

Beyond a white privilege model

By [Drew G. I. Hart](#)

September 9, 2014

Speaking about race and racism generically hasn't done anyone any good. Though white men dominate and control an unjustly disproportionate part of the church's leadership, face, and voice, many white men in the church and broader society also are the quickest to cry "reverse-racism" and at the slightest mention of racial inequities, many have dismissed concerns as merely "playing the race card". I would be rich if I got a dollar for every time I had a white man quote Dr. King's statement about the content of one's character not the color of one's skin as the basis for judgment, out of context to me in a way that went against the very logic of the "I Have A Dream" speech, which focused on righting the racial and economic injustices and disparities in America. It seems that the more one is squarely situated in the center of dominant culture, having gained advantage from it, the more likely one is to live in a state of denial in regards to the actual past 400 years, and the continuing white hegemony and racial oppression that pervades our society.

However, people's beliefs and actions are not determined by race and gender in some fatalistic manner. I've known hundreds of white women and men that have opted out of aligning themselves with white dominance, and instead affirm the humanity of all people and have chosen to live lives that resist white hegemony while coming to struggle alongside those that have been most directly impacted by the ungodly racial systems, practices, and beliefs that have morphed and flourished in new and often mischievously subtle ways (though sometimes they have not been so subtle). Regardless, there is a tradition that goes back to slavery up to the present day, of white people challenging racism and oppression, and to not acknowledge those rich and beautiful stories as a parallel narrative to the black determination and struggle for justice and liberation would be a dishonest account of America's troubled history.

One of the inherited terms that arose along the way that has gotten a lot of mileage in aiding white people to become aware of their own complicity and accommodation to racism is the language of "white privilege". Basically, through various means of

sharing, talking about invisible knapsacks, and confession times, white folks have wrestled with the various ways that the current racial order offers white people in general, and them in particular, certain advantages and privileges as a white person. For some people, this has created a moment of awakening for them. They suddenly looked at their life, built on generations of white advantage. They considered G.I. Bills and Homestead Acts by their ancestors, loans received, opportunities to live where they wanted to, access to social networks that included people of means, and on, and on, it went. White privilege has been the banner and primary rhetoric for engaging white people about racism in America.

However, there have been a lot of challenges to this language, especially highlighting its weaknesses and limitations. I noticed that this issue was revived in the midst of Christians discussing the Michael Brown execution and the protests and demonstrations that followed in Ferguson and around the country. Not only in response to this moment, but in general, I have witnessed the deployment of white privilege ideology in ways that I found not helpful, and at times simply disturbing.

It shouldn't be surprising though. The idea that telling white people that they have privilege as the solution to fix our racial woes was short sighted and bound to fall short of the radical creative transformation that Christians articulate when we speak of God's reign breaking into our world. I actually don't blame white people for messing up. **If I were white, and someone told me I had “white privilege”, I don't think I would necessarily know what to do with that.** For some people, they find themselves in a perpetual state of guilt and shame, but never finding a new mode of being. They are mentally stuck within a state of awareness of their white privilege, without a new path forward. Another response that could leave someone stagnant in white privilege is to think about it as a positive. I mean, in America, most citizens want all the privileges they can get. It gets confusing for a culture with such individualistic values, to actually decide that the privileges one has, whether the result of racial inequities or not, is a negative thing. Some might think “good, I'm going to take full advantage of my privileges”!

Though, some people haven't found the language of white privilege helpful, some have found within it a direction for a new course of action. **Different than those that want to use their white privilege for themselves, some have realized that they must become “stewards” of their white privilege in the cause for racial justice and equality.** Within the logic of stewardship, their goal is to go ahead and use the opportunities and positions that are available to them, so they

can run the institutions and become the decision makers. In that way, they can hire black and brown women and men with intentionality. They can create new cultures, set new terms, and forge new possibilities, all through making white privilege work for racial justice and reconciliation. For those who are most serious about resisting racism in America, this option probably seems very appealing. It places them in control of dismantling racism, by using the white privilege that they have, and can't shed even if they wanted to.

The problems with the first couple options are clear enough without saying more on the subject so I will only briefly discuss some of the failed reasoning that is inherent in the concept of stewarding white privilege. **We live in a society that has been oppressively controlled and dominated by white people for about 400 years. To put it bluntly and succinctly, a society dominated by white control can't be fixed by white people taking control of the situation.** The failure in the white privilege stewardship model, is that it inherently affirms and utilizes the very thing that it is called to resist and counter. If the answer to our racial problems is that white people must run things, call the shots, and be the saviors to the world, then we have missed the mark.

Another critique I've heard made by many people is that models like "white privilege" merely re-centralize white people as the focus, and those that have been marginalized, remain so. White feelings, white action, white guilt, white confession, etc., all become the center of discourse and concern. **The attention within this model is squarely on white people.** Now, just so I am upfront, I think a lot of attention needs to be placed on the social construct of whiteness and how it operates within society, but that is different than centralizing white people in the struggle for racial justice as the central instruments needed for the creation of a new humanity. Whatever the new model is, it must not centralize white people, nor expect them to take the reigns, controlling where we go next.

Here are a few suggestions that I would like to contribute to the discussion, in aiding the Church towards a more faithful way of being, in the midst of our white hegemonic and racialized society:

1. Since Jesus refused to lord over others, but chose to be a servant to all, the Church must follow that lead. White Christians must renounce any desires to dominate and control everything. Whether it is the death-dealing control that

seeks homogeneity and superiority, or it is the good intention filled stewardship of white privilege. Within the Church some folks might need to do the truly hard work of demoting themselves, turning down decision-making opportunities, and refusing to accommodate majority white strongholds around the table of power-brokers. It requires a boldness to agitate the powers that be *in the Church* towards the embodiment of Galatians 3:28. The clash and confrontation that flows out of following Jesus, makes taking up the cross visible and concrete when we risk our own well being more and more, prophetically calling the church to be the called out ones. This of course, also applies to every area of our lives, not just within the life of the Christian community, as we move in society as disciples of Christ working towards justice and shalom.

2. Since Jesus' Kingdom centralized those who have been marginalized and oppressed, the Church must follow that lead. Christians from dominant culture can no longer follow the lead of mainstream and popular Christianity. Instead, they must find Jesus among the least of these, and follow after him. Dominant culture's portrayal of Jesus will always be domesticated, sometimes looking like Uncle Sam, a good citizen, or often just a glimpse of the person we see in the mirror every day. The Americanized and assimilated Jesus must be rejected for the Jesus that brought good news to the poor and came to liberate the oppressed. This will only be found by dropping everything, and immediately following Jesus into solidarity with the oppressed. That is, our lives must no longer be aligned with the white hegemonic social order, and must be grounded among the most vulnerable of society, including those that have been historically oppressed by race, class, or gender in America. Jesus' reign is made visible when the oppressed are privileged at the table of Christ, and where oppressors have repented of their way of life and joined in Christ's vulnerability in a world that can't recognize him. It is a new solidarity of being with 'the little ones' and allowing them to help reteach what it means to be made in the image of God.
3. Since Jesus was the liberator of the oppressed, the Church must be liberated itself, so that it can be free to love our neighbors through liberative action and nonviolent struggle that reflects the life-giving impulse of God's people. This liberated community cannot be achieved through our own productivity and

hard work. Liberation and Shalom are divine interventions that come through yieldedness to the Spirit, and through the risk of participating in God's reign. Once free from the social construction of whiteness as a way of being (in belief and practice) the Church, and as a bondage, we are able to truly resist the forces of this world that oppose the coming New Creation that God has in store for us. No longer conformed to the racialized patterns of America, the Church can be a blessing to the place in which it resides and beyond. The church can struggle against police brutality, the school to prison pipeline and mass incarceration, patriarchy and sexism, economically deprived communities and the lack of access to livable conditions and wages. Certainly, part of our liberation must also come from intentionally renewing our minds, but we must be committed to seek after a thorough and comprehensive liberation that touches every area of our lives and habits. The anti-black ideology, rhetoric, and practices of our society is the enemy of the liberated and liberative Church that pursues wholeness and shalom locally and globally.

What I hoped to do here, is to interject a vision towards a new mode of being for white Christians in particular, and the whole Church in America more broadly. Rather than succumb to the rhetoric of white privilege, which has had its limits and weaknesses exposed in moments of crises, I am calling for something more risky and more Jesus-shaped. It is a vision of the Church that renounces the inclination to control and run things, and that is grounded in the community of the oppressed which Jesus has identified himself with, and finally it is liberated to be itself, a community that embodies the struggle for liberation and shalom that God is enacting in our society. This is just sketches of my thought of where we must go. What suggestions do you have? Is this vision helpful for you? What needs clarity? How have you seen white privilege ideology work in your own experience? Are you willing to join me in calling the Church towards this important work ahead of us?