

Wait—Is This Racist?

A Guide to Becoming
an Anti-Racist Church

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with

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Introduction

The question always comes, eventually.

Whether it's after a talk I've just done, at a church with which I'm consulting, or when I'm speaking one-on-one with someone, White people, ultimately, always want to know the answer to one specific question: "What can we actually *do* about racism?" I sense the good intentions here, the real desire to fix a problem to which they are either just awakening or with which they have struggled for some time. I hear the deep desire to do better. I also sense some desperation—a response to being overwhelmed, a desire to be good, and a real craving for a quick fix to a very complicated situation.

Tell me what to do to not be racist anymore, and I'll just do it. Check the box. Push the button. Post to Instagram. Task complete.

It's an understandable phenomenon. After all, the Protestant work ethic teaches us that we must work our way into God's grace and a state of goodness, rather than finding beauty and worthiness in our very embodiment. Capitalism tells us we must be productive and that our value is variable based on market demand, rather than our inherent human worth. Technology teaches us that our results must be instant. When combined with Whiteness, these paradigms spur us into a frenzy of do-gooder action and White saviorism, where we rush to offer tutoring to struggling students of color or fly across the ocean to go on mission trips to feed hungry bellies on other continents. To be clear, White saviorism is nothing new—it's been around for a long time,

but modern technology seems to add a certain frenetic, social-justice-warrior, meme-filled energy to it.

All of this raises the question—do we want to be anti-racist because that’s what the current market demands? Or because we long for the true shalom of God and know it can’t exist without real racial justice? It’s an important question, and the answer will result in radically different behaviors. While I am encouraged by the recent rush of desire among White people to *do something* after the horrific murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, the real danger here is a justice that is only **performative**—one that makes White people feel great about ourselves but doesn’t initiate any real change. Still, I believe that as institutions that have a huge influence on the spiritual formation and worldview of individuals as well as deep cultural and community impact, churches have the potential to be a massive influence for justice in our world. If—and that’s a big *if*—we are willing to actually engage in a **divestment of power**. (Note that words in bold are explained more fully in the glossary starting on page 181.)

Churches are used to being charitable; when it comes to responding to the world’s physical needs, the church is an expert at feeding empty bellies and clothing cold bodies. Charitable efforts that feed and care for the marginalized are, of course, important and worthy. After all, cold bodies need clothes, and hungry bellies need food. When it comes to racial justice, however, very often the work White people rush through in order to feel as if we are *doing something* is ineffective, and sometimes it even does more harm than good. We might post to social media or even join a protest. We may attend book clubs and read Black authors. We may even work to extend our social circle, our musical tastes, our electoral choices in the voting booth. These things are important, but they are nowhere near enough. We are Doing the Right Things, and this is good, but until we begin to initiate real change by *divesting ourselves of power and privilege*, nothing will actually change. Worse, our performance of justice without real change can lead to the dangerous complacency associated with the belief that posting to social media means that we have *done something* and are therefore existentially anti-racist.

So, what does it mean to actually divest ourselves of power and privilege? This can manifest in many ways, and it is the imaginative edge that I am inviting you to dance along with me. This is the work of White labor: to imagine new ways to be White in the world that not only do no harm, but also participate in collective liberation. This book

will give you some ideas as a jumping-off point, but you are invited to bring your genesis, your creativity, your imagination to the work as well. More importantly, you and I together are invited to submit to the imaginations of the **BIPOC** community as they give us feedback on our Whiteness and how to be better human beings. This cuts to the core problem of Whiteness: we think we know what's best for everyone, including us.

This may surprise you, but Jesus is a pretty good example of someone who divested himself of power. According to the Christian narrative, Jesus had the power of the Almighty at his fingertips, and never once did he use it for his own gain. When Jesus did use his access to divine resources, every single time it was focused on helping someone else. Not once did Jesus say, I need a building, so I will manifest some gold to pay for it. Not once did Jesus say, these Romans are hurting my feelings, so I will persecute them with legislation. Even when Jesus was actually being persecuted by both a mob and the state, he did not call down what must have been some pretty awesome smiting powers. No—he called down forgiveness and grace. When he saw hungry bellies he fed them, but he also healed bodies and restored them to community; he banqueted with the marginalized and called them his siblings and his friends; he resisted systems of power, ultimately spreading his arms wide to demonstrate power's murderous sin. There is no greater statement of condemnation for power than the cross.

There are still some White churches who resist saying that Black lives actually do matter. This statement, they claim, is too political. Give them a hungry belly, and they'll feed it, believing that this is what Jesus would do. They are not wrong—I think he would, too. But there is a disconnect in these White churches between the hungry belly and the body politic that creates it, and a lack of understanding that the church can—and has a responsibility to—impact both. Since the time that Jesus had a body that walked on this earth, the church has changed dramatically, becoming an institution imbued with the very type of power Jesus resisted.

Charitable programs implemented by institutions that hold power are important. But they can *also* run the risk of making White folk feel self-satisfied, as if we can check the boxes and be deemed *totally not racist* because we ventured into the inner city to mentor at-risk youth, and most of them happened to be Black. This is the act of “doing” anti-racism, and at best, it's a short-term solution to a systemic problem. This book will help you engage in some of the deep paradigm shifts that

are necessary for your church to become an organization that doesn't just *do* anti-racism, but actually *is* anti-racist—from the inside out.

While we are busying ourselves with feeding hungry bellies and protesting state-sanctioned violence, we *also* need to be addressing the systems that cause them—and that includes interrogating the ones we ourselves perpetuate and participate in as institutions that hold power. That means looking at the way we think about poverty, education, and taxes. It includes things like property ownership and capitalism, public domain, overpoliced communities of color, “law and order” politicians, and “good side of the tracks” mentalities. We need to interrogate the bootstrap ideology, and we need to recognize whether we deem people worthy by their societal productivity or simply by the fact that they are human (your answer may surprise you). And we need to identify the ways in which our beliefs in these areas infiltrate the way we do church.

If we are only willing to do the easy work of giving up a Saturday afternoon to hand out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches but not willing to sit with the ways we embody **systemic racism** with our votes, the policies we support, or the way we stay silent when racist Uncle Joe tells us his fifteen millionth bad joke, we are not *being* anti-racist, we are *performing* anti-racism. If we are only willing to entertain notions of anti-racism that make us totally comfortable and feel familiar, we are not *being* anti-racist, we are *doing* anti-racism. And anti-racism that is only *performed* or *done* and not embodied and internalized is not really anti-racism at all. In fact, it teeters on the side of racist White saviorism at best. At worst, it's straight-up racist tomfoolery wrapped up in a blanket of White warm fuzzies.

As churches and institutions work to become more anti-racist in our being, a five-week sermon series or a book-group discussion about work by a Black author is not enough. Those are important parts of becoming, but not the entirety of a holistic state of being anti-racist. Institutions that seek to become existentially anti-racist—to have anti-racism be something they *are*, rather than something they *do*—must look at how we show up in the world on a daily basis, not just during Black History Month. How do we honor the land we are on and the people who once inhabited it? How do we resist **White pseudosupremacy** in our daily operations? How do we consistently interrogate narratives that maintain the racist status quo? What is our response when we identify ways in which we have done or do harm to Black and Brown communities? How do we embody lament and reparations? How do the ways in which we use language or music or policy or any

other number of things that happen, automatically perpetuate that which we hope to resist? These are not easy questions and there are no simple answers.

The point is that if we focus our efforts less on doing and more on becoming, the right doing will come from our becoming. The work toward which we must endeavor is to be comfortable with the fact that a truly just society looks nothing like what we currently have. This is a terrifying notion to many of us, but this is because we have yet to start imagining, to lean into the power of our own genesis and creative being to envision something new. There is an imaginative void that is ours to fill. White people must ready ourselves to lay down our false dominance and endeavor with the collective, trusting that, as John Franke says in my all-time favorite description of the realm of God, when we reach that holy place of shalom, “Everyone will have enough, and no one needs to be afraid.”¹

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is designed to be a tool that will help you interrogate the way your organization currently embodies church, identify ways in which those operations, procedures, and liturgies may be propping up White pseudosupremacy, and make the types of structural changes that can effect long-term corporate change. Our goal is nothing short of a world that is just for all creation, and this must begin with our own organizations and our dedication to being existentially anti-racist. As a White person, I am your companion and your guide on this journey. I come to you with a deep understanding of the sense of overwhelm, grief, frustration, and desire you might experience as a White leader who wants to make this right. I know what it’s like to have to deconstruct your own identity, to have to find a new way to be in the world. And I’m here to tell you straight up: if you’re not feeling uncomfortable, you’re doing it wrong.

Of course, one of the hallmarks of White saviorism is when we White people think we know exactly how to fix everything. So while I am completely convinced that White people need to do White work (and I know you’re shocked to discover I have some strong opinions about how to do that), and even that we need White leaders leading us in that work, I am also certain that we need to do so under the authority of and in collaboration with members of the BIPOC community.

Addressing racism within our churches is important, impactful work, and we need Black and Brown voices to speak into that process, to illuminate the places where we are unconsciously perpetuating racism, and to help us see how we can be not just inclusive, but truly *anti-racist* in our being. (You may be surprised to know that I do not equate being anti-racist with being more diverse necessarily—but we'll get to that in a bit.) I am also convinced—in fact, I think it's fairly obvious—that creating a more just world is the work of the collective. It's not just White people's work, but rather labor that White people must do in collaboration with—and yes, even in submission to—voices that have traditionally been marginalized. The goal is for the world to no longer be White, with everyone else just doing their best to assimilate, but rather a beautiful coalition of cultures where everyone is valued and thriving in the authenticity of their God-given identities. The new creation—the kin-dom of God—will be the result of all of us imagining something entirely different *together*.

To that end, I am thrilled to introduce you to Bryana Clover and Josh Riddick, two professionals who regularly work with churches—specifically around race issues—who will share their own expertise, stories, and experiences. You'll find their words woven through each chapter, offering invaluable perspectives on each area of church life we'll be discussing. If you are a member of the BIPOC community and leading anti-racist work in primarily White spaces, Bryana and Josh will offer you tips, support, and encouragement from their own wisdom and experiences doing this work. If you're White, you'll learn more about the experiences of Black and Brown people and the emotional labor they must do to navigate White spaces, and you'll also learn how you can better show care and support for them as well.

UNLEARNING WHITENESS

(Bryana)

The labor of unlearning is not easy. It requires sacrifice from all involved, both White people and BIPOC. Guilt is a common emotion that often surfaces for White people, and I want to address this for a moment in the context of anti-racism. For most of us, guilt acts like cancer—slowly and invisibly doing its harm until our sickness catches us by surprise. It paralyzes us into inaction and overwhelms us into a state of shame and despair. When guilt manifests in this way, it causes

individual and collective harm. So how can we move from a state of guilt to authentic action? You're reading this book, and that's a great start! I want to provide a quick perspective on culture and socialization that can serve as a tool for you throughout your journey.

In their book titled *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo provide a helpful paradigm to understand the way culture—and our position within it—impacts our racial identity.² According to the authors, each one of us is born into a particular culture. **Culture** essentially encompasses the norms, values, practices, patterns of communication, language, laws, customs, and meanings shared by a group of people in a given time and place. There are obvious elements of a particular culture, such as food or music, but many other elements of culture are more difficult to name. Sensoy and DiAngelo point out that because we are all born into a particular culture, it is often impossible for us to distinguish our own reality *within* our culture from the realities *outside* our culture. These deeper levels of culture include body language, concepts of beauty, and patterns of handling emotions. **Socialization** refers to our “systematic training into the norms of our culture . . . the process of learning the meanings and practices that enable us to make sense of and behave appropriately in that culture.”³ In order for us to engage in the work of anti-racism, it is important for us to recognize how our own position in society shapes what we can see and understand about the world. This is commonly referred to as **positionality**, or social location.

So what does this have to do with guilt, you might ask? One of the ideologies inherent in Western culture is **individualism**—which Sensoy and DiAngelo describe as “the belief that we are each unique and outside the forces of socialization.”⁴ This is especially ingrained in the psyche of anyone who has spent a majority of their life in the United States. Guilt, therefore, stems from this idea that we are personally responsible for racism—that racism is an ideology that we, as individuals, either hold or do not.

So here is the paradigm shift we wish to introduce: What happens if we recognize racism as a systemic problem and a product of our socialization, rather than merely an individual ideology? What if we can see more clearly how our position in a society that benefits a particular race at the expense of others gives some of us the power and privilege needed to actually dismantle racism? What if we recognize that racism is a collective burden that we all must dismantle with intention, and that it is imperative for our collective liberation? As you engage in the

following chapters, take note of when that emotion of guilt creeps in, and make a conscious decision now to challenge that guilt with knowledge and growth.

WHITE SELF-LOVE, GUILT, AND SHAME

(Josh)

One of the practices I use when facilitating interracial workshop groups is taking some time to go around the room for folks to share what they love about their racial identity. It's a fun exercise that gives BIPOC a chance to name parts of themselves that give them joy instead of only being asked to rehash moments of discrimination and marginalization. The answers are usually something like these:

I love our hair.

I love our food.

Oh, I love our creativity and our rhythm.

Smiles light up faces as people get to share what is special about their identity and culture. Then, I arrive at a White participant who squirms uncomfortably in their chair and does not have a response on hand like most of the BIPOC participants. Sometimes I might hear, "I like not being pulled over by the police, I guess?" Every time, White participants in the room struggle to answer that question. Ultimately the participant gives up and acknowledges they do not have anything they love about being White.

White pseudosupremacy has malformed all of us, and as you will learn from this book, White folks are not immune. If you are White, anti-racism work is not just about learning to unbind the oppressed and deconstruct systems, it is also about learning to love yourself—your *White* self. Reclaiming your identity and the capacity to love yourself apart from the powers and privileges of Whiteness is an intimate part of your liberation. Reclaiming your ethnic lineage is one way this can be done—celebrating the perseverance of your Irish immigrant heritage or the robust flavors of the Italian culinary tradition. Doing so enables you not only to (re)discover parts of yourself and your cultural narrative that inform who you are, but also to grapple with how parts of your lineage were erased as the "price of the ticket" into Whiteness. As you hold the guilt Bryana named above, do not let it derail you from the

liberative work of learning what it means to love your White identity while still pursuing racial equity.

Guilt is a familiar feeling for White folks who do this work. Learning to identify the emotions that come with guilt and differentiate it from shame is paramount to being able to experience liberation and self-love needed for racial justice to work well. Guilt arises when one becomes aware of behavior or involvement in a system of oppression. Guilt dredges up emotions that White folks tend to avoid but can be great motivators toward pursuing equity. Sitting with the feeling of guilt instead of fleeing or shrinking from it will help you identify where you may have caused harm or made a **microaggression**.

Shame, on the other hand, speaks to our identities and our being. Shame seeks to devalue personhood because of an external action or behavior. Shame undermines our ability to see ourselves as members of the beloved family of God. If you cannot begin to love yourself as you were created, you cannot love others as they were made. BIPOC do not want or need your shame, nor are they responsible for removing that guilt or shame.

For too many White folks, the shame of Whiteness is the motivator to engage in racial justice work. But shame as motivation is unsustainable and unable to help you arrive at a place of loving self. Instead, let your liberation journey be bound up in learning to love how the Divine made you and not how Whiteness shapes you.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is designed to be interactive. In other words, it's not your typical weekend sofa read. It's meant to be a thing you work through both individually and with your fellow church leaders. You'll answer (that is, struggle with) questions and dig deeper to find uncomfortable truths. Just as if Bryana, Josh, or I were coaching you one-on-one, if you really engage the work, you'll find that we won't let you off the hook, and this is the exact thing you need. The questions are designed to bring you deeper so that both you and your organization can travel on the journey from racial awakening, through the deep midnight of the soul that is White grief and lament, to the other side, which is the good and holy work of true liberation for all God's children.

Each chapter will begin with an exploration of why the topic at hand matters. What actually makes it important, for example, to audit

the lyrics of your hymns, or consider the way your organization uses space? Unless you understand *why* congregational singing, for example, impacts our worldview, you'll continue to do things the way you always have. That's just human nature. Then, each chapter will take you into a more practical conversation specific to your church's operations before offering you questions you can use with your leadership team to dive deep into an examination of your own organization. It might be helpful for you to go through this as individuals, and then bring your entire staff and/or lay leadership team together to discuss what you've learned and, most importantly, develop a plan of action. The final chapter will help you do just that. You'll look back over the work you've done and use it to complete a strategy for moving forward.

It's important to remember, however, that this is not a one-and-done kind of thing. This is work that will be an ongoing process, a constant awareness and intentionality that you'll need to practice. Remember: this is about becoming, and a way of being. It is not something you "do." Come back to the book regularly to remind yourself of what you've learned, and plan regular check-ins with yourself to examine and interrogate your own identity as a White person. This is a practice that will yield deep and rich results.

Finally, there are a few key points to remember, in no particular order:

This will be messy. Becoming and being an anti-racist church will never be neat and orderly, nor will it ever be complete. You will not reach a singular point in time at which you can effectively say, "We are done." It is contextual, and the anti-racist lexicon is changing daily. It will require you to be agile and able to respond depending on the circumstance. The sooner you understand this, the less painful the process will be.

You will feel resistance. Because this will require a divestment of centralized privilege and power, you will feel uncomfortable. The resistance will come both from within you and from the people around you as you begin to externalize your new, anti-racist stance. This is practically guaranteed. If you don't feel resistance, you're either not doing it right, or you are a White person who has already completely divested from Whiteness. That means I should probably be learning from you. White anti-racism is an exercise in discomfort, and the sooner we all get comfortable with that, the better.

It will require a divestment of resources. Performative anti-racism is free, but true anti-racism has a cost. Churches that hope to become anti-racist but are not willing to redistribute financial resources, human

energy, or liturgical time to the process are only perpetuating the problem, not solving it. If you're thinking this will just be an exercise between you and your journal, think again. This is about taking real action, initiating real redistribution, and making real change.

Beloved aspects of your church and its practices may have to go, and that's OK. People tend to cling to things we love. This is human and natural; it's normal to want to resist change. But sentimentalism cannot come at the cost of our anti-racism, and unfortunately some of the things we love are also deeply embedded in supremacy culture. We'll be talking in these chapters about church buildings and imagery, about beloved liturgical practices and the ways we do small groups. You can be almost certain that somewhere, there will be an aspect of the way you do church that is complicated and messy because it is both easy to love and be attached to, and also really racist. You may feel complicated feelings around this yourself, and perhaps more difficult, you'll receive pushback (sometimes, very vehement pushback) from your congregants. But it's important to be merciless and objective here and remember that White feelings are not more important than Black lives, and it is Black lives that are quite literally in danger in the supremacist culture we are working to resist.

It's all based in the White cis-hetero patriarchy. I've met with church leaders who say they want to lead their church toward a more anti-racist stance, but they don't want to use the word *race*.⁵ These same churches also refuse to affirm women in leadership roles or the LGBTQ+ community at all. I am adamant that you cannot affirm only one part of a person's identity. If a Black gay woman walks into your church, you cannot tell her that you will love and fight for her Blackness, while refusing to acknowledge her leadership gifts because she is a woman or her spouse because she is attracted to the same sex. **Intersectionality** is important, and you must be willing to engage all of these parts of her identity in meaningful ways. The one thing that racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity have in common is *power*—a state of being in which the dominant group controls access, influence, and resources. A truly Jesus-centered and anti-racist church will seek to divest itself of power at all costs, even when it feels really uncomfortable.

Diversity is not the goal. When I consult with churches, this is often the first big hurdle I need to help leadership to leap over. Somewhere along the line, Whiteness has taught us that to be successfully *not racist* means that we need to have faces of all different colors sitting in our pews. I'm here to tell you that diversity should *not* be the goal of

your anti-racism work, and I'll go even further to say that diversity efforts usually do more harm to the BIPOC community than good. You can be a really awesome, wholly anti-racist church and still be completely White, all at the same time. In fact, a key aspect of being anti-racist is recognizing that sometimes, the BIPOC community just needs BIPOC-only spaces, because Whiteness has a tendency to consume everything in its path. The difference is that all-White spaces can often be inherently racist because Whiteness is reinforced as the norm against which everything else is measured.

What is important to understand here is that humanity's racial healing is not yet complete, and so the beloved community—that beautiful realm of God where racial identity is no longer an obstacle to relationship but rather something that is valued and celebrated—is not yet something we're ready for. So for now—at this point in our healing journey—White people need to spend time deconstructing our Whiteness while also understanding that BIPOC folk need to cultivate spaces that are safe for them. It's possible that our anti-racism efforts will result in a more diverse church because once we have tamed the power dynamic of Whiteness, BIPOC will feel safer. But if all we're trying to do is use the measure of how many BIPOC butts we have in our seats, we're not practicing anti-racism, but rather racist tokenism of Black and Brown bodies.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

1. Create a journal specifically for this project.
2. Set aside time each week to engage this material regularly.
3. Leaders should go through the material individually (or, even better, with a trained coach) first. Only then should you engage your team, and when you do, you should have a solid plan of action for doing so.
4. Understand that while the time you spend engaging this book is important, much of your learning will come in the day-to-day practice, so keep your journal handy for those realizations when they come.
5. Prayer and meditation can be a powerful tool for transformation, and we encourage it throughout this process. Ask to be shown what you need to know. I believe this is a prayer God *always* answers.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION BEFORE WE BEGIN

1. As you prepare to lead your organization to a place of true anti-racism, what fears come up for you? List them all honestly and without judgment. (You can't heal them without first acknowledging them.)
2. Do you notice any resistance to the introduction of this work? For example, how do you respond to the idea that anti-racism must include a divestment of power? What does this feel like in your body? Emotionally? It is important to be able to recognize resistance when it happens, because if you're not able to recognize it, you can't practice agency over it.
3. Does the way Bryana speaks of White guilt challenge your beliefs in any way? What feelings come up for you when you think of White guilt in this way?
4. How does your social location impact the way you see and understand racialized contexts?
5. What comes up for you when Josh invites you to love your *White* self? What about your identity can and do you love, and how is it related to your Whiteness?
6. Do the things you love about your Whiteness relate only to the power it offers, or are there other, more meaningful things that your White heritage can offer while also divesting itself of power?

PDF versions of the assessments found throughout this book are available at www.wjkbooks.com/WaitIsThisRacist and may be printed for use by your teams as you work through this book together.

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