

FeistyThoughts

TURNS OUT...SHE'S GOT SOMETHING TO SAY

Why I Stopped Talking About Racial Reconciliation And Started Talking About White Supremacy

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Recently people have asked me, “Why isn’t talking about white privilege enough, why white supremacy?” There is an obvious discomfort with the term by white and Asian American people. The one exception to that is when things like Charlottesville happen. When people march around with Nazi flags, most folks I know feel comfortable saying, “I’m not down with that.” Which is a pretty low bar, but ok. However, when the term white supremacy is used for anything less obvious than tiki torch wielding Nazi flag waving people, lots of folks get uncomfortable. Most of my crowd was taught to use the terms white privilege and racial reconciliation. Here is why I no longer focus on them and instead teach on white supremacy.

When I first learned the term racial reconciliation in the early nineties, I found it very helpful and exciting. I was passionate about issues of race and justice, but had never heard those things discussed in Christian circles. Suddenly there was a Biblical basis and communal energy towards this value. When I came on staff with a Christian non-profit I was taught that racial reconciliation consisted of a three strand rope- ethnic identity, inter personal relationships, and systemic injustice. Though the focus was almost always on the first two.

Beginning with the not guilty verdict of George Zimmerman and gaining momentum with the murder of Michael Brown Jr. in the fall of 2014, Black Lives Matter revealed the limits of the racial reconciliation model espoused by many evangelical organizations in nineties. Watching white Christians and People of Color (POC) submitted to whiteness respond again and again with

- denial of systemic injustice

- disregard for the lived experience of black people

- silence in the pulpit

- a deeply ingrained superiority regarding issues of race

- a fixation on intentions over outcomes

I had to ask why those disciplined by the racial reconciliation framework were so ill equipped to engage, learn from, and respond to a movement focused on systemic and institutionalized racial injustice.

Bad Theology

The term racial reconciliation serves the dominant culture, it serves white people and those who align with whiteness. The term reconciliation is relational in nature. And though relationships are important, it is anchored in white theology's pathological individualism.

Jesus died for **my** sins.

Jesus went to the cross for **me**.

I know the plans He has for **me**.

Though there is a place for the individual in theology. White theology, in profound syncretism with American culture, has distorted the Bible to be solely about individual redemption. So it is blind to the reality that when Scripture says, "I know the plans I have for you." The **you** is plural and addressed to an entire community of people that has been displaced and are in exile. All Scripture has been reduced to individual interactions between God and a person, even when they are actually between God and a community, or Jesus and a group of people. As a result, white theology defines racism as hateful thoughts and deeds by an individual, but cannot comprehend communal, systemic, or institutionalized sin, because it has erased all examples of that framework from Scripture.

Secondly, white Christianity suffers from a bad case of Disney Princess theology. As each individual reads Scripture, they see themselves as the princess in every story. They are Esther, never Xerxes or Haman. They are Peter, but never Judas. They are the woman anointing Jesus, never the Pharisees. They are the Jews escaping slavery, never Egypt. For the citizens of the most powerful country in the world, who enslaved both Native and Black people, to see itself as Israel and not Egypt when it is studying Scripture, is a perfect example of Disney princess theology. And it means that as people in power, they have no lens for locating themselves rightly in Scripture or society- and it has made them blind and utterly ill equipped to engage issues of power and injustice. It is some very weak Bible work.

All of this put together creates a profoundly broken theological framework. It explains why people love a photo of a cop hugging a black person, but dismiss claims of systemic racism in policing. It pretends that injustice is resolved when individuals hug. This was actually something that people were encouraged to do at Promise Keeper events in the nineties- go find a black person, hug them. It confuses white emotional catharsis with racial justice. The two are far far far from each other. BLM insists on addressing systemic issues, and white Christianity is pathologically individualistic. And since white Christianity is also characterized by a lack of humility, it is not prone to learn from POC, who would clearly be the experts on issues of racism in the church.

Bad History

Racial Reconciliation assumes an innocent reading of history. This is a term I learned from theologian Justo Gonzalez. An innocent telling of history is foundational to maintaining unjust and racist systems. When have white people ever been in just relationship with black people? During slavery? During Jim Crow? During the War on Drugs? What are we RE-conciling? It pretends that there was a time when everything was fine, we just need to get back there. However, that idyllic time has never existed.

Even when the civil rights movement is taught, it is framed as a discussion of the courage of black people. Which is true, their courage was amazing. But why did they have to be so courageous, what were they facing? The rage, racism, and violence of white people. Rarely is the profound hatred and resistance of white people taught. The evil of white people is downplayed, or minimized, to a few racist exceptions in the South. But white people, all across the United States, resisted any move towards racial justice with fury, rage, and violence. Our history never tells the true story of whiteness.

In her brilliant book on the Great Migration, Isabel Wilkerson describes a riot that broke out in Chicago, in 1951, when a black family attempted to move into a white apartment building. After being driven from the apartment, white people destroyed everything they owned, and over the course of the next day the crowd grew to over 4,000, eventually burning down the entire building. White people would rather burn a building than see black people live there. Or looking to the West coast “When Oregon was granted statehood in 1859, it was the only state in the Union admitted with a constitution that forbade black people from living, working, or owning property there. It was illegal for black people even to *move* to the state until 1926.

Waddles Coffee Shop in Portland, Oregon was a popular restaurant in the 1950s for both locals and travelers alike. The drive-in catered to America’s postwar obsession with car culture. But if you happened to be black, the owners of Waddles implored you to keep on driving. The restaurant had a sign outside with a very clear message: “White Trade Only — Please.” ([Matt Novak](#))

And hence, white people don’t believe it when white racism is pointed out in the present. They’ve been told a fairy tale about themselves. Even when the history of People of Color (POC) is told, white violence is erased, and the consequences of historical injustices is minimized. White people do not connect themselves to history, once again because of pathological individualism. They simply want a friend in the present, with no acknowledgement of the past or present injustice.

White Comfort

Racial Reconciliation centers language with which white people and its allies are comfortable. Racial Reconciliation moves at the pace that whiteness dictates. It focuses on making sure white people don't feel guilty, but not on the systemic disenfranchisement of black, Latino, and Native people. It will talk about redeemed white identity without teaching about white supremacy. It will lament but not repent with action. It is comfortable with POC being displaced and paying significant mental and emotional tolls for the work, but asks little to nothing of its white people. It is profoundly anxious about white discomfort, and is always trying to control the narrative.

In the racial reconciliation model POC are commodities. People of Color exist to teach and educate whiteness. When white people are ready to learn, POC must share their story, our pain is for consumption. Whiteness listens, feels superior to other white people who aren't as "woke," but does not change. Recently, I talked with a twenty four year old African American woman. She shared that she was expected to learn her job with a ministry, educate her peers, educate her supervisors, and educate up the line to leadership with twenty years more experience than her. While those leaders congratulate themselves for their openness to listening, they never wonder why there are no people at their own level of management to teach them. And the 24 year old white guy, her peer, is left to simply learn his job and carries none of that responsibility and exerts none of that emotional labor. This is the Racial Reconciliation model. But if POC become angry, frustrated, tired of this dynamic, they are labeled as uncommitted to the cause, immature, or not a right fit. When that 24 year old realizes this dynamic is exploitative and wrong, her leaders can't believe it, they had the best of intentions.

The Racial Reconciliation model perpetuates white privilege because the pacing is centered on the dominant culture, the language is white centered, and the implicit audience of teachings and content is always the dominant culture. In the racial reconciliation model, POC are expected to show up whenever the topic of race is addressed, even though the implicit audience is always the dominant culture. The time is not really FOR people of color, but they must be there to validate that "real" work is happening. Again POC are a commodity.

The role of POC in Racial reconciliation is to feel grateful, be loyal, educate (but nicely, and without anger) and conform to white culture. People of Color are to bring just a sprinkle of color- without ever pressing for deeper cultural, organizational, or systemic change. POC must always "trust their leaders" and be satisfied with intentions over outcomes. Whiteness controls the narrative at all times. And let me state for the record, one does not need to be white, to be working for whiteness.

White Privilege

The term white privilege can be helpful, but it is still located in pathological individualism. It assumes that issues are resolved by how an individual white person handles their privilege. Hence, it cannot be

considered a term that is sufficient to address or resolve organizational or systemic white supremacy. It cannot dismantle white supremacy culture in a denomination, organization, or church. It is useful, and it is real. It is often a first step for people of privilege. It is important that they realize that they participate in unequal systems, even unintentionally. However, it is not enough for anyone in a position of leadership or influence.

Shifting to the term white supremacy, and understanding that it means more than flag waving Nazis, is a move away from pathological individualism. It puts responsibility on white people to stop supporting white supremacy versus putting the responsibility on POC to educate and provide diversity. Racial Reconciliation often views POC as the problem that needs to be solved. White supremacy locates the problem in the right place. Racial Reconciliation, because it is so preoccupied with the good intentions of whiteness and its allies, considers POC leaving sad, but no reflection on them. In the canary in the mine analogy- the death (departure) of POC, particularly Black, Latino, Native, and SE Asian people is sad, sort of confusing, but is really an indicator that the bird was just not a good fit for the mine. White supremacy says- "HEY! That bird died cause your well intentioned mine is toxic. It is on you, it is on the mine, to stop being toxic. It is not on the canary to become immune to deadly fumes."

The term white supremacy labels the problem more accurately. It locates the problem on whiteness and its systems. It focuses on outcomes not intentions. It is collective not individual. It makes whiteness uncomfortable and responsible. And that is important.