressive systems. Part of this exploration will evaluate those places where lament is already culturally

¹ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 97-98.

² Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 99.

heard within the United States. This will include the prophetic voices of those who are calling the white church to join the lament and become leaders in repenting for historic and current systems of injustice.

Ultimately, this chapter will evaluate how lament shapes three different areas: the relationship between church and God; between members of the church community; and, between the church and those who suffer. Regardless of individual intent, there cannot be true restoration, reconciliation, or revival within the church of the United States without an honest, communal evaluation of sins and injustices that continue to cast a pall over this country. When that evaluation leads to lament, there is hope that God will hear the cries of the people and reconciliation can begin.

What is Lament?

Lament is a word that most people know but perhaps they have not thought about the depth or complexity of its meaning. Merriam-Webster defines lament, “to express sorrow, mourning, or regret for, often demonstratively.”³ Lament is not an act in and of itself. It is always an action that either expresses an emotion or response to something that has caused suffering. Professor and theologian, Rebekka A. Klein acknowledges, “Lament is an expression of ‘something’ which has affected the human being and precedes the actualization of their own initiatives and expectations for a good life.”⁴ This expression is not the shallow whining or moaning that occurs when a slight is perceived,

³ “Lament,” *Merriam Webster.com*, accessed July 3, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lament>.

⁴ Rebekka A. Klein, “The Phenomenology and the Presence of God in Time,” *Evoking Lament: A Theological Discussion*, ed. Eva Harasta and Brian Brock (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2009), 15, ProQuest.

or life seems unfair. Lament is the deep, unstoppable flow of pain that cannot be consoled. Old Testament scholar, Kathleen M. O'Connor writes, "Laments are prayers that erupt from wounds, burst out of unbearable pain, and bring it to language...Laments are prayers of the discontented, the disturbed, and the distraught."⁵

Lament differs from Kübler-Ross's depression in a critical way that may cause those familiar with her Stage Theory of Grief to question the comparison between the two. Kübler-Ross writes, "In the preparatory grief there is no or little need for words. It is much more a feeling that can be mutually expressed and is often done better with a touch of a hand, a stroking of the hair, or just a silent sitting together."⁶ This silent form of depression shows up when a person is preparing for an impending loss. Klein, however, notes that a hallmark of lament is an "excess of expressivity."⁷ She further explains, "This excess frees the lamenter to react in a way that is responsive to what has happened to him or her ... The effects of the incident that violates the coherence of the sufferer's life orientation cannot be erased, but some distance from the incident's immediate threat may be gained."⁸ Lament, then, is more for the living who grapple with how to move forward in the face of suffering or tragedy, than for those preparing for their own imminent demise. For white Christian's grieving complicity and loss of entitlement to privilege, the withdrawal happens in the earlier stages of denial and anger. The preparation to accept and move forward in grief involves lament.

⁵ Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 9.

⁶ Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 99.

⁷ Klein, "The Phenomenology and the Presence of God in Time," 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

While this chapter focuses mainly on lament as reflected in Scripture, Christian culture, and society in the United States, it is essential to note that formal, ritualized lament is by no means unique to Jewish or Christian culture. Byzantine Greek culture, for example, adopted ritual lament as a vital part of religious rituals, instead of merely using it as a poetic genre in myth and saga literature.⁹ In the cultures of South Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa, women are the predominant voices in lament rituals, providing a counter-cultural response to the celebration of heroic death. Sociologist Parita Mukta notes that governments in these cultures have often sought to quash the ritual of lament, because it works against the state valorization of death on behalf of one's country or tribe. "Women's voices raised in lament are, in this respect, an important cultural expression, for they form a vivid counterpoint to this death-valorizing ideology and to the power of state structure which have attempted to harness death in their service."¹⁰ Mukta also explains that Greek city states "instituted the custom of the (male) funeral oration in praise of those who had died in battle, thus displacing women from their central role as lamenters."¹¹ The ritual of lament, which has provided time and space in many countries and cultures to mourn and/or protest suffering has, in many of those same cultures, shifted to a celebratory eulogy.

As mentioned above, lament is not simply complaining or venting about the unfairness of human life. Pastor and author, Glenn Pemberton advises that a

⁹ Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, Greek Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 62-63.

¹⁰ Parita Mukta, "Lament and Power: The Subversion and Appropriation of Grief," *Studies in History* 13, no. 2 (1997): 210.

¹¹ Parita Mukta, "Lament and Power," 213.

“misunderstanding of lament regards the genre to be nothing more than getting everything off one’s chest, a cathartic dumping of disappointment, frustration, and rage into the cosmic void...lament is regarded as little more than complaining, moaning, and groaning about the hardships of life.”¹² Lament is not meaningless complaining, nor is it a denial of one’s faith in a sovereign God. Celebrated scholar and theologian, Walter Brueggemann writes that lament is “an act of bold faith because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended way. On the other hand, it is bold because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God.”¹³ Lament is part of the natural course of conversation, in which the beloved of God cry out to God in pain and a need to understand.

Lament in Scripture

In Jewish and Christian Scripture, lament divides into two categories: the funeral dirge lament, and the prayer of lament. Theologians, Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller write, “The funeral dirge lament...is an act of mourning in the face of death and loss, (while) the prayer of lament protests the loss, and pleas for God to hear and respond.”¹⁴ Lament provides space and language to imagine and cling to God’s faithfulness in the face of tragedy, suffering, and sin, whether it is one’s own or someone else’s. Either in prayer or in mourning, it is the vehicle by which one person (or group)

¹² Glenn Pemberton, *After Lament: Psalms for Learning to Trust Again*, Kindle ed. (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2014), Loc. 377.

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Later print ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1985), 52.

¹⁴ Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, “Introduction,” *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown, and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), xv-xvi.

can join another in pain and suffering and present the complaint to God. Pastor David Swanson, in an article explaining how his church came to discover lament writes, “We lament...on behalf of the ones who suffer. Lament teaches us to place ourselves in the path of pain that is not our own.”¹⁵ Lament allows a person or community to mourn or protest the pain of another.

The most recognized forms of lament in Scripture are found in Job, Psalms, and Lamentations. In reality, lament is found throughout Scripture, beginning with the cry of Abel’s blood in Genesis 4:10,¹⁶ progressing through to the lament of the martyrs in Revelation 6:9-10.¹⁷ The laments in Scripture are the voices of humanity in the story of the Creator’s relationship with the created. This story is, in the words of Patrick D. Miller, “rooted in and shaped by the experience of pain and suffering and what God does about it.”¹⁸ Lament is the voice of prayer and, through the model of Scripture, Christians learn to put language to the unutterable and otherwise indescribable suffering in the world.

The poetry of lament, especially in Lamentations and in the Psalms, uses what O’Connor calls “wounded words” to bring into light the depth of pain and protest to what

¹⁵ David Swanson, “Make a Mournful Noise: How My Church’s Violent Neighborhood Led Us to Discover the Power of Lament,” *Leadership* 35, no. 2 (March 22, 2014): 84.

¹⁶ “And the Lord said, ‘What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!’” (NRSV).

¹⁷ “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, ‘Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?’” (NRSV).

¹⁸ Patrick D. Miller, “The Lament as Christian Prayer,” *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 15-16.

the people see as God's actions in their lives and in the world.¹⁹ These words, according to O'Connor, express the "bitter, raw, and largely unhealed" testimony of those who lament, "aggressively confronting suffering and resolutely refusing to whitewash truth."²⁰ Prayers of lament make it clear that there is not only a freedom to express rage, sorrow, and complaint before God and others, but also an *expectation* that this will happen, particularly in worship. Nancy J. Duff, professor of theology and Christian ethics, writes, "What was quite natural for the Hebrew worshipper, however, seems foreign to most of us now."²¹ Pemberton grieves the loss of lament, noting "Lament is a near-dead language, being suffocated to death at the hands of praise songs and up-beat assemblies.

Meanwhile, those in deep pain, beaten up by the world and lying on the side of the road, are dying for just a word or two of comfort and someone who will speak and argue with God on their behalf."²² Pemberton states that lament is, "first and foremost language addressed to God."²³ It is language directed to God in hopes, or perhaps simply merely trusting, that God will hear and act.

Through the Scriptural model, readers note that Christ's lament puts the suffering of the world over his own pain. In Luke 23:28 and 29, for example, Jesus says to the women present, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves

¹⁹ O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 4.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Nancy J. Duff, "Recovering Lamentation as a Practice in the Church," *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, eds., (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 3.

²² Glenn Pemberton, *After Lament: Psalms for Learning to Trust Again*, Kindle ed. (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2014), Loc. 321.

²³ Pemberton, *After Lament: Psalms for Learning to Trust Again*, Loc. 386.

and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’” In Matthew 23: 37-38, Jesus laments over the city, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate.”

Through the model of Jesus, believers learn to say that the suffering of others matters more than their own suffering. Laments are cries for help, but they are also pleas for justice.²⁴ The lament of Rachel (Matthew 2:16-18)²⁵ in response to Herod slaughtering the sons in Bethlehem, is echoed by the earth itself in Matthew 27: 51-52 mourning and calling for justice at the death of Jesus.²⁶ The funeral dirge of lament joins the prayer of lament in mourning the loss as well as protesting the injustice. Theologian C. Clifton Black writes, “When crucified and derelict, God-with-us suffers death at its most accursed (Deut. 21:22-23), a single teardrop from heaven will not suffice. The scope of lament implied in Matthew 27:51-54 – God’s wailing over a tortured creation –

²⁴ Patrick D. Miller, “The Lament as Christian Prayer,” 17-24.

²⁵ “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’” (NRSV).

²⁶ “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” (NRSV).

corresponds to the magnitude of God’s own loss.”²⁷ Creator and creation lament the injustice and suffering of Christ.

Lamentations

The book of Lamentations, while never including the “voice” of God nor any explicit statements of hope, is nonetheless an incredible example of faithfulness through lament. In the face of utter loss and deprivation, Lamentations invokes a liturgical response that demands a witness and presumes God is listening. Biblical scholar and literary theorist, F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, writes, “Lamentations may well be the most remarkable and compelling testament to the human spirit’s will to live in all of the Old Testament.”²⁸ The structure, genre, and rhetoric of Lamentations are all familiar to those who interact with Hebrew poetry and would have been recognizable to the earliest hearers and recipients of the poems. Dobbs-Allsopp explains that Lamentations “represents a thorough translation and adaptation of the genre in a Judean environment.”²⁹ The voices of Lamentations use structure, words of horror, and pain to draw listeners into the devastation cast upon Jerusalem. There are no words of comfort in Lamentations, and God never “shows up,” but this historic artifact provides witness to the loss and suffering. O’Connor writes, “God’s voice is missing, and the book is God-abandoned...because God never speaks, the book honors voices of pain. Lamentations is a house for sorrow

²⁷ C. Clifton Black, “The Persistence of Wounds,” *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A., Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 52.

²⁸ F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, Interpretation: A Bible commentary for teaching and preaching (Louisville, KY.: John Knox Press, 2002), 2.

²⁹ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 9.

because there is no speech for God.”³⁰ The “speakers” in Lamentations offer witness to the suffering and, despite the fact we never hear it, demand God’s response.

The book of Lamentations sets out what scholars consider to be the “typical elements of a lament:”

- Direct address to God
- Complaint
- Words that reassure the speaker
- Motivation for God to act
- Petition for justice or vengeance
- Vow or promise to praise.”³¹

Each voice speaks from his or her limited perspective. The voices do not blend into one, nor is there resolution or comfort given to any of the voices. The perspectives are individually honored and witnessed. O’Connor again writes, “The book honors each by not resolving them into a unified vision, and it treats these multiple voices of pain as hallowed ground.”³² According to biblical scholar, Adele Berlin, the imagery of the varying perspectives is that of “horror and outrage, immorality and shame, suffering and pity” in hopes that God will “see the suffering of his people with the hope that this will provoke a response.”³³ The voices represent a nation that is lamenting in hopes that God will hear, but the book ends with God remaining silent.³⁴ It is this silence that speaks to the faithfulness exhibited in the book of Lamentations. The voices continue to cry out

³⁰ O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

³² *Ibid.*, 84.

³³ Adele Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary*, 1st ed., Old Testament library, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 9.

³⁴ Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary*, 16.

despite God's silence because of their deep, undying hope that God still listens and will act.

Psalms

Although the Hebrew title for the book of Psalms is *Sepher Tehillim*, the Book of Praises,³⁵ the largest percentage of psalms are, by far, those of lament. Pemberton explains that the book of Psalms includes 60 chapters of lament, 41 hymns of praise, 27 songs of thanksgiving, and 22 miscellaneous types.³⁶ This breakdown shows that 40 percent of the psalms are prayers of lament. According to Pemberton, the language of these lament psalms varies widely from “mild concern” to utter desperation.³⁷ As biblical scholar, Amy Cottrill, notes, the heart of lament in the Psalms, as well as other books, is the suffering of an individual or community played out for all to see in “a language of vulnerability and pain.”³⁸ A reader might assume that the lament psalms display the times when the author was out of faith but, as with the book of Lamentations, the language of the Psalms exhibits a yearning and belief that God will show up and act on behalf of God's people. The author may feel like God has disappeared, but the honesty of the lament psalms shows that even at that point, there is hope. As Pemberton notes, “These psalms teach us that there is nothing a believer may not say to God in lament as long as

³⁵ Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms*, (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 27.

³⁶ Pemberton, *After Lament*, Loc. 313.

³⁷ Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 30.

³⁸ Amy C. Cottrill, Andrew Mein, and Claudia V. Camp, *Language, Power, and Identity in the Lament Psalms of the Individual*, 1st ed. (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 29.

the lament matches the honesty of our praise.”³⁹ Nancy Duff echoes this by saying, “Psalms of lament indicate that the Hebrew worshipper was free to express complaints, anxiety, rage, and deep sorrow before God and other members of the community.”⁴⁰ There was never an expectation that the suffering should simply endure, but instead that God and the community would shoulder some of the pain.

Lament, particularly in the Psalms, was not about doubt or a lack of faith. Many of the Psalms of lament were ascribed to those who were later deemed in Scripture as the most faithful. Pemberton offers the following breakdown ascribed in Psalms: “Moses (once in Ps. 90), David (thirty-eight times, e.g., 22, 38), and various temple leaders (Ethan [89], Korah [42-43], Heman [88], Asaph [77, 79]) – and [Psalms] assigns lament for occasions ordained by God (e.g., the memorial offering [38, 70].”⁴¹ He goes on to explain:

In the Psalms it is not those who lack faith who lament, but those recognized for strong faith who bring their most honest and passionate feelings to God. Moreover, by the sheer number of laments in the Psalms, it would appear that one major message of the book is this very point: God invites (God’s) people to speak the truths of their lives, their pain, and their confusion, to the One who can do something about it.⁴²

It appears to be God’s relational expectation that the people of God will enjoy complete freedom to share even the harshest complaints and suffering with their Creator.

³⁹ Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 31.

⁴⁰ Duff, “Recovering Lamentation as a Practice in the Church,” 3.

⁴¹ Pemberton, *Hurting with God*, 33.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Nehemiah and Corporate Lament

Context is crucial to understanding how the Hebrew Scriptures were read and lived out. Identity and community were interconnected. Personhood and identity were always connected to community, therefore lament and suffering were expressed within the community, before God and other people. The prayer of lament was never meant to be private, but rather to be heard and joined. In today's Western construct, Cottrill explains, "human dignity...comes from self-sufficiency rather than social embeddedness."⁴³ When reading prayers of lament, modern readers may be tempted to consider them to be private or personal. The construct of personhood in the Scriptures, however, is one where identity and dignity are culturally embedded with what Cottrill calls "comparatively decentered and undefined personal boundaries."⁴⁴

The stories and prayers of lament throughout the Hebrew Scriptures help the suffering sustain cultural and communal identity with the people of God when pain and loss threaten to overwhelm and diminish previous understandings of that identity.⁴⁵ Suffering can lead to lament. It also leads to re-thinking the nature of God and one's relationship to God. These prayers and stories often show that those who suffer make statements to God such as, "I thought I was _____, and You were _____, but now (the pain, those around me, shifting circumstances, and so forth) are showing me that I am _____. So, who are You and where are You in all of this?"

⁴³ Cottrill, et al., *Language, Power, and Identity in the Lament Psalms of the Individual*, 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1.

In Nehemiah, Chapters Nine and Ten, the prophet, Ezra, brings the people of God together in corporate confession and lament for their sins and the sins of their ancestors.⁴⁶ This corporate gathering, according to Old Testament scholar, Derek Kidner, was an “act of penitence . . . to face the facts of the past and the challenge of the future.”⁴⁷ In reciting the history of the people, Ezra recalled the times and places where they had been disobedient and rebellious, as well as the times when God had been faithful. In Nehemiah 9:29, Ezra declares, “And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your ordinances, by the observance of which a person shall live. They turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey.” As Kidner writes, this recitation is offered as a prayer. It is “worship, not mere wallowing in self-reproach.”⁴⁸ Ezra offered this in preparation for the community’s covenant to do better, to return to obedience to the Law and a right relationship with God.⁴⁹

Lament in Modern American Churches

As mentioned above, lament was never meant to be a private action, but rather to be offered within the community as plea to God. This corporate plea, however, is not usually present in white evangelical churches in the United States. Pastor and author,

⁴⁶ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 120, ProQuest.

⁴⁷ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 120. Nehemiah 9:1-2 reads, “Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. Then those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors.” (NRSV).

⁴⁸ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 122.

⁴⁹ See Nehemiah 9:32 – 10:39.

Soong-Chan Rah writes that “Unfortunately, lament is often missing from the narrative of the American church.”⁵⁰ O’Connor explains, “Fear of truth motivates denial...Denial means to live knowingly or unknowingly with lies...Denial interferes with our ability to accept the pain of others.”⁵¹ Lament is possible only when white Christians move past the denial that is common in white churches. Instead, the primary focus remains on celebration.

Our music, in particular, is dominated by praise, celebration, and a recognition of some theological or historical traditions. The white church in the United States is missing songs of lament. In reviewing the 2012 list of top 100 worship songs, according to Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), it is clear that only five of the songs listed would be considered close to lament songs.⁵² Consider that in light of the fact that, as mentioned earlier, a full 40 percent of the book of Psalms are psalms of lament.

There is, within the white church, a deep disconnect with a theology of suffering. As discussed in Chapter Three, most Black, American Christians have a well-developed theology of suffering. The oppression of their ancestors and the ongoing systems of white supremacy in the United States inform this theology. As James Cones explains, “American theologians...including radicals and conservatives, have interpreted the

⁵⁰ Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2015), 21.

⁵¹ O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 86, 92.

⁵² Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) licenses and maintains information and resources for churches and copyright owners relating to copyrights of Christian worship songs. A CCLI license is required for churches to play copyrighted worship music, and the churches must submit information to CCLI regarding what songs are played throughout the year, and the frequency with which they are played.

gospel according to the cultural and political interests of white people.”⁵³ As such, white, evangelical Christians have a well-developed theology of victory and celebration, but a stunted theology of suffering. Rah describes the problem clearly: “The power of lament is minimized and the underlying narrative of suffering that requires lament is lost.”⁵⁴ The suffering, pain, and loss remain daily parts of congregants in American churches, but modern liturgies offer few, if any, means of communally expressing grief, anger, or pain in the presence of God and community.⁵⁵

By persisting in triumphalism in worship, churches remain capable of ignoring pain and drowning doubt, particularly of those who suffer in the community and in the culture.⁵⁶ Rah writes, “Christian communities arising from celebration do not want their lives changed because their lives are in a good place... To have only a theology of celebration at the cost of the theology of suffering is incomplete.”⁵⁷ In white, Christian culture, the theology of celebration is the dominant one. Brueggemann explains, “‘Have-nots’ develop a theology of suffering and survival ... ‘haves’ develop a theology of celebration.”⁵⁸ Having a dominant theology of celebration makes it easier for white Christians to avoid seeing, hearing, or lamenting injustice and suffering in nearby

⁵³ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, revised ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 43.

⁵⁴ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 22.

⁵⁵ Duff, “Recovering Lamentation as a Practice in the Church,” 4.

⁵⁶ Sally A. Brown, “When Lament Shapes the Sermon,” *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 28.

⁵⁷ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 23.

⁵⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Peace* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002), 3-4.

neighborhoods and churches. While there is certainly cause to celebrate victory in Christ, there is no room for the triumphalism adopted by white American Christianity.⁵⁹

In his book, *Shalom and the Community of Creation*, noted Native American theologian and activist, Randy Woodley writes, “*Shalom* living is how life is meant to be.”⁶⁰ Woodley teaches that the concept behind this Hebrew word is much larger than the way we typically interpret it as ‘peace.’ “Such a rich list of descriptors leans heavily into the concepts of love, justice, and God’s created intention, concepts that truly make the word *shalom* a profound construction.”⁶¹ According to Woodley, “A society concerned with shalom will care for the most marginalized among them.”⁶²

Even a brief observation shows how the white church is failing to help move this nation toward the concept of shalom. There is a tendency within American churches to ignore or gloss over despair, anxiety, and suffering because expressing and sitting with this pain seems like a crisis of faith. O’Connor writes, “The United States ignores despair and anxiety because of social taboos. Even religious communities overlook despair because to express it appears as a lack of faith.”⁶³ Lament, however, is the honest recognition of injustice in our world. It appears that many Christian communities would rather set aside that recognition because acknowledgment in lament requires action and

⁵⁹ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 40-42. Rah explains that, in the midst of “white flight” from urban areas, “church became viewed as yet another American commodity” rather than neighborhood centered or community driven. Rah describes how white privilege in the church offered “magical formulas” which included “the promise that people would only have to be in community with others who looked, sounded, and possessed ‘values’ just like them.”

⁶⁰ Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 1.

⁶¹ Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation*, 11.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶³ O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 108.

change, and that change may require a loss of privilege.⁶⁴ In order to lament, the white church cannot ignore the suffering of Black people and non-Black persons of color any longer, but must instead be a witness to their pain. As philosopher and theologian, Nicholas Wolterstorff, writes, “To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.”⁶⁵

There are multi-cultural churches in the United States which seek to include those who are oppressed and marginalized by systems that continue the cycles of injustice. Many multi-cultural churches, however, do not have an understanding of the importance of lament and its connection to reconciliation. Therefore, there is limited participation in liturgical lament within these churches. Pastor Michael Dean, former Director of Worship and now Senior Pastor for Imago Dei Eastside Community, in Portland, Oregon, noted that while he sees a deep need for lament in the church, including in his own congregation, there are not many tools readily available for lament in musical worship. “You know there really aren’t a lot of songs like that written for worship are there? We do mostly praise songs, or songs calling for Jesus, but lament isn’t really a big worship genre.”⁶⁶ Even though the Imago Dei Eastside Community addresses matters of social justice, suffering, and oppression, Dean notes, “It doesn’t feel like the church in general is broken-hearted about very much. We have our projects and things we would say breaks our heart, but do I see anything that causes Jeremiah-like lament? Not really.”⁶⁷ When

⁶⁴ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 23.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 34.

⁶⁶ Michael Dean, “Interview—Lament & Worship in a Multicultural Church,” *In Person*, April 24, 2014.

⁶⁷ Dean, “Interview.”

asked to sum up his thoughts on lament and reconciliation in the church, Dean had this to say:

About lament. I don't think anyone can lament what they aren't aware of. But can people be aware if they don't have empathy? It goes back to that friendship thing. You hear my story and you think – hey, I know Mike better now. Next time someone assumes a big Black guy is a thug, you say, I know Mike. He's a big Black guy and he's not like that. Right? It's easy to avoid empathy if you stay out of my neighborhood or ignore my story ... There's a lot of ways to build empathy, but you have to want to and it takes time.⁶⁸

Dean's words echo those of Nicholas Wolterstorff, reminding the church that the empathy needed to develop a sense of lament cannot be created from a distance, and that lament and reconciliation require empathy. Merriam-Webster defines empathy as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.”⁶⁹

What Dean is speaking of is *cultural empathy*, which differs from personal empathy in that it locates itself within the other's context. Author and professor of social work, Julie Dodge, defines cultural empathy as “an intercultural skill that is marked by the ability to understand and communicate another person's thoughts and feelings, given the other person's cultural context.”⁷⁰ Using this definition, Dean's comments invite white Christians to enter into the context of a Black man's neighborhood and community in

⁶⁸ Dean, “Interview.”

⁶⁹ “Definition of Empathy,” Merriam-Webster, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>.

⁷⁰ Julie A. Dodge, “‘But I Wouldn't Do That’: Teaching Cultural Empathy” (DMin dissertation, Portland Seminary, 2016), vii, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/127>.

order to better understand the places where lament is needed. Without personally engaging in the cultural context of those who are oppressed by systems of white supremacy, it becomes too easy to slip back into denial. As Rah writes, “Privilege would hide the truth that creates discomfort.”⁷¹ Cultural empathy requires taking the time and energy to know other people and communities. Rah continues, “True reconciliation, justice and shalom require a remembering of suffering, an unearthing of a shameful history, and a willingness to enter into lament.” The only way to begin the reconciliation process is to draw close, and enter into the pain of the suffering and oppressed.

Lament in American Culture – Prophetic Voices

While the American church may not recognize the need for lament, Christians in the United States need not look far for the prophetic voices calling the nation to lament. It is not necessarily the civic leaders or preachers who are issuing the call to lament; instead it is groups such as Black Lives Matter, Water Protectors, immigration activists, and Black musicians who are holding a magnifying glass to the injustices and oppressive systems. Music in particular continues to bring significant attention to suffering. Contemporary artists, such as Beyoncé, Kendrick Lamar, and Childish Gambino, join their voices with those who sang the blues and Spirituals in protest and lament. They do this to draw attention to ongoing white supremacy that leaves Black and non-Black people of color people dying in the streets, expelled from public areas, and arrested as trespassers in their own homes.⁷² Ironically, America’s greatest musical contribution to

⁷¹ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 58.

⁷² Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 12-21. Cone explains on page 13, “The blues, as Ralph Ellison put it, is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s

the world is that which was (and continues to be) composed by slaves in hidden worship, by blues and jazz artists protesting the ever-present threat of lynching, and by modern, Black artists protesting the systems which continue to oppress.⁷³ According to Christian social ethicist, Peter J. Paris, there are over 6,000 Negro Spirituals which embrace the themes of lament: protest, grief, hope, and longing.⁷⁴ Contemporary musical artists draw from the depth of these Spirituals to voice lament in today's society.

Just as the voice of the city of Jerusalem is cast as a woman in the book of Lamentations, so it is women who are rising up in the United States to call for the end of white supremacy and inviting the nation to lament and repent. Three Black women — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi — founded the #BlackLivesMatter network in 2013 as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who shot and killed Trayvon Martin in Florida.⁷⁵

In 2015, the African American Policy Forum (AAPF), co-founded in 1996 by Black law professor and activist, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and political science professor, Luke Charles Harris, launched #SayHerName. This social media movement brings to light the reality that Black women are also victims of police brutality and anti-Black violence in the United States.⁷⁶ These “voices of Rachel” cast their lament over the

aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.”

⁷³ Peter J. Paris, “When Feeling Like a Motherless Child,” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 113-120.

⁷⁴ Paris, “When Feeling Like a Motherless Child,” 114.

⁷⁵ “#BlackLivesMatter – Herstory,” Black Lives Matter, accessed July 17, 2018, <https://Blacklivesmatter.com/about/herstory/>.

⁷⁶ “#SayHerName: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women,” African American Policy Forum, accessed July 17, 2018, <http://www.aapf.org/sayhernamereport/>.

United States in hopes that there will be change, but they do not leave change to chance. Activism, organization, and protest have become tools of awareness and resistance to those who would ignore the lament. According to Jamar Tisby, most white evangelical Christians have not engaged in this work. Tisby explains that:

... because many of these organizations are not faith-based, or include a platform of support for gay, queer, and transgender rights ... many evangelicals have distanced themselves from or even opposed both the Black Lives Matter organization and the phrase. But the American evangelical church has yet to form a movement as viable and potent that addresses the necessary concept that Black lives do indeed matter. This is not to suggest that evangelicals have not responded to present-day racism but that the national presence and influence of Black Lives matter, as both an organization and a concept, should prompt critical engagement rather than reflexive rejection.⁷⁷

The question for white, evangelical Christians is whether there is a willingness to embrace these suffering people and follow their lead of lament in order to tear down systems of oppression.

Whether the prophetic voices in American society purposefully cry out to God or not, Christians understand that it is God alone who can affect change at such a staggering level. As Image-bearers, it falls upon Christians to come alongside those who suffer, repent of complicity in oppressive systems, and join in the cry of lament while working to create change. The problem is not that churches in the United States lack prophetic voices. The problem is that the white, evangelical church, for the most part, has either hardened itself in denial and anger or chooses to succumb to the fear of upsetting the status quo while remaining ignorant of the importance of lament. It is the denial of pain expressed in every community that perpetuates the racial divide in the United States. As

⁷⁷ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 180.

O'Connor writes, "Denial interferes with our ability to accept the pain of others."⁷⁸

Choosing to accept the pain and suffering of Black people and non-Black persons of color can propel us to lament and repentance.

The white church trivializes and demeans the suffering when ignoring the sins of the past and ignore ongoing systems of supremacy and oppression. Hope for reconciliation and revival comes only when white Christians face and repent sins committed against those deemed "less than" (Black people, Indigenous people, Asian Americans, Latinx, and others) by white supremacists. The authors of *Forgive Us* share this simple principle: "The people who were wronged know better than anyone else what it will take to make things right."⁷⁹ Cultural empathy, building relationships, and listening to the words of lament from those wronged will guide us in this process.

It is time for Christians to rediscover the biblical language of lament, incorporating prayers of lament and lament funeral dirges from Scripture into all aspects of worship. This rediscovery of lament language helps members of the faith community become fluent and able to recognize it and engage in lament on behalf of those who suffer. "The words and concepts of lament may be unfamiliar ... but it is a language we can begin to learn rather easily. Pastors can comment on events ... that call for lament. Certain Psalms can be adapted for corporate prayer."⁸⁰ As the language becomes familiar, Christians will be able to utter words of lament that will lead to repentance and reparation.

⁷⁸ O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 92.

⁷⁹ Cannon et al., *Forgive Us*, 79.

⁸⁰ David Swanson, "Make a Mournful Noise: How My Church's Violent Neighborhood Led Us to Discover the Power of Lament," *Leadership* 35, no. 2 (March 22, 2014): 85.

“To Whom Can We Go?”

In her sermon, *Elephants in the Church: Racism*, Michelle Lang explored the disciples’ dilemma posed in John 6:22-71.⁸¹ Upon hearing Jesus teach that he was the bread of life and that those who follow must “eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood,” many who called themselves disciples turned away (v. 66). Jesus asked the twelve if they were also going to leave. Faced with a difficult choice, Peter spoke on behalf of the twelve, saying “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (vv. 68-69). Lang’s point here is that white Christians who have heard the truth about the church’s racist history and complicity with ongoing systems of injustice also face a difficult choice: will they follow the way of Jesus, or will they retreat into denial, anger, and bargaining that has comforted us thus far? Andrew Draper writes, “To become like whiteness is to disremember the manner in which whiteness competes with the rule and reign of Jesus as a site of identity constitution.”⁸² Faced with the choice, will white Christians continue to disremember?

The journey of awareness that comes with studying white supremacy, especially as it relates to the church, is overwhelming. Understanding lament in racism and white prejudice comes with the realization that we have perpetuated these systems, both knowingly and unknowingly. Along with many other white Christians, I feel powerless to change. How can we help churches recognize white privilege, systems that oppress, and

⁸¹ Lang, *Elephants in the Church*.

⁸² Andrew Draper, “The End of ‘Mission’: Christian Witness and the Decentering of White Identity,” *Can “White” People Be Saved?: Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission*, ed. Love L. Sechrest, Johnny Ramírez-Johnson, and Amos Yong (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 178.

our complicity in the whole mess? I feel shame in my complicity and deep regret for the pain my complicity has caused. How can I guide others to a place where guilt and privilege are acknowledged, but shame does not become our identity in the process?

White, Christian leaders must continue to ask this question and others like it.

Even though many people are on this same path, it is lonelier than first imagined. There is an exhaustively wide range to that complicity. Social disdain, even in our families, will grow as we point out or avoid racist expressions. Knowing we cannot fully identify with the oppressed communities because of privilege can cause white Christian leaders to feel alone when awakening to injustice. The Hebrew mindset, discussed earlier in this chapter, is a reminder that everyone is culturally embedded and dependent upon one another in community for a portion of their identity. There are others who also experience the discomfort and confusion.

This chapter has been an exploration of lament, its expressions, and ways in which white Christians can shift toward a posture of lament. Anchoring ourselves with a community that is learning the language of lament and seeking to develop a heart for justice can relieve individual burdens while creating a system of accountability and encouragement. Once lament begins, it does not stop. It continues to shape acceptance and the drive to change the status quo.

In Chapter Five, I will discuss how learning the language of lament keeps white Christians “tuned” to lament in our communities and the world, drawing us to places where we can help affect change. I will also discuss possible answers to the inevitable questions, “What is next? What do we do now?” Lament is painful and difficult. The proposed answers will be difficult for some, as they require white Christians to do the

very things they have been resisting, which is to face history, give up entitlement to privilege, and speak prophetically.

CHAPTER 5:
LEARNING TO LAMENT AND AFFECTING RECONCILIATION

Introduction: Becoming Tuned to Lament

Learning to lament complicity, the loss of perceived righteousness, and entitlement to privilege is a bit like learning to appreciate a new genre of music. When a community has feasted on a steady diet of dominant culture individualism and celebration, the funeral dirge can be difficult to embrace. Soong-Chan Rah writes, “There has been a deep and tragic loss in the American story because we have not acknowledged the reality of death ... We have yet to engage in a proper funeral dirge for our tainted racial history and continue to deny the deep spiritual stronghold of a nation that sought to justify slavery.”¹ As white Christians step away from being stuck in denial, anger, and bargaining, there can be an urge to lament, but perhaps not the realization that lament is, as Rah writes, “an important counternarrative to the triumphalistic tendencies of God’s people in the United States...(in which) American evangelical inability to move beyond Christian triumphalism arises from the inability to hear voices outside the dominant white male narrative.”² This can be a difficult shift for many white, evangelical Christians. Tuning to the language of lament will require a willingness to hear from traditionally silenced voices.

¹ Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 51.

² Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 60.

Becoming tuned to lament involves shifting the church's gaze from an individualized, "vertical" relationship to one that includes the world that God loves outside of the church building. Pastor David Swanson writes, "In many of our worship services it would be difficult to know that there are great tragedies and battles raging outside our walls ... Lament teaches us to place ourselves in the path of pain that is not our own."³ There is a different rhythm to worship that includes lament. It is a rhythm first woven into the strains of the Spirituals during slavery and hidden in the lines of the blues during the lynching era of the late 1800s to mid-1900s.⁴ Theologian and author, James Cone, quotes these lyrics by blues artist Charlie Patton:

Everyday seems like murder here,
 Everyday seems like murder here.
 I'm gonna leave tomorrow,
 I know you don't want me here.⁵

Cone elaborates, "Blacks enjoyed Friday and Saturday nights so much that they nearly forgot, at least for a few hours, whatever humiliations they endured during the week."⁶ Becoming tuned to lament requires hearing the pain and suffering situated in the blues and other music of lament rather than consuming this music for entertainment. The writers and performers of this music are our neighbors, and they have endured a different historical heritage than those of the white church. Theologian William Stacy Johnson reminds us, "Because God has made our situation God's own, God is urging us to pay

³ David Swanson, "Make a Mournful Noise: How My Church's Violent Neighborhood Led Us to Discover the Power of Lament," *Leadership* 35, no. 2 (March 22, 2014): 84-85.

⁴ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 1-29.

⁵ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

heed to the cries of our neighbors ... to give ourselves to it in passionate, pastoral, practical response. Just as God hears our cries in Jesus Christ, so too by the Spirit's power are we called to hear the cries of one another."⁷ Tuning in to the work that Black people and non-Black persons of color have already done is an essential way for white Christians to learn the language of lament.

Learning the Language

Language is best learned through immersion into the culture where that language is dominant. Years ago, before travelling to Brazil, my family prepared by learning Portuguese. We quickly learned that this preparation was somewhat meaningless compared to being immersed in Sao Paulo, a city of 23 million. We could read signs and understand a bit if everyone spoke very slowly, but we were essentially lost without our translator until our ears became better attuned to the language and different dialects that surrounded us. I think of this often when I work to tune my ears and learn the language of lament. No matter how much I immerse myself into the biblical language, the music, or the activism, there is no substitute for good translators, and I find most of those outside of my white, evangelical church tradition.

Pastor Daniel Hill writes that "one of the primary reasons American Christians (white, in particular) are unable to deal with the shame ... of the cultural identity journey is we have feeble lament theology ... We've been groomed to search for quick and easy answers to complex problems, and we rarely have the ability to appreciate the act of

⁷ William Stacy Johnson, "Jesus' Cry, God's Cry, and Ours" in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown, and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 91.

crying out to God in brokenness and pain.”⁸ Immersion into the world of those lament their suffering and pain, along with a few good translators, creates a unique appreciation for that language. For many, the best first step into immersion is through music.

Music and Lament

As discussed in Chapter Four, the white, evangelical church, in particular, does a poor job of engaging the music of lament. Oddly enough, the mainstream music culture does a much better job of this. One can scarcely turn on a popular radio station without hearing sad songs about lost love and heartache. These songs lament the everyday struggles of humanity, but there is also music that expresses a deeper pain, some of which is written by white artists beginning to delve into the sounds of lament. In her latest album, *Inspired by True Events*, popular artist, Tori Kelly, includes a song entitled, “Until I Think of You.” In verse two, Kelly expresses the pain that reflects depression and lament:

When I'm sinking deeper soaked in a sadness
 When emptiness is hard to hide
 Each step I take brings me closer to madness
 But they all think I'm doing fine

I can't find my way
 I need saving grace
 It hurts no matter what I do
 I'm lost without a home
 Until I think of You.⁹

⁸ Daniel Hill, *White Awake: An Honest Look at What It Means to Be White* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2017), 108-109.

⁹ Tori Kelly, “Until I Think of You,” Track 13 on *Inspired by True Events*, Capitol Records, 2019, Audio CD. The full lyrics to this song can be found in Appendix B.

There is no explanation of who “You” is in this song, just a deep pain that the artist is experiencing. Songs like this begin to introduce the sounds of lament to people who may not be familiar.

Sometimes music is the only way to codify the underlying lament that communities feel. At age 19, our middle child was diagnosed with a chronic disease. During the five years from 2011 - 2016, our daughter endured unexplained injuries ending in painful surgery. She was treated with medication that produced horrible side-effects, was hospitalized for almost a month, and was near-death twice. During those five years, lament was our constant language. Conversations, Seminary papers, and interactions with strangers were all touched by our lament. Suffering colors a person’s entire existence and changes the performance of even the most basic, daily functions. This was the first time our family and friends understood what it looked like to go to work, take classes, and meet general obligations through the haze of suffering. Near the end of our daughter’s last hospital stay, our youngest daughter wrote a song while staying in the hospital with her sister. The first verse and chorus of “Deliverance” are reminiscent of a Psalm of lament:

I’m in a desert
 Waiting for rain
 “Someday, someday,”
 I hear again and again

You say have patience
 And trust what I say
 But it gets harder and harder
 With each passing day

Chorus
 How long do I have to wait

For deliverance from this place?¹⁰

Music, as lament, has the power to capture the essence of a painful moment in time.

Although our daughter is now in full remission, this song reminds us of not only the pain but also the grace and freedom we felt to shout at God while trusting that God was listening even though there was no evidence.

As mentioned above, Black Americans have a long history of lament songs that offer an indictment of their treatment and portrayal in white America. Cutting across musical genres, these artists flood the mainstream with strong messages of anger and pain. In “Freedom,” Beyoncé joins with Kendrick Lamar to express:

Ten Hail Marys, I meditate for practice
 Channel nine news tell me I'm movin' backwards
 Eight blocks left, death is around the corner
 Seven misleadin' statements 'bout my persona
 Six headlights wavin' in my direction
 Five-o askin' me what's in my possession
 Yeah I keep runnin', jump in the aqueducts
 Fire hydrants and hazardous
 Smoke alarms on the back of us
 But mama don't cry for me, ride for me
 Try for me, live for me
 Breathe for me, sing for me
 Honestly guidin' me
 I could be more than I gotta be
 Stole from me, lied to me, nation hypocrisy
 Code on me, drive on me
 Wicked, my spirit inspired me
 Like yeah, open correctional gates in higher desert
 Yeah, open our mind as we cast away oppression
 Yeah, open the streets and watch our beliefs
 And when they carve my name inside the concrete
 I pray it forever reads

Freedom
 Freedom

¹⁰ Gwendolyn Hamilton, “Deliverance,” *Home EP*, Track 2, August 2016.
<https://soundcloud.com/gwenhamilton>. The full lyrics to this song can be found in Appendix C.

I can't move
 Freedom, cut me loose
 Singin', freedom! Freedom! Where are you?
 'Cause I need freedom, too
 I break chains all by myself
 Won't let my freedom rot in hell
 Hey! I'ma keep running
 'Cause a winner don't quit on themselves.¹¹

Like “Freedom,” Childish Gambino’s (aka Donald Glover) “This is America” translates and interprets the unique pain of being Black in America, especially in this final section:

You just a Black man in this world
 You just a barcode, ayy
 You just a Black man in this world
 Drivin' expensive foreigners, ayy
 You just a big dawg, yeah
 I kenneled him in the backyard
 No proper life to a dog
 For a big dog.¹²

For white Christians to learn the language of lament, songs like this offer the opportunity to immerse themselves beyond entertainment while embracing the harsh and often explicit words that express what it is like to be a Black person or a non-Black person of color in America. This immersion is an intense experience with which white Christians in the United States may not be comfortable. Stretching and leaning into a culture of Black lament is a way to begin to move away from what Tisby calls “pious

¹¹ Beyoncé with Kendrick Lamar, performing artists, “Freedom,” by Alan Lomax, Beyoncé Gisselle Knowles, Carla Maria Williams, Dean Carlos Mcintosh, Frank Tirado, John A. Lomax, Jonathan Charles Coffey, Kendrick Duckworth, and Robert Crenshaw, Track 10 on *Lemonade*, released September 2016, Parkwood/Columbia Records, Spotify streaming audio, <https://open.spotify.com/album/7dK54iZuOxXFarGhXwEXfF>. (Explicit).

¹² Childish Gambino, performing artist, “This is America,” by Donald Glover and Ludwig Goransson, on *This is America EP*, released May 2018, mcDJ/RCA Records, Spotify streaming audio, <https://open.spotify.com/album/7arx9qPJexCsDz67El4qvk>. (Explicit).

irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities that ignore the deep social, political, and cultural divides that persist along the color line.”¹³

Lamentations and Psalms

Rather than rehash the discussion of biblical lament from Chapter Four, this brief section is an introduction to the way lament language is opened to readers in *Lamentations and the Psalms*. These two books offer the best opportunity for immersion in order to rediscover the language of lament. While the language is clear, it does not hurt to employ the use of an “interpreter” through commentaries and books that explore the background of the language used. In *Lamentations*, for example, reading English translations of the poetic Hebrew language does not do justice to the beauty and pain exhibited in the book.

Noted scholar and literary theorist, F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, clarifies, “*Lamentations* is a literary artifact and demands to be read accordingly.”¹⁴ “*Lamentations*,” Dobbs-Allsopp continues, “employs structural and rhetorical devices well known to Hebrew poetry . . . *Lamentations* is written as lyric poetry.”¹⁵ Understanding Hebrew poetry and its meter, cadence, and so forth, are not necessary to take in the depths of lament language in *Lamentations*, but realizing that the author critically designed *Lamentations* in a format that would be familiar to its first readers/listeners enhances the relationship today’s reader

¹³ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 1.

¹⁴ F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching (Louisville, KY.: John Knox Press, 2002) 5.

¹⁵ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 9, 12.

has as well. Rah writes, “Lamentations 1:1-3 reminds us of Jerusalem’s story by contrasting the past glory with the anguish of the present crisis ... How will God’s people respond? Will they only look for the answers they want to here? Will they run and hide, or will they enter into the place of lament and embrace the reality of their situation?”¹⁶ With immersion and the help of an interpreter, the white, Evangelical church of today has the opportunity to see itself in the story.

When learning the language of lament, the Psalms have prepared an immersion experience like none other. Psalm 38, for example, demonstrates a level of intimacy between the psalmist (attributed to King David) and God. As Glenn Pemberton explains, “It is difficult to read the psalm and not come away with a feeling that we have been eaves-dropping on a private conversation between the psalmist and God.”¹⁷ Yet even in that intimacy, there is space for this Psalm to become corporate confession and lament. When read corporately, the language becomes inclusive of both “me” and “we,” and familiarizes the community with the power of lament. Sally Brown and Patrick Miller write, “Perhaps it is only in learning both to express and to hear lament that we can become sensitized to the often bitter and tragic ironies of our situation as both perpetrators and victims of violence and suffering.”¹⁸ In Psalm 38, the psalmist recognizes that his own actions have created the suffering he now endures and that only

¹⁶ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 43.

¹⁷ Glenn Pemberton, *After Lament: Psalms for Learning to Trust Again*, Kindle ed. (Abilene, Texas: Abilene Christian University Press, 2014), Loc. 321.

¹⁸ Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller, “Introduction,” *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown, and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), xix.

God can bring relief. Even when bringing God his fear of those who would hurt him the psalmist makes no excuses. In verses 12-18, the psalmist writes:

- ¹²Those who seek my life lay their snares;
 those who seek to hurt me speak of ruin,
 and meditate treachery all day long.
¹³But I am like the deaf, I do not hear;
 like the mute, who cannot speak.
¹⁴Truly, I am like one who does not hear,
 and in whose mouth is no retort.
¹⁵But it is for you, O Lord, that I wait;
 it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.
¹⁶For I pray, “Only do not let them rejoice over me,
 those who boast against me when my foot slips.”
¹⁷For I am ready to fall,
 and my pain is ever with me.
¹⁸I confess my iniquity;
 I am sorry for my sin.

Notably, the offering of repentance comes near the end of this Psalm, after the offering of lament. The psalmist expresses pain, fear, and even desire for escape; only then does he offer a confession of sin.

Reading Psalm 38, and others like it, may bring the temptation to believe that the psalmists offered only humble praise and confession to God. Pemberton notes, however, that this is not true. “Most psalmists admit their own flaws, accuse others of making their situation worse, and indict God for God’s failures — because if I praise God for bringing blessings, then ultimately God must be held accountable when, instead of blessing, we are hurt.”¹⁹ Pemberton continues, “In six of these psalms, however, the writers express raw emotion as they accuse God of gross neglect and wrong-doing (Pss 46, 60, 80, 88, 89, 90).”²⁰ These psalms can only lead us to conclude that God invites God’s people to be

¹⁹ Pemberton, *After Lament*, Loc. 393.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 400.

honest and speak the truth, as it is understood at the moment. Nancy J. Duff writes, “Psalms of lament invite us to bring our sorrow and the rage that may accompany it before God and one another.”²¹

Lamentations and the Psalms, as well as other lament passages not mentioned here, give language to the suffering that Christians in the United States have been programmed to push past and even ignore due to the individualism discussed in Chapter Three.²² Duff continues, “Our hearts may cry out with all the anguish and rage expressed in biblical lamentation, but our contemporary liturgies provide very few ritualistic means for expressing our grief, despair, and anger in the presence of others and in the context of faith in God ... Society and the church discourage us from expressing intense feelings of sorrow or anger when we experience significant loss in our lives.”²³ It is possible, however, to rediscover and embrace the language of lament. Pastor David Swanson speaks from the experience of his church, writing “The words and concepts of lament may be unfamiliar to many of our congregations, but it is a language we can begin to learn rather easily. Pastors can comment on events in the community that call for lament. Certain Psalms can be adapted for corporate prayer and responsive readings to teach us this ancient language.”²⁴ In agreement, Duff writes, “Perhaps every Sunday liturgy should include a prayer of lament in the same way that many of us are accustomed to reading a

²¹ Nancy J. Duff, “Recovering Lamentation as a Practice in the Church,” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 8.

²² Mae Elise Cannon, et al, *Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 206.

²³ Duff, “Recovering Lamentation as a Practice in the Church,” 4-5.

²⁴ Swanson, “Make a Mournful Noise: How My Church’s Violent Neighborhood Led Us to Discover the Power of Lament,” 85.

prayer of confession.”²⁵ Language is the first step, but there is something deeper to be learned if leaders hope to guide congregations away from being stuck in the early stages of grief, toward lamenting complicity with systems of white supremacy and oppression. This type of lament requires white, church leaders to continue teaching the language of lament while learning *what* to lament from Black people and non-Black persons of color who have been speaking the language for centuries.

Hearing from the Oppressed and Building Our Vocabulary of Lament

As mentioned in Chapter One, taking American Church History from Native American activist and historian, Randy Woodley, in seminary, was a catalyst for radical change from my previously held views about how the church engaged oppressive systems in the United States. It was an earlier class taught by Woodley that caused me to offer the dangerous prayer, “God, break my heart and show me what troubles you.” In *Missional Ecclesiology*, I read three books that unsettled me and upended my view about privilege: 1) *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* by Dr. Woodley, 2) *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* by Soong-Chan Rah, and 3) *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism* by Paula S. Rothenberg.²⁶ These texts were my first primers for the journey into lament and,

²⁵ Duff, “Recovering Lamentation as a Practice in the Church,” 9.

²⁶ Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010).

Paula S. Rothenberg, *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, 4th ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2011).

eventually, repentance and acceptance. The list of other interpreters is now much longer (see the footnotes and bibliography for examples) and extend far beyond books. There is an entire culture of lament that has been in existence for centuries, waiting for those who are unaware.

There are many resources to help extend one's awareness but tuning into the language of lament requires a deeper shift. Hearing stories and engaging in research is necessary, but tapping into the suffering of lament requires a recognition that Hill refers to as a "kingdom battle over the *imago Dei*."²⁷ The sin of racism is a denial that every person carries the image of God. As one of my favorite "interpreters," Michelle Lang teaches, "Somehow they had to be seen and regarded as inferior...white people had to say 'they're not really people,' and the church had to agree."²⁸

White Christians in the United States have been complicit in slavery, forced assimilation, separation of families, physical cruelty, and even murder, all because we have supported and perpetrated denial of the *imago Dei* in Black people and non-Black persons of color.²⁹ Theologian, author, and activist, Drew G. I. Hart, comments on what he views as the monumental failure of the white church: "The white church ... has often been silent in response to the four hundred years of assault on Black humanity ... In the church, everyone from every background must recognize that Black people ought to be loved and valued, because we too are made in the image of God."³⁰ Lament aligns the

²⁷ Hill, *White Awake*, 144.

²⁸ Lang, *Elephants in the Church: Racism*.

²⁹ Cannon, et al, *Forgive Us*, 61-67.

³⁰ Drew G. I. Hart, *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2016), 120.

white church with those who suffer and with the heart of God who suffers alongside. Miller unpacks this by writing, “If lament is the voice of pain, it is also the voice of prayer...the lament is utterly human and profoundly theological. The laments of Scripture make clear what is present in every human cry for help, the assumption that God is there, God can be present, and God can help.”³¹ In lament, interpreters help the white church find the words in order to mourn the suffering abetted by denying the *imago Dei* and defaming the humanity of others. The white church also learns to cry out for God’s help to dismantle the systems built and perpetuated in the United States. There is a trust that God hears and will respond.

Heartbreak Beyond Explanation

July 13, 2013 was the first time I truly lamented the systemic injustice toward Black people and non-Black persons of color in the United States. On that day, George Zimmerman was acquitted in the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. I watched press coverage of the case, confident that Zimmerman would be convicted. Instead, he was acquitted by a six-person jury on the grounds that he was justified in shooting Martin.³² I heard the explanations of the legal reasoning, but could not get past the thought that this child was dead because an adult was afraid of him. I could not make sense of all of this.

³¹ Patrick D. Miller, “The Lament as Christian Prayer,” in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, ed. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 17.

³² Richard Luscombe, “George Zimmerman Acquitted in Trayvon Martin Case,” *The Guardian*, July 14, 2013, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/14/zimmerman-acquitted-killing-trayvon-martin>.

One year later, on August 9, 2014, 18-year-old Mike Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri, by a white police officer, and the world exploded.³³ Again, even though I heard legal reasons from police officers in my life, I could not help but think this went so much deeper than any law. I watched round-the-clock coverage of the protests, marches, and interviews. I read everything I could, attended local discussions, and journaled about what was happening. My heart broke for the family, for the community, and for every mother who worried about her own son. Then there was Tamir Rice, and Eric Gardner, and Sandra Bland, and Philando Castile.

These incidents and names are not included to open a debate about police shootings, but rather to demonstrate the shift that moved me from listener to lamenter. In *Tears We Cannot Stop*, Eric Michael Dyson writes,

Beloved, one thing is clear: until we confront the terror that Black folk have faced in this country from the time we first breathed American air, we will continue to die at the hands of cops whose whiteness is far more important in explaining their behavior than the dangerous circumstances they face and the impossible choices they confront. We do not hate you, white America. We hate that you terrorize us and then lie about it and then make us feel crazy for having to explain to you how crazy it makes us feel. We cannot hate you, not really, not most of us; that is our gift to you. We cannot halt you; that is our curse.³⁴

Reading these words creates a visceral reaction within me, different from the general anger I once felt against injustice. Words like this, in light of the command to “Love your neighbor as yourself,”³⁵ have become an invitation to suffer alongside neighbors who are

³³ Gene Demby, “The Butterfly Effects of Ferguson,” NPR.Org, August 11, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/08/11/489494015/the-butterfly-effects-of-ferguson>.

³⁴ Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop*, 193.

³⁵ Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 19:19, 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14, James 2:8 (NRSV).

Black people and non-Black people of color. This lament comes from a heartbroken love that accepts no explanation or justification for the suffering endured by the neighbors the white church claims to love. In her book, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made For Whiteness*, Austin Channing Brown asks for this love and lament:

I need a love that is troubled by injustice. A love that is provoked to anger when Black folks, including our children, lie dead in the streets. A love that can no longer be concerned with tone because it is concerned with life. A love that has no tolerance for hate, no excuses for racist decision, no contentment in the status quo. I need a love that is fierce in its resilience and sacrifice. I need a love that chooses justice.³⁶

These are the lament prayers that trust beyond reason or logic that God hears and will respond. These prayers are the unique language available for white Christians seeking to move forward into a place of repentance and, finally, acceptance. Lament is the key to moving white Christians from being stuck in denial and anger, to a posture of repentance and reconciliation.

What Is Next? Steps Toward Repentance and Change

The description in Chapter Four of lament as an action means that lament moves people and community forward, but toward what? Racial reconciliation is the ultimate goal, but there are many steps or actions that take place between lament and reconciliation. In fact, as noted activist and theologian, Brenda Salter McNeil, writes, even reconciliation is, in itself, a process. “Reconciliation is an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and justice that restores broken relationships and

³⁶ Austin Channing Brown, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* (New York: Convergent Books, 2018), 176.

systems to reflect God’s original intention for all to flourish.³⁷ The reconciliation process is the ultimate goal, but lament is the catalyst to start moving in that direction.

Lament sits in the “in-between” time that happens between facing up to complicity with oppression and repenting of that complicity. In *The Message of the Psalms*, Walter Brueggemann classifies the lament psalms as psalms of disorientation.³⁸ “The community that uses these psalms of disorientation is not easily linked with civil religion, which goes ‘from strength to strength.’ It is, rather, faith in a very different God, one who is present in, participating in, and attentive to the darkness, weakness, and displacement of life.”³⁹ Lament comes in the expected darkness of guilt and grief to lead the way toward repentance. Repentance, then, is a catalyst toward change — toward action. The authors of *Forgive Us* put it this way: “When we face and repent of the sin of the past and stop making the sinful choices in present generations, then we can move on. Until then, with each generation we continue to mount judgment on our own heads.”⁴⁰

While lament can take place within the walls of the church, corporate repentance requires a public acknowledgment of sin before God and the wounded. As discussed in Chapter Four, Ezra provides a model for this action in Nehemiah, Chapters Nine and Ten. Each community can decide for themselves how this repentance will look and to whom it will be directed. The authors of *Forgive Us* provide a beautiful example from Pastor Keith Stewart and his congregation at Springcreek Church in Garland, Texas. After

³⁷ Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 22.

³⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1985), 51-58.

³⁹ Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 52.

⁴⁰ Cannon, et al, *Forgive Us*, 77.

visiting Africa, Pastor Steward was moved to take responsibility for how his congregation had responded to global poverty and had “produced consumers rather than disciples.”⁴¹ When their church reached the point of repentance, they took out a full-page ad in the *Dallas Morning News* that read:

We Were Wrong
 We followed trends
 When we should have followed Jesus.
 We told others how to live
 But did not listen ourselves.
 We live in the land of plenty,
 Denying ourselves nothing,
 While ignoring our neighbors who actually have nothing.
 We sat on the sidelines doing nothing
 While AIDS ravaged Africa.
 We were wrong; we’re sorry.
 Please forgive us.⁴²

The Springcreek congregation publicly announced their repentance, making themselves accountable to the surrounding community, including those who suffered. The authors of *Forgive Us* write, “In our effort to fix the world’s problems, we fail to engage our own culpability while focusing on the failures of others ... We cannot blame the world for their sinful actions when we do not confess our own.”⁴³ Repentance like this is not about apologizing and moving on. It is an invitation to watch, critique, and join in the power of gospel love that does not concern itself with intentions, but rather the impact of personal and corporate actions. Austin Channing Brown writes,

More often than not, my experience has been that whiteness sees love as a prize it is owed, rather than a moral obligation it must demonstrate...In

⁴¹ Cannon, et al, *Forgive Us*, 210.

⁴² Cannon, et al, *Forgive Us*, 210. More about this story can be found in Keith Stewart’s book, *We Were Wrong: An Evangelical Pastor’s Radical Transformation Through Following Jesus in the Margins*, 1st ed. (Winston-Salem, NC: HIS Publishing Group, 2017).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 211.

this way, so-called love dodges responsibility for action and waits for the great catalytic moment that finally spurs accountability. I am not interested in a love ... that refuses hard work, instead demanding a bite-size education that doesn't transform anything. In a love that qualifies the statement 'Black lives matter,' because it is unconvinced this is true. I am not interested in a love that refuses to see systems and structures of injustice, preferring to ask itself only about personal intentions.⁴⁴

What is the point of confession, lament, and repentance if it does not result in a love that displays a willingness to sit in sacrificial discomfort, which, in turn, offers hope? Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg answers: "There are several steps to making *tshuvah* (the work of repentance and repair): You have to acknowledge what you did wrong (no matter whether it was intentional). You have to take actions to correct the mistake, or to make amends, if possible. And you need to invest some time working out how things can be different next time."⁴⁵ Because there will be a next time.

Despite best efforts, white people who have grown up in the United States make mistakes and stumble over attempts to work with people of color to create change. White privilege has a lasting effect which gives white Christians the impression that white voices are somehow more powerful or relevant than voices of color. Racist language has slipped into white, American vocabulary. An overeager desire to be considered an ally can lead to heavy-handed mistakes, and sometimes, ideas presented as solutions are simply wrong. This is why repentance is a posture, not a single act. Rabbi Ruttenberg explains, "Maimonides, the great 12th century philosopher and sage, defines complete *tshuvah* as that which happens when a person has the opportunity to commit the same sin

⁴⁴ Austin Channing Brown, *I'm Still Here*, 175-176.

⁴⁵ Danya Ruttenberg, "We Still Have Time to Repent for American Racism," *Washingtonpost.com*, last modified September 18, 2017, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A505272118/AONE?sid=lms>.

as he had in the past, but does not -- he makes a different choice the second time around.”⁴⁶ Ijeoma Oluo, a modern day philosopher and sage, echoes Maimonides:

Life is a series of moments. And in reality we are both the culmination of those countless moments, and each moment individually in time...you have been racist and you have been anti-racist ... you have been racist, and will be in the future, even if less so. You are racist because you were born and bred in a racist, white supremacist society ... This does not mean you have hate in your heart. You may intend to treat everyone equally.”⁴⁷

Racism informs many of our decisions without our even being aware. However, repentance, or *tshuvah*, as Rabbi Ruttenberg teaches, offers white people the opportunity to do better each time. This opportunity is part of the gospel message for all people — that we are not condemned to repeat the mistakes of the oppressive systems and false hierarchies we have created. Theologian and scholar, Walter Wink, writes, “The passion that drove the early Christians to evangelistic zeal ... was fired above all by relief at being liberated from the delusions being spun over them by the Powers. Being thus freed determined them to set others free.”⁴⁸ Liberation is not complete until the structures we have built and perpetuated have been torn down.

Through this chapter, examples and guides have provided a pathway into the language of lament. At this point there is a decision to be made: will we as white Christians choose to see and lament the suffering of our siblings, or will we remain stuck in the grief that results from our complicity and the loss of perceived righteousness and entitlement to privilege? Will our worship remain focused purely on celebration, or will

⁴⁶ Ruttenberg, “We Still Have Time to Repent for American Racism.”

⁴⁷ Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race* (New York: Seal Press, 2018), 217-218.

⁴⁸ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Galilee Doubleday, 1998), 200.

we begin the process of incorporating lament, not only over systems of injustice, but over the ongoing anguish of a nation steeped in individualism and white supremacy? In the final chapter, I will offer not only my conclusion, but some proposed applications as well as my own dream for the future of lament and reconciliation in the church.

CHAPTER 6:
CONCLUSION, APPLICATION, AND A DREAM FOR THE FUTURE

The fundamental reason for this dissertation is to explore how the white, evangelical church in the United States has become stuck in the early stages of grief regarding the church's history and complicity with racism and structures of systemic oppression. Why have white Christians been unable to move forward toward the ultimate goal of participating in racial reconciliation? Framing the church's grief within the stages of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Grief Stage Theory — denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance — a pattern emerges that not only explains where the church became stuck, but how it became stuck, and what will be required of the church to move forward.

In exploring ways in which the church has become stuck in its grief, I offered historical and current foundations, such as the perpetuated myth that white Christians in the United States have always intervened on the side of the oppressed. I also provided an introduction of two primary losses that white Christians grieve: the idea of being “good,” and the entitlement to privilege. Having established the reality of white, evangelical grief, I provided analysis of the psychological, spiritual, and cultural consequences the church faces for remaining stuck in these early stages.

The main contribution derived from this research is that lament, as aligned with Kübler-Ross's depression stage, is required to move the white, evangelical church forward. I provided scriptural and sociological foundations for the necessity of lament, including the unfortunate reality that white, evangelical churches lack a robust theology of lament to aid them in this process. Also provided was an examination of cultural “prophets,” explanations and tools for learning the language of lament; and establishing

rhythms and vocabulary to express deep sorrow in the face of suffering and loss. Perhaps the most important truth established here is that lament is a language which allows a person or a church community to suffer alongside those who have been oppressed by racism and systemic injustice, just as God suffers alongside God's people.

Lament is the catalyst for moving white Christians forward in their grief process, which leads to the deeper realization that lament is, in fact, the catalyst for meaningful repentance. More than confession or an offering of apology, lament has the capacity to open our hearts to the suffering of the oppressed and genuinely repent for the role of the white church in that suffering. Lament is an action, which spurs a continuation to act on behalf of the suffering. Lament also allows people, and their churches, to be held publicly accountable for changing behaviors in order that systems of oppression can be torn down. The actions and results of lament become a continual cycle because humans stumble in efforts toward change.

One of the greatest confirmations this research brought is that white Christians must take responsibility for tearing down the systems of oppression, but they have too many blind spots to recognize and destroy these systems on their own. In order to offer what the authors of *Forgive Us* call a “necessary counter-narrative”¹ that upends the status quo, white Christians must follow the lead of those harmed by the dominant narrative. To that end, I have gathered suggestions from several Black authors and non-Black authors of color to provide an application to start the process for white Christian leaders who are ready to do more.

¹ Cannon, et al., *Forgive Us*, 207.

Application: Listening and Learning From Prophetic Voices of Color

To begin our application, author and activist, Ijeoma Oluo, offers what she calls “basic rules” to determine if something is about race:

1. It is about race if a person of color thinks it is about race.
2. It is about race if it disproportionately or differently affects people of color.
3. It is about race if it fits into a broader pattern of events that disproportionately or differently affect people of color.²

As Oluo notes, if you think it seems like almost anything can fall under these categories, you are correct. “Because race impacts almost every aspect of our lives.”³

Oluo acknowledges that the problem of racial oppression in this country can be overwhelming unless it is attacked “piece by piece.”⁴ As such, she offers the following list of practical ideas for taking action:

- Vote in local elections.
- Get involved in local schools and insist on inclusive education.
- Bear witness for people of color — be a watchful presence and offer to help when it is safe to do so.
- Speak up on behalf of people of color, if you are in a union.
- Support businesses that are owned by Black people and non-Black persons of color.
- Boycott banks that prey on people of color.
- Give money to organizations working to fight racial oppression and support communities of color.
- Boycott businesses that exploit workers of color.
- Support music, film, television, art, and books created by people of color.
- Support increases in the minimum wage.
- Speak up for police reform.
- Demand college diversity.
- Vote for diverse government representatives.⁵

² Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race* (New York: Seal Press, 2018), 14-15.

³ Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 231-234.

Many of these suggestions may seem uncomfortably political. They are political because systemic injustice is political. Oluo writes, “The way we vote, where we spend our money, what we do and do not call out – these are all pieces of the system.”⁶ To defeat systemic oppression, we must fight within the political and public venues where it thrives.

Author, activist, and theologian, Jemar Tisby, offers a second set of suggestions for white Christians who seek to do something about systemic oppression:

- Increase awareness by watching documentaries about racial history, listen to people of color via social media, websites, podcasts, and search the internet for topics relating to racism, white privilege, and systemic injustice.
- Expand your relationships to include people of color, as well as people from different backgrounds and ethnicities.
- Hang out in places where you will be around people of diverse backgrounds, including people of color.
- Take action by creating something that speaks to racial justice — a book, a blog post, a sermon, a song, or a poem — and get feedback on it from a person of a different racial or ethnic background.
- Join and / or support organizations financially that advocate for racial and social justice.
- Find out what your local candidates support, then VOTE.
- Learn from Black churches. Attend a church where the spiritual authority is a person of color. If you are a pastor, join a ministerial association led by persons of color.
- Participate in the modern-day civil rights movement by:
 - Supporting the tearing down of confederate monuments.
 - Participate in starting a new seminary that prioritizes diversity.
 - Join or host freedom schools and pilgrimages.
 - Publicly denounce racism.
 - Speak to the church about racism and privilege.⁷

⁶ Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, 234.

⁷ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 195-212.

Notice that Tisby's suggestions become progressively more uncomfortable and, perhaps, frightening. He reminds us that, when God called Joshua to lead the people of Israel after Moses died, God's command was to "be strong and courageous."⁸ Tisby writes, "In much the same way, the church today must receive God's command to show strength and courage to combat racism. When it comes to racism, the American church does not have a 'how to' problem but a 'want to' problem ... The time for the American church's complicity in racism has long past. It is time to cancel compromise. It is time to practice courageous Christianity."⁹

The third, prophetic voice I offer is that of author, theologian, and activist, Drew G. I. Hart. In his book *The Trouble I've Seen*, Hart proposes Seven Jesus-Shaped Practices for the Antiracist Church, explaining that these disciplines do not require a specific order, but can begin at any point on the list, and happen all at once.¹⁰

- Share life together — do not allow racial hierarchy to pattern social lives, manage geographical moments, shape identities of superiority and inferiority, or interpret one another through white supremacist and anti-Black gazes.
- Practice solidarity in the struggle by — joining with racially oppressed communities.
- See the world from below by following Jesus to the margins — where stories of oppression can be shared and received.
- Subvert racial hierarchy in the church. The church must undermine any project that concentrates white power over others or that normalizes white values, experience, and perspectives as the objective and universally right way.
- Soak in Scripture and the Spirit for renewed social imagination. Read Scripture through the lens of Jesus, as God's Messiah and suffering servant, while yielding to the Holy Spirit active in the world.

⁸ Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 213.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 213, 215.

¹⁰ Hart, *Trouble I've Seen*, 168-169.

- Seek first the kingdom of God, taking Jesus’ parables about the kingdom seriously without being distracted by the American dream.
- Engage in self-examination. No one in America is untouched by currents of racial bias and white supremacy. Now is not the time to fall into denial.¹¹

Hart’s focus on community, Christ, and kingdom provide a way forward for white Christian leaders to move congregations, denominations, and movements to courageous action.

These are only three of the prophetic voices available to white Christians today. In a time when the United States is in tremendous racial upheaval, it is time for white evangelical Christians to acknowledge a history of complicity with racism and systemic oppression. This acknowledgment provides an avenue to reclaim the language of lament in order to express deep sorrow, repent, and begin to tear down the systems, stereotypes, and abuses we have perpetuated with our complicity. To repeat Tisby’s exhortation, “The time for the American church’s complicity in racism has long past. It is time to cancel compromise. It is time to practice courageous Christianity.”¹²

To aid in the process of moving forward, Soong-Chan Rah offers “a post-Ferguson lament for our nation adapted from Lamentations 5 when the people begin to pray for themselves.”¹³ It is a timely reminder of what has happened, and what is at stake.

The People Pray

¹Remember, Lord, what happened to Michael Brown and Eric Garner; look, and see the disgraceful way they treated their bodies.

¹¹ Hart, *Trouble I’ve Seen*, 168-175.

¹² Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 215.

¹³ Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 210.

- ²Our inheritance of the image of God in every human being
has been co-opted and denied by others.
- ³The children of Eric Garner have become fatherless
widowed mothers grieve their dead children.
- ⁴We must scrap for our basic human rights;
our freedom and our liberty has a great price.
- ⁵Corrupt officers and officials pursue us and are at our heels;
we are weary and find no rest.
- ⁶We submitted to uncaring government agencies and to big
business to get enough bread.
- ⁷Our ancestors sinned the great sin of instituting slavery;
they are no more – but we bear their shame.
- ⁸The system of slavery and institutionalized racism ruled
over us,
and there is no one to free us from their hands.
- ⁹We get our bread at the risk of our lives
because of the guns on the streets.
- ¹⁰Michael Brown’s skin is hot as an oven
as his body lay out in the blazing sun.
- ¹¹Women have been violated throughout our nation’s history;
Black women raped by white slave owners on the plantations.
- ¹²Noble Black men have been hung, lynched and gunned down;
elders and spokesmen are shown no respect.
- ¹³Young men can’t find work because of unjustly applied laws;
boys stagger under the expectation that their lives are
destined for jail.
- ¹⁴The elder statesmen and civil rights leaders are gone from
the city gate;
young people who speak out their protest through music
are silenced.
- ¹⁵Trust in our ultimate triumph has diminished;
our triumphant dance has turned to a funeral dirge.
- ¹⁶Our sense of exceptionalism has been exposed.
Woe to us, for we have sinned!
- ¹⁷Because of this our hearts are faint,
because of these things our eyes grow dim
- ¹⁸for our cities lie desolate
with predatory lenders and real estate speculators

prowling over them.

¹⁹You, Lord, reign forever;
your throne endures from generation to generation.

²⁰Why do you always forget us?
Why do you forsake us so long?

²¹Restore us to yourself, Lord, that we may return;
renew our days as of old

²²unless you have utterly rejected us
and are angry with us beyond measure.¹⁴

Conclusion: My Dream for the Future of the White Church

According to Katherine O'Connor, "Lament is truthful...Lament is hopeful in its attempts to engage God...Lament demands justice...Without the practice of public lament, collective work for justice is blocked, paralyzed, unable to begin."¹⁵ O'Connor describes the Christian church I long to see – truthful, hopeful, and demanding justice. The Christian church I have experienced, however, has embraced denial and the centering of whiteness. My dream for the future of the white church, then, is one of discomfort as we admit that we have been shaped by systems of oppression and need deliverance from the sins of our past complicity and our fears that we will be named as unrighteous.

Reni Eddo-Lodge writes, "The perverse thing about our current racial structure is that it has always fallen on the shoulders of those at the bottom to change it. Yet racism is a white problem."¹⁶ This is the complexity that stymies change in the nation, and especially in the white church. Rather than lead the charge toward justice, we seem

¹⁴ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, 210-212.

¹⁵ Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 125-128.

¹⁶ Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, 207.

content to talk about the evils of racism without exploring our part in it. We leave our Black siblings and non-Black siblings of color to do the actual fighting. So my first dream for the white church is that we would talk the talk AND walk the walk. If, as O'Connor says, lament demands justice, then learning to lament well will be the catalyst white Christians need to participate.

The question that remains here is “how?” In addition to those prophetic suggestions listed above, how do white Christians reclaim lament that reflects biblical models? It seems to me that it begins with decentering whiteness, and evolves into distinct changes in our liturgies. As mentioned above, admitting we have been individually and corporately shaped by white supremacy moves us into a posture to resist that system and look for a better way.¹⁷ Andrew Draper offers these practices for individuals and communities to begin decentering whiteness and moving into such a posture:

- Repent complicity in systemic sin;
- Learn from theological and cultural resources not our own;
- Choose to locate our lives in places and structures in which we are necessarily guests;
- Tangibly submit to non-white ecclesial leadership;
- Hear and speak the glory of God in unfamiliar cadences.¹⁸

Draper continues:

As I am a guest in a community not my own, as I submit to others different from myself, I begin to recognize what love and desire sound like when spoken to me in ways with which I was not previously familiar. As my ears are attuned to the glory of God being shouted and sung and preached and whispered, I imagine the God of Jesus differently... Only when our lives are intertwined with others in

¹⁷ Lang, *Elephants in the Church*.

¹⁸ Andrew Draper, “The End of ‘Mission:’ Christian Witness and the Decentering of White Identity,” in *Can ‘White’ People Be Saved?: Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission*, ed. Love L. Sechrest, Johnny Ramírez-Johnson, and Amos Yong (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 181.

relationships marked by difference can we learn to recognize the Word of God meeting us in the other.¹⁹

Decentering is the first step toward lament because it takes us outside of our own worlds and reorients us to a place where we see the image of God in places we have never before recognized. This allows us to glimpse the pain and joy of their existence. In my dream for the future of the white church, this decentering and reorientation is as cyclical as our grief and becomes an ongoing process toward lament.

The next step toward lament is the evolution of our liturgies. In my dream, this begins with the introduction of regular (weekly) corporate lament for the suffering in the world and our complicity in that suffering. If, as O'Connor writes, lament is truthful,²⁰ this corporate lament makes no attempt to soften the language regarding our sin and God's expectation for our involvement in justice. Our music, our Scripture readings, and our prayers would contain expressions of lament. Truthful lament exposes our discomfort and reveals those places we would rather hide. It shifts us into a posture of repentance.

The third step (though not likely the final step) is making changes in our personal and corporate lives that reflect the posture of repentance and our growing awareness of God among the other. If, as O'Connor suggests, lament is "hopeful in its attempts to engage God,"²¹ this means that our worship will reflect that hope and engage God in ways that reflect people who are not like us. It will reflect the hope that God hears God's

¹⁹ Draper, "The End of 'Mission: Christian Witness and the Decentering of White Identity," 204-205.

²⁰ O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 125.

²¹ O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 126.

people in their suffering. It will resist language of paternalism, patriarchy, and paternalism, embracing instead the language of the upside-down Realm of God.

Pastor and activist, Lenny Duncan, lays it on the line this way, “the first step in dismantling white supremacy in our church is a public admittance—a national confession wherein we admit that systemic racism is woven into the fabric of our structures, our hymnals, our liturgies, and our ecclesial polity.”²² Duncan offers examples such as the possibility that straight, white men may need to relinquish leadership to marginalized Black women and men, or non-Black people of color; Advent language of darkness and light could be removed and replaced with analogies of emptiness and fullness; “white Jesus” may need to be removed from stained glass windows; and the cross on Resurrection Sunday could be draped in a color other than white.²³

Will some of these steps and remedies seem trivial to white Christians? Probably. But if lament truly demands justice, offers hopeful engagement with God, and reflects truth, then lament requires white Christians and the white church to assume a posture of repentance that will, one day, lead to reconciliation. That is my dream for the future of the white church and for the entire Church of Jesus Christ in the United States, that white Christians will embrace lament and become so embedded in a posture of repentance that reconciliation becomes the inevitable result in the Church as a model of hope for the entire nation.

²² Lenny Duncan, *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 21.

²³ Duncan, *Dear Church*, 22-23.

APPENDICES:
SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Appendix A

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack
by Peggy McIntosh

“I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group.”

DAILY EFFECTS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE:

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place and time of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person’s voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race.
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.

16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.
18. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
22. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
23. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
24. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge", I will be facing a person of my race.
25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
26. I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
27. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared.
28. I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her/his chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine.
29. I can be pretty sure that if I argue for the promotion of a person of another race, or a program centering on race, this is not likely to cost me heavily within my present setting, even if my colleagues disagree with me.
30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have.
31. I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices.
32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.
33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.
34. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
35. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.
36. If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it had racial overtones.
37. I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about my next steps, professionally.
38. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.
39. I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race.
40. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
41. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
42. I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.

43. If I have low credibility as a leader I can be sure that my race is not the problem.
44. I can easily find academic courses and institutions which give attention only to people of my race.
45. I can expect figurative language and imagery in all of the arts to testify to experiences of my race.
46. I can chose blemish cover or bandages in “flesh” color and have them more or less match my skin.
47. I can travel alone or with my spouse without expecting embarrassment or hostility in those who deal with us.
48. I have no difficulty finding neighborhoods where people approve of our household.
49. My children are given texts and classes which implicitly support our kind of family unit and do not turn them against my choice of domestic partnership.
50. I will feel welcomed and “normal” in the usual walks of public life, institutional and social.

Peggy McIntosh is associate director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. This essay is excerpted from Working Paper 189. “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies” (1988), by Peggy McIntosh; available for \$4.00 from the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley MA 02181. The working paper contains a longer list of privileges. This excerpted essay is reprinted from the Winter 1990 issue of *Independent School*.

Appendix B**Until I Think of You**
(Tori Kelly)

Some days I wake up wishing I hadn't
Just leaving the house is hard to do
Clouds make the sunshine hard to imagine
When you feel you're only bound to lose

Some nights I can't sleep
I'm trapped in these sheets
It hurts no matter what I do

I'm lost and all alone
Until I think of you

When I'm sinking deeper, soaked in a sadness
When emptiness is hard to hide
Each step I take brings me closer to madness
But they all think I'm doing fine

I can't find my way
I need saving grace
It hurts no matter what I do

I'm lost without a hope
Until I think of you

Ooh-ooh-ooh
My strength, my God, my love, my life
You're all I need to get me through the darkest night
My peace of mind 'cause I know you'll never leave my side

Broken and confused
Nothing left to lose
Oh, I just feel like there's no use

I'm sure it's over now
Until I think of you

Appendix C

Deliverance

I'm in a desert
Waiting for rain
"Someday, someday,"
I hear again and again

You say have patience
And trust what I say
But it gets harder and harder
With each passing day

How long do I have to wait
For deliverance from this place

I'm on a mountain
Climbing to the peak
But I fear it's a destination
I'm-a never gonna reach

My soul is tired
My heart is bruised
"Someday, Someday,"
Is all I hear from you

How long do I have to wait
For deliverance from this place

My Lord, I'm tired
Tired of this pain
How long, how long
Until you take it away

This hope within me
Is all that keeps me going
I know that one day
I'll be able to sing

Oh I made it through
All I needed was to trust in you

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