

Praise for *White Lies*

I once heard someone say that many White Christians are two or three good questions away from confessing a White supremacist view. *White Lies* is the book I would give to every White Christian to make sure their understanding of racism and White supremacy could withstand the burden of reality. Daniel Hill exposes the lies that prevent progress in racial justice and brings the truth spoken in love to help readers gain more competence in the fight against racism. Aside from the meticulous research and copious real-world examples, what makes *White Lies* so compelling is that its author speaks with integrity. Hill is doing the work of confronting the temptation to believe “White lies” in his own life and in his ministry as the pastor of a justice-oriented, racially diverse church. If you’re ready to take the next step in the journey of racial justice, then you must read *White Lies*.

**Jemar Tisby, *New York Times* bestselling
author, *The Color of Compromise***

The soul of the White church is at stake! There is an enduring stain on its collective conscience because of the sinful complicity it has with White supremacy and racial injustice. In this book, Daniel Hill bravely pulls back the curtain, exposes the lies, and tells the truth about what it will take to break free from the evil hierarchy of racial difference. This groundbreaking book is for all Christians who want to restore the credibility of the church by embodying the truth and power of the gospel to bring hope and healing to a broken and divided world. I highly recommend it!

Brenda Salter McNeil, author, *Becoming Brave*

This book has given me biblical language and spiritual strategy for the dismantling of White supremacy in my life and also in the world around me. As a Christian, I walked away from this book full of hope that heaven is in this with us and we have been given enough grace through Jesus Christ to engage, learn, and listen. Daniel Hill has written a book that reminds me at every turn of the page that what feels impossible for us to overcome is possible with God.

**Kristene DiMarco, worship leader and
Christian recording artist**

White Lies is the perfect book for this moment. As more of us awaken to the racial injustices in our country, we continue to ask, “How can I make a difference and participate in confronting racial injustice?” Start here, as Daniel Hill walks us down the path from awakening to becoming an active participant in confronting the evil that is White supremacy. Embracing a spirit of love, empathy, and truth, Daniel embodies this path here and carefully unpacks the White lies that have deceived us.

Kyle Korver, National Basketball Association veteran

I am deeply grateful to God for the gift of Daniel Hill’s new book *White Lies*. It has been birthed out of many years of study and learning and ministry and listening, but I believe it has arrived “for such a time as this.” The pervasive and demonic power of White supremacy needs to be named and disarmed, and repented of, and discipleship to Jesus cannot plow around this.

**John Ortberg, senior pastor, Menlo Church,
and author of *Eternity Is Now In Session***

Daniel Hill has done it again. In *White Lies*, he offers perceptive analysis, a pastoral heart, and an ability to mark a path forward for many who are stuck in the mire of White supremacy and

racial injustice. I believe this book will serve as an important catalyst to reframe the work of justice and reconciliation and to move us to be the kind of people God calls us to be in the world.

**Rich Villodas, lead pastor, New Life Fellowship,
and author of *The Deeply Formed Life***

As the White evangelical church slowly awakens to the rootedness of White supremacy in society and the church, the hard work of discipleship will be not only in identifying White supremacy but in doing the slow work of actually dismantling it. At a time when the world seems to be leading the church in responding to racial injustice through protests and movements, this book is a critical tool to help the church engage both in internal self-reflection and correction and in outward ministry and activism, grounded in spiritual disciplines that point the world to the radical, loving, subversive nature of Christ. The church needs many messengers with multiple messages to pursue racial justice and equity, and Daniel Hill is the leader we need now whose own vulnerability and humility have allowed the church to take a hard look at itself and grow into greater likeness of Christ that can impact the world.

**Jenny Yang, vice president of advocacy
and policy, World Relief**

This is a historic moment in America. We are living through a racial awakening, and many White folks are leaning in, listening, marching, and searching for ways to participate in the movement for justice and liberation. In addition to listening to Black and Brown voices and reading books by people of color, we also need to do some of our own work as White folks. This book is a massive contribution to the conversation around faith and race in America.

Shane Claiborne, author, speaker, activist

white lies

white lies

Nine Ways to Expose and Resist the
Racial Systems That Divide Us

daniel hill

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BOOKS

*To my beloved community at River City.
I wouldn't be who I am without you all.
I'm forever grateful for a place
where I can love and be loved,
and where we can work out the full dimension
of following Jesus together
in a transformational manner.*

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introduction

The Parasite of White Supremacy

It's not likely you meditate on the idea of parasites often—really, why would you? But when it comes to the core message of this book, it's the perfect place to start.

Let's begin with some important facts that may be helpful to know about parasites. For instance, did you know:

- A parasite is an organism that lives within another organism, typically referred to as the host.
- Without a host, a parasite is unable to live, grow, and/or multiply. For a parasite to survive, the host must survive as well.
- Parasites are *never* beneficial for the host. They thrive by stealing the resources of the host.
- Parasites are incredibly difficult to detect. For example, 70 percent of parasites are not visible to the human eye.
- A parasite and its host evolve together. The parasite adapts to its environment by living in and using the host in ways that sustain the parasite's existence while continuing to harm that of the host.

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Now that we have become pseudo-experts on parasites, what does it all mean?

Let's jump over to Dr. Willie Jennings, who is considered to be one of the premier public theologians in America, particularly with regard to race and Christianity, and who has written a number of seminal books on the subject. When Dr. Jennings speaks about White supremacy, I am quick to listen.

When describing the nature of White supremacy, here's the shorthand image he uses: *it is a parasite*.¹

That's provocative enough, but it also elicits an immediate follow-up question: If White supremacy is a parasite, what is the host it has embedded itself in? Dr. Jennings's claim? *Christianity*.

Wow, what a picture! To help us gain an immediate and visceral image for understanding the historical reality of White supremacy, he suggests we think of White supremacy as the parasite and Christianity as the host it has embedded itself in for protection and survival.

With that in mind, look again through the list of key facts that describe parasites. Instead of reading them in a general way, consider the detailed application of White supremacy as a parasite and of Christianity as the host it is embedded in. It's a terrifying exercise.

We will explore the full meaning of this parasitic relationship throughout the book, as well as the White lies that sustain this relationship, but allow me to immediately highlight one serious and urgent facet of this unholy alliance. One of the greatest threats facing American Christianity is the severe divide along racial lines that continues to grow more severe with each passing year. The 2016 and 2020 elections served to bring the divide to the forefront, but these are only one of a dozen indicators that highlight the same reality.

I would contend there is no factor that plays a bigger role in this divide than the inability of White Christians to meaningfully

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process this parasitic relationship between White supremacy and Christianity. Similar to the growing polarization we see on many fronts, White Christians tend to move toward one of two opposite poles when they are exposed to this parasitic relationship.

At one end of the extreme are those of us who have been conditioned in such a way that we either cannot or will not honestly acknowledge that White supremacy has found a way to parasitically embed itself in Christianity. Those of us in this group have never learned to carefully parse the one from the other, and as such, we lack the critical thinking skills that are necessary to decouple White supremacy from White Christianity. Therefore, when we hear someone attack White supremacy, we often interpret it as an attack on our faith itself. The tragic result of this failure is that we end up defending not only the Christianity we love but also the White supremacy we should despise.

At the other end of the extreme are those of us who have learned to identify the parasite of White supremacy, as well as its fusion with Christianity, but who have used that insight as a basis for outrightly rejecting Christianity. Rather than doing the hard work of analyzing the sinister manner in which it has embedded itself to Christianity and evaluating what Christianity says about an evil ideology like White supremacy, this group often chooses to settle for an oversimplified caricature of the Christian faith. In this way, the group's inability to decouple the one from the other repeats the same failing result as those representing the first pole.

The fallout from these intensifying poles is catastrophic. It divides the church, compromises our collective witness, and renders us useless in the fight against White supremacy.

This is why the message of this book feels so urgent. The only reason this parasitic relationship has lasted so long is that it is shrouded in a cloud of lies. As White Christians, we have lost our ability to tell the truth about the parasitic presence of White

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supremacy within the faith we love, and as a result, we don't know how to move forward, even when we believe we are ready to.

Therefore, the purpose of this book is to grow in our ability to tell and apply the truth of Christ and his kingdom to the problem of White supremacy. It is to expose the lies that allow this parasitic presence to survive generation after generation. It is to resist the racial systems that continue to divide us. It is to position us as active participants in the work of the risen Christ, who is bringing the good news of God's kingdom—a kingdom that will ultimately dismantle the kingdom of White supremacy.

Before we jump all the way in, let's look at five important introductory statements.

1. This Book Builds on *White Awake*

When I started River City Community Church in January 2003, I promised God I would not publish anything regarding race. I didn't think the world needed another White guy talking to people about issues that most affected non-White people. I sincerely intended to keep that promise, but over the years, God began to speak in a new way. The mentors of color who had provided such critical guidance and direction for the ministerial work I did began to more directly invite me to participate in their work. They were established veterans in exposing, illuminating, and confronting White supremacy, and they appreciated that I happily submitted to their lead in this work.

But even as they were regularly investing in the growth process of White people, their conviction grew that for many, there was a struggle to grasp the full depths of White supremacy without interacting with the story of other White folks who had gone on this journey. Therefore, these mentors began to challenge me to become more vocal about my own racial awakening

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process and to actively contribute to their work by sharing some of my own discovery process as to the far-reaching nature of White supremacy.

That invitation eventually culminated in the writing of *White Awake: An Honest Look at What It Means to Be White*. It is there that I talk about the unique challenges we as White people face—White Christians specifically—when we attempt to awaken to and understand White supremacy through a faith lens. I spend a lot of time addressing the internal defenses that are bound to go up when this journey is taken seriously, and I chart out a path for developing a resilient spirit that steadfastly moves toward truth, justice, and equity.

In *White Lies*, I build on the platform of *White Awake* and move much deeper into the conversation of how White Christians can position ourselves to actively participate in the resistance and confrontation of White supremacy. While I invite you, the reader, to step into this conversation from wherever you are, it also seems important to mention this intended sequence. It can be challenging to position yourself as a potential participant when you have not yet dealt with the many internal defenses that come with a racial awakening process. So starting with *White Awake* is always an option to consider.²

2. This Book Uses the Language of Spiritual Practices

I hope the ideas I propose in *White Lies* will find resonance beyond just the walls of Christian organizations. I have presented this material in settings ranging from banks to law firms and civic leadership hubs, and I am confident that it translates to secular settings as well as religious.

With that being said, I want to fully acknowledge that I

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come to this subject matter in a distinctly Christian manner. And even more specifically, I approach these ideas from the lens of a pastor. For instance, when I talk of the seriousness of the parasitic relationship between White supremacy and White Christianity, there is nothing theoretical about that for me. Instead, I begin to immediately picture real people—people whose spiritual lives feel like they are in the balance. It is the person who senses the impact that White supremacy has had on the development of her Christian identity, but who feels a sense of terror that if she starts pulling the thread, the whole thing might come apart. It is the person who has become mortified by the way he sees White supremacy operate in religious spaces in plain sight and who is now in a full-fledged wrestling match with doubt, wondering if Jesus can still be who he really says he is, even in the midst of such a seemingly broken religious system.

With this as my starting point, I have framed each big idea in this book around the language of spiritual practices. A spiritual practice is an action that we can take that can help deepen our connection to the power of the divine, and this is a critical component of resisting and confronting White supremacy. I am convinced that any and all efforts we make, when not first established in the supernatural, everlasting power of God, will end up falling flat. So each chapter is a practice for following Jesus . . . and for rising up against the forces of White supremacy in his name.

3. This Book Talks about White Supremacy . . . a Lot

White supremacy is a term that can feel very charged for many White people. I am aware of that. But that doesn't change the importance of using it a lot.

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One of the unfortunate reasons for this discomfort is that its popular usage is often exclusively reserved to describe the most extreme, violent, and inflammatory expressions of White supremacy (i.e., images of tiki torches and combat boots in a White nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, or instances like Dylann Roof's killing spree in a Charleston, South Carolina, church in the name of White supremacy).

White supremacy is first and foremost an ideology, which means that its tentacles reach infinitely farther than those extreme expressions. It is operating everywhere, all the time. When we fall for the trap of avoiding the term until its ugliest manifestations show up, we disempower ourselves and others from being able to resist and confront it in its multitude of everyday forms. This is arguably the much more important front to fight it on, so it's important that we learn how to think and talk about White supremacy differently.

I will provide a much more in-depth analysis of White supremacy in practice three and would advise you to consider all four words in that chapter (see p. 61) as part of a comprehensive description of White supremacy. But I believe there is also value in having a faster, more concise definition, so I will point to the very helpful work of Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes to provide a foundation to stand on as we prepare to dive deeply into it:

White supremacy: The systemic evil that denies and distorts the image of God inherent in all human beings based upon the heretical belief that white aesthetics, values, and cultural norms bear the fullest representation of the *imago Dei*. White supremacy thus maintains that white people are superior to all other peoples, and it orders creation, identities, and social structures in ways that support this distortion and denial.³

4. This Book Refers to Non-White People Groups as BIPOC

In the above definition of White supremacy, Dr. Walker-Barnes highlights the way this ideology maintains that White people are superior to all other people groups. Therefore, in race conversations, there has always been a need to differentiate the experience of White people as they interact with the superiority messages of White supremacy from the experience of non-White people as they interact with the inferiority messages of White supremacy, as well as a need to point out the tendency of White supremacy to erase the identities of non-White people in relation to Whiteness. For some time now, the term “person of color” (often abbreviated POC) has been the most common way to make this differentiation.

For as helpful as the term POC has been, many thought leaders around race have begun to move away from it. While they recognize the importance of making a delineation between the White experience and the non-White experience, they also rightfully point out that the term POC is not nearly robust enough to effectively hold space for such a wide range of racial experiences.

The term gaining the most traction in its place right now is BIPOC, which stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. This term attempts to acknowledge and honor the significant differences that accompany the journey represented by the three distinct racial histories in America.

- First, there is the Native history, which is the story of Indigenous communities that were dispossessed and forcibly removed from their homeland.
- Second, there is the African history, where millions of Black people were forcibly stolen—kidnapped from their home country—and then brought to America as slaves without consent.

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- Third, there is the immigrant history, where communities of people have moved to America with the intention of staying and living here. While there has always been a variety of reasons for immigrating, the two most common causes have traditionally been employment opportunities and the need to escape a violent conflict in their home country.

The differences among these racial histories are very significant, and the ways in which White supremacy has harmed each racial group are distinct. Therefore, the term BIPOC is less about comparing the experiences and histories of each group to each other, and more about recognizing the importance of addressing the uniqueness of each in a thoughtful and comprehensive manner.

It feels important to mention this here, not only to introduce the term, but also to recognize that it won't be the final evolution. The term BIPOC will not last forever, nor should it. The reason that terms like this are important is not so that we can create a permanent identity marker or demonstrate a capacity for being politically correct in our terminology. They are important because White supremacy is evil, and it harms people. And worse, it evolves. While its attack on the personhood and livelihood of communities of color remains consistent, its tactics don't. Therefore, the ways we think about, talk about, respond to, and organize against it must also evolve.

5. This Book Is Built on the Brilliance of the Team I Am Blessed to Work With

I am the one authoring this book, but this project is in every way a collaborative effort. God has given me the gift of a lifetime by allowing me to work with an incredibly smart and culturally

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diverse team of leaders who love Jesus with all their hearts, who seek the kingdom of God with all their lives, and who understand the multiple facets of White supremacy better than anyone I've ever encountered. I'm so thankful for the way this team provides leadership for River City Community Church,⁴ and for the ways they disciple Christ-followers of every background into a way of life in Jesus that empowers them to resist and confront White supremacy on a daily basis.

I will introduce some of them later in the book, but one name I specifically want to draw out in the introduction is Shumeca Pickett. Shumeca is a key leader at River City, and as such, we get to partner on race-related efforts in very meaningful ways there. In addition, Shumeca founded and leads one of the most well-respected social impact consultancies in the city of Chicago called Alfred Dewitt Ard.

Through her firm, she and I have had regular opportunities to speak together, to test ideas, and to implement organizational efforts designed to resist and confront White supremacy. I will refer to many of these stories throughout the book and wanted to introduce her to you up front as one of my most valued thought partners and friends in this work. And I can't encourage you enough to visit her website and learn more about her work at www.alfreddewittard.com.

With these five introductory statements in place, let's jump in.

practice one

Stop Being Woke

I was invited to lead a staff training day at a well-known nonprofit organization in the Midwest. This nonprofit had a strong reputation for work that focused on compassion and justice for the marginalized. But their lack of emphasis on racial justice concerned many of their advocates. In particular, the organization was often criticized for having an all-White staff, especially since most of the work they did was in communities populated primarily by ethnic minorities.

Their leadership took the criticism to heart and began to wrestle with how best to respond. They decided to put a number of protocols into place to address their hiring practices, and within two years, they had increased the diversity of their workforce to the point that 20 percent of their employees came from non-White backgrounds. The organization was very proud of this accomplishment and began to publicly celebrate their progress. In a sense, they celebrated being “woke.”

The feeling of triumph didn’t last long though. As the workforce became increasingly diverse, the internal conversations became increasingly intense. This nonprofit had a strong organizational culture, and they took pride in passing on these principles to incoming employees as part of the orientation process.

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But to their surprise, the employees of color were not nearly as enthusiastic about these principles as the White employees typically were. In fact, some of the new employees shared with the leadership the personal difficulty they experienced when it came to the navigation of the culturally White ethos. When asked to describe some of the cultural norms that felt White in their orientation, they identified three in particular:

- *Organizational efficiency.* Incoming employees were quick to acknowledge that the organization's reputation for being highly productive was rightly deserved. However, it also became apparent that this productivity came at a high cultural cost. A constant commitment to efficiency and productivity left nearly every initiative feeling urgent, and as a result, the stated commitment to include diverse voices almost never materialized. The value of getting things done fast continuously trumped the value of hearing the important ideas and perspectives of those outside of the majority culture.
- *Decision-making protocols.* While it was clear that the number of ethnically non-White employees was increasing, it did not appear that this new influx had much impact on the organization's overall decision-making process. The pervasive feeling was that upper management either already assumed they understood what these employees needed or, worse, didn't care. The fact that overtures by these new employees fell on seemingly deaf ears only further increased the suspicion that the power held by the White stakeholders was largely unnamed and uninterrogated.
- *Overvaluing of harmony and undervaluing of conflict.* One of the consistent traits externally touted about this organization was the high degree of harmony shared by employees across the board. However, from the inside, it appeared this

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harmony often came at the cost of the transformation that is often possible only through conflict. One of the primary manifestations was the regular use of the label *troublemaker* to describe those who were brave enough to name racial offenses and/or microaggressions. Even when the tone was kind and conciliatory, it was the person bringing attention to the issue who would inevitably become the focus—not the issue that was creating discomfort in the first place.

In response to the contrasting realities that White employees and BIPOC¹ employees were experiencing, a number of potential responses were explored. Eventually the leadership team decided to organize a D&I committee (diversity and inclusion) that would explore the organizational culture together. The group was made up of a combination of established White leaders and newer BIPOC employees, and the hope was that some common agreements would form and that concrete suggestions would be proposed to the leadership team.

The intentions were good, but the experiment didn't end well. Each committee meeting would end in frustration, and the gulf in perspectives only widened. The group eventually hit a breaking point, with the employees of color informing their White counterparts that they no longer felt safe engaging in these conversations together. As an alternative, the BIPOC employees suggested that the White employees do some of their own work on these conversations. More specifically, the suggestion was to create some White-only learning spaces in the organization where these pressing concerns could be discussed in a culturally homogenous space. This created some hurt feelings, but ultimately the White staff took them up on the suggestion.

As a result, the White staff compiled some suggested resources and ended up reading my book *White Awake* together. The book resonated with the staff. They asked if I would spend

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a day with them talking through the principles in the book, with the hope of finding some new ideas they could apply to the conflict they were facing with their non-White counterparts.

I was honored by the request and agreed to do so. In advance of the session, I met with their director of training, and we discussed the needs of the participants—their level of comfort with race conversations, current level of cultural competency, responses to previous conversations on the topic—and then considered how to best contextualize the time together. The agenda was agreed upon, and the outline was sent in advance to the staff.

When the training day came, we spent the first thirty minutes doing introductions and sharing stories about how and when we had first been introduced to the reality of race. I was then asked to take some time to review what I believed to be foundational principles for White engagement around race. I got about five minutes into the training when I was suddenly interrupted.

“Um, excuse me, Dr. Hill, can you please pause for a moment?”

I looked out in the audience to locate the source of the interruption and was surprised to discover that it was the executive director of the nonprofit. I was initially pleased when told he would be in attendance, as it seemed to model a posture of curiosity for the other White employees who were there. But suddenly I wasn't so sure.

He continued, “I'm sure this material you are sharing is helpful for beginners, but that's not who you are talking to right now. *You are actually speaking to an extremely woke group*—we know all about the history of race, and we understand that it's a really big deal. We only have one day together, so I'm hoping you can maybe speed this up and get to some of the deeper stuff?”

I was dumbfounded by both the interruption and the challenge to the material. What I was covering was an extension of the curriculum that my team had collaboratively developed, and it had been vetted many times prior to this training.

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I had no idea what to do next, so I just awkwardly stood there. The executive director took advantage of the silence and asked if he could suggest an alternative approach to our time together. I handed him the microphone, and he shared his vision with the group. He said, “I know you all care deeply about the issue of race, and I’m proud of how woke we are as a group. I think we should capitalize on our time together and leverage that collective concern to address this problem head-on. I say let’s roll up our sleeves and spend our time working today. How does that sound?”

The group seemed to be in alignment with his vision, and the verbal affirmations were all he needed to continue down this redirected course. He pulled out a flip chart and asked them to name the top three race-based problems currently facing the organization. They identified what they saw as three big problems, and from there he divided them into work groups to analyze, formulate a proposal, and then report back to the larger group.

I stayed for the remainder of the day as a passive participant, but it was all a fog from that point forward. I was lost in my thoughts and feelings and trying to make sense of what had happened that morning. Part of me was feeling shocked, embarrassed, and even angry that I had been publicly challenged.

But another part of me was second-guessing myself. Interruption aside, maybe the executive director had been right to redirect the conversation. *Did I underestimate the cultural competency of this group?* I wondered. Maybe I had moved too slowly. Maybe his instinct was right—perhaps a collaborative work session was the right starting point.

I had a chance to sit down with one of my mentors the following week. She had worked in the corporate sector for close to thirty years, and over the last decade she had been focused almost exclusively on diversity and inclusion initiatives in the

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marketplace. She was the one who had coached me on how to approach this particular assignment, and she had followed that up by proactively scheduling a follow-up meeting so we could debrief. I was hopeful she could provide clarity about my experience.

I wasted no time replaying the details of the whole experience. I told her the whole thing had me second-guessing myself and begged for help in interpreting the day. I also assured her that I wanted to learn and grow from this and reminded her that she had full license to say whatever she needed. If she was seeing something I wasn't, I was genuinely ready to hear whatever constructive critique she had.

But instead of sharing a critique, she just gave me a sweet smile—one of those smiles that comes from decades of experience with similar types of encounters. “I’m sorry that happened to you,” she said, “but there is a silver lining in it. You just got to see firsthand why *woke* is such a dangerous word.”

That was not exactly the response I was expecting from her. Though I had replayed every detail of the experience in my head many times, it had never once occurred to me to consider the use of the word *woke* as a key to interpreting the whole thing. And going beyond that, it occurred to me that I had never once associated the word *woke* with dangerous. Overused, perhaps. But dangerous?

She continued. “The word *woke* is problematic at two different levels. The first is very specific to the word; the second is more about the motivation behind the word.”

To illustrate the first point, she put it into question form: “Did you know that *woke* is a term that was invented in the Black community? [It was gracious of her to ask, but I’m pretty sure she already knew my answer was no.] *Woke* was developed in the sixties as a shorthand version of *stay woke*, and that was an important phrase in my community. It was a collective reminder that we need to remain conscious of the Black struggle against

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the very real presence of White supremacy. When someone would say, “Stay woke,” to me, I knew exactly what they were saying—that they saw me, that they saw what I was up against, that they saw how real the struggle was. So that is the first reason the word *woke* is dangerous, particularly when it is used by White people. They are using a word that has a rich history they’re often oblivious to, and they risk co-opting it for their own purposes.”

She then transitioned to the second danger. “Just as important as the problem with the word is the motivation behind the word. While I want to trust that most White people who use it mean well, I suspect they don’t realize how revealing it actually is.” She paused and put it into question form again. She asked me, “When a White person says they are woke, what do you think they are trying to communicate?”

I hadn’t thought much about this, so my answer was simply reflexive. “I don’t know. I guess they—we—are hoping to prove to other people—probably people of color in particular—that we see race and that we understand it and that we are trying to do our part.”

“Yes,” she said. “That is what I hear when I hear a White person use the word *woke*. And I can understand why a White person longs to reach this fixed state of enlightenment. I can see why they long to prove to me that they are allies in the work. But that is such a dangerous idea.”

I was tracking with her logic, though the actual danger of the word was still escaping me. I asked her if she’d be willing to make it abundantly clear for me.

“Well, you actually got to see firsthand why it is dangerous. So let’s use that experience to illustrate. This training you just did—you said the need arose because a cross-cultural committee was started to explore racial dynamics together, right? But it quickly dissolved because the employees of color didn’t want to have any more conversations with the White leaders.

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Now, I don't know them, but I can guess what happened in those meetings—I'd be willing to bet that what these employees of color ran into was the brick wall we call *woke*. Once White folks deem themselves as woke, they come in assuming they have the same baseline of knowledge as BIPOC. While they may now possess a greater knowledge of the history of race in America, they do not have lived experience as a BIPOC who endures White supremacy daily. So the starting point for BIPOC and White people in conversations about race is always different.

“Now, I'm not saying we don't want our White counterparts to move forward in an awakening journey. It goes without saying that we want them to stay teachable and curious—to want to understand race better. But do we want them to be woke? No, at least not in how the word has come to be understood. Once they convince themselves they are woke, they will think they have arrived. They won't see the need to be challenged anymore or to have blind spots revealed. And *that* is why *woke* is so dangerous.”

By this point I'm guessing there is little mystery left as to the overall point of this chapter. And yet I don't want to just jump to the end and declare, “Stop being woke!” As in most arenas of life, the transformation we so badly need cannot be found solely through behavior modification. While it would make the journey far simpler to just extricate the word from our vocabulary, to do so would not lead us into the depths of change we're searching for. What we need to do is dig even deeper and explore why it is that this word has become so popularized in the first place. What is it about this word that draws in so many of us?

Why Is the Word *Woke* So Popular?

Allow me to come at this first practice from another angle. In developing this practice for my own journey, I have found

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a helpful analogy in the way the Bible instructs us to deal with fear. Fear is one of the most powerful emotions we experience as human beings, and it has the potential to completely paralyze us when we fail to deal with it. Therefore, it seems both significant and expected that the Bible addresses the subject matter so frequently. Did you know that “fear not” is the most frequently repeated command in the Bible?

During my early twenties I was dealing with a lot of fear, and I decided to study each of the instances of “fear not.” I assumed I would find stories akin to mine—anxiety-ridden men and women who should know better but who continually gave in to fear. But that’s not what I found at all. In most cases, the men and women who were commanded to “fear not” actually had really good reasons to be afraid. In fact, it went even further. It was often God who created the situation of fear as an opportunity to test and stretch their faith. Consider just a few examples:

- Abraham was told to “fear not” in a vision that would completely uproot his and his family’s life (Genesis 15:1). Who wouldn’t be terrified if they were told to leave everything they had ever known and head toward a destination not yet revealed?
- The people of Israel were told to “fear not” after they temporarily escaped Egyptian slavery but were now barricaded in by the Red Sea (Exodus 14:13). Who wouldn’t be terrified when on their right was an immovable body of water, and on their left was a swarm of angry soldiers coming at them?
- Joshua was told to “fear not” while mourning the loss of his mentor Moses and being summoned to lead the people into the Promised Land (Joshua 1:9). Who wouldn’t be terrified at the prospect of leading an entire nation on a dangerous mission, especially when his predecessor had been unable to fulfill the assignment?

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- Mary was told to “fear not” by the angel Gabriel, who had come to deliver the news of the coming incarnation of God (Luke 1:30). Who wouldn’t be terrified by the prospect of telling her husband-to-be that God was about to divinely conceive the Son of God into her womb?

This was a critical discovery for me. These were not fear-filled people who just needed to “buck up” and stop being afraid. They were facing incredible situations that were genuinely terrifying, and they wouldn’t have been human if they looked at those opportunities without feeling fear. So when God told them to “fear not,” was God asking them to just flip a switch and change their behavior?

I don’t think so. I think it’s actually the opposite. By commanding them to “fear not,” God was inviting them into a deep, introspective relationship with the fear that was already present—fear that was vying for control of their actions. So if they were going to learn to “fear not,” they would first need to come to grips with the fact that they were afraid. By acknowledging the presence of fear and by coming to understand its power, they could then develop a vision for transformation that would lead them to new heights of courage.

This theological discovery helped me develop a concrete practice for dealing with fear. In order to “fear not,” I needed to diligently follow these three steps:

1. Acknowledge the presence of fear.
2. Come to a deeper understanding of the power of my fear.
3. Develop a God-inspired vision for moving from fear to courage.

White Christians need to confront the motivations that fuel the desire to be woke in the same way we can confront fear.

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We can't get rid of fear without acknowledging and understanding it, and the same is true for the subject matter at hand.

So using those same three steps of the practice for confronting fear, we can humbly confront our pride in being woke and move to real transformation.

1. Acknowledge that the desire to be seen as woke lives deep inside of White people. I was invited to speak at a seminary recently to a group of White pastors who were about to finish their Master of Divinity program. This seminary does a good job of integrating race into their theological education, and the director of this program assured me that this was a group of pastors who were very conscientious about the subject matter. Therefore I spent the morning session covering the material of this chapter (probably unsurprising!). We talked together about the popularity in White circles of being deemed as woke, and I passed on the lessons instilled in me about the dangers of its unchecked motivations. I shared how I've come to see this desire as an act of pride and talked about the need for those of us who are White to commit to an ongoing posture of listening, learning, and surfacing blind spots.

When the first session was over, I connected with the director of the program to see how he thought it was going. He looked at me with a semi-defeated look and said, "Unfortunately, not as well as I'd hoped. I personally thought the content was great, but as I'm talking to the pastors in attendance, they are telling me that they don't fully see the relevance of this conversation. While they can see how it might be helpful for some White people, they say it's not particularly applicable to them."

Now, is it possible that this just happened to be the one group of emerging White leaders unaffected by the deeper desires represented by the word *woke*? I suppose that's theoretically possible, but I highly doubt it. A far more likely explanation is self-awareness—or the lack of it. I don't believe it's malicious,

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and I don't think they (or we) shrug off the need for introspection around the idea of being woke as an overt act of pride, but I nonetheless find this to be a constant reality. White folks who want to be engaged in the work of confronting race tend to be chronically unaware of how badly they want and need recognition of having reached this enlightened status.

Let me tell you another story. I was once invited by another director of D&I to do a one-day training with a large company in Chicago. I met with her beforehand to learn more and asked her to expound on the problems she faces as she tries to transform the organization's culture. Her response was as piercing as it was insightful:

I used to think the biggest challenge at this organization was represented by the White folks who didn't care about racial disparities. That is still a problem, of course. But I'm realizing now that, functionally, my far bigger problem is all the woke White people who have key leadership positions here. They started their journey by doing the work to educate themselves on the basics of race, of which I'm glad. But that same posture of learning that was demonstrated early in the journey seemed to suddenly transform into something else. In short order they moved from student mode to teacher mode. They're no longer trying to understand race as much as they're trying to dictate solutions for fixing it. They confuse intellectual knowledge with experiential understanding and no longer wholeheartedly seek critical feedback on their perspectives or ideas. As a result, our efforts completely stall. The holdup no longer feels like White folks who refuse to engage with race. Instead, it's White folks who are certain they understand it. You'll see it when you get here—it's a circle of decision-makers who are all White—and all supposedly woke.

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If I was only allowed to share one anecdote with a White person who is enthusiastically setting out on this path, it would be this story. I don't think that most of us who are White see how big of a problem this assumption of being woke is, which is why we don't spend the necessary time engaging in introspection and self-reflection.

2. Come to more deeply understand why this motivation is so powerful. Why do we want to be woke? What is the allure of being crowned with this status? These are questions I ask of myself constantly. I've asked them to dozens of self-aware White folks engaged in work like this as well. What is it about this label that makes it so attractive?

I was tempted to write an entire chapter just on the answers to this question, but for the sake of brevity, I'll confine my remarks to the top three reasons I hear. I don't think this list is exhaustive, but hopefully it will spark deeper levels of self-reflection for those who are genuinely willing to probe our unidentified yet very powerful motivations.

The label woke is powerful because we do not want to be associated with "those" White people. It's hard to ignore the fact that a large percentage of the White population in America still lives in a state of denial when it comes to the impact of race on every facet of our society. Whether it shows up in the annual celebration of Columbus's "discovering" of America or in the blaming of African Americans for "Black-on-Black" crime or in political ideologies that harm marginalized non-White citizens while hiding behind phrases such as "make America great again," we see the multitude of ways that the obvious realities of White supremacy are somehow filtered, minimized, and ultimately ignored. Given this dangerous landscape, it becomes somewhat inevitable that those of us who are White and waking up to race will want to immediately and definitively distance ourselves from any kind of association with this slice of the White population.

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I see the motivation to be seen as woke almost always beginning there. At the most basic level, we want the world to know we don't operate like that—we hunger to be recognized as having a qualitatively different relationship with race than those who intentionally choose to ignore it. Or said another way, to be woke is to mean we are not like “them”!

It is regarding this first motivation that I believe the message of Christianity provides a unique pathway to freedom. At the core of an authentic reception of the gospel message is a shift in how we come to understand our identity. Said a different way, to be saved by Jesus is to come to a new knowledge of who we are (and who we are not) through God. Though we used to, we no longer identify ourselves by what we do for work or how we dress or who we hang out with or how much money we earn. And of particular relevance to this point, we no longer find identity based on how we measure up against others.

It was actually this very tendency that led to some of the most rebuking words from Jesus to the Pharisees (read his parable in Luke 18:9–14, as he talks about a Pharisee who gained his identity by comparing himself to others he felt superior to). So while it is understandable that we would look to establish a sense of identity by comparing ourselves to those we perceive as less enlightened, it is nonetheless dangerous to ourselves, to others, and to the larger goal of confronting and dismantling White supremacy.

The label woke is powerful because we dream of eventually reaching a permanent state of enlightenment. I think most of us carry this fantasy that if we take the racial awakening journey seriously enough—if we read the right articles, study the right history books, listen to the right podcasts—we will eventually land at an arrival point where we can exhale and join the ranks of other woke White allies. It's a fantastical place where all major lessons have already been learned. It's a place where all blind spots have already been exposed. It's a place where I am on equal

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footing in my knowledge of the issue with those who represent the margins. It's a place where my credibility is solid enough that I can tell jokes about race without repercussions. It's a place where I no longer have to be sensitive to the multitude of cultural vantage points on an issue, because my own sense of instinct is so well developed. It is a place where I no longer have to worry about being corrected, because I never make mistakes anymore. It is a place where I no longer say anything stupid or say the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Do you see the threads of this fantasy inside yourself? I sure see it in myself. I think there are many reasons this fantasy is so common in White folks who deeply desire to be active participants, but to explore them here would take me farther down this path than I want to go in this chapter. For the purposes of dealing with this second motivation, I believe we have to do the same with this fantasy as we do with every other fantasy: we must find our way back to reality.

When I begin to slip into a mode of fantasizing about graduating to some type of fixed state of enlightenment, here are a couple of truths I remind myself of. *First, my whole life has been socialized by, through, and inside a system of White supremacy.* While I was growing up completely oblivious to the system—or worse, internalizing messages of superiority—most of my BIPOC friends were growing up *having* to learn it in order to survive. The gap in understanding between these two realities is almost immeasurable. *Second, I remind myself that even as I slowly close the necessary knowledge gap involving the system of White supremacy, this is not the same thing as lived experience.* My intellectual understanding of race does not compare to being the lone minority presence in any given space. Nor does it compare to fearing for my life as I get pulled over by the police. I've also never had to figure out how to have “the talk” with my children. I've never had to worry about being dragged out of my home by an ICE agent.

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Though the fantasy of reaching some type of fixed, enlightened point is understandable, I need only to remind myself of these truths to remember that it is indeed just that—a fantasy. The reality is that I am on an ongoing journey of discovery.

The label woke is powerful because we long to be independent agents of change. I met recently with a White leader who is a respected veteran in this work. She is respected for her humble attitude as she partners in cross-cultural settings. I was grateful to glean life lessons from her. One of the first lessons she passed on was a caution about what *woke* represented for White folks. It was affirming to hear how central this idea had been in her journey. I asked her to elaborate on how she had learned to be cautious about this term. She responded, “I have had to come to grips with the fact that a big reason I want to be thought of as woke is directly tied to my pride.”

This is a pattern I notice in myself as well, so I asked her if she could elaborate on what that specific connection to pride looks like for her. “Here’s one clear example I’ve come to identify,” she replied. “Once I began to realize how serious the problem of race is, I felt like I needed to do something to improve the problem. Perhaps that is not pride, but the desire to make change on my own terms certainly was. Despite the fact that there were all kinds of opportunities to serve under seasoned and credible leaders who were working within their own communities, I felt the need to prove that I could bring about change on my own. I wanted to establish myself as an independent agent of change.”

Choosing to pursue change outside of the guidance of seasoned leaders made immediate sense as a form of pride. I asked her if there were additional ways she saw this phenomenon of seeking to be an independent agent of change play out. She explained that a lot of White folks begin their journey with a clear admission that the system of race is something they typically haven’t thought about and still don’t understand well. But she

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notices something that happens along the way, specifically for White leaders who are actively searching for ways to participate in solutions to race-based problems. Whereas they used to center voices of people of color in their initial process, they start to shift toward a centering of their own thoughts and ideas. And whereas they used to demonstrate a healthy dependence on people of color to tutor them from lived experience, they start to long for an independence that no longer requires this ongoing mentorship. She sees this desire as a direct symptom of wokeness. The more woke that White leaders deem themselves to be, the more likely they are to see themselves as fit to lead efforts directed toward race in an independent fashion, disconnected from critical feedback on their approaches or theories of change.

This insight was incredibly helpful. She put words to another dimension of wokeness that I had not yet named for myself.

I asked her how she had learned to combat this dangerous motivation in herself, and I loved the clarity and depth of her answer. She said that when it came to her desire to actively participate in combating race, she had adopted Romans 12:3 as her life verse: “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.” This, she said, was how she could quickly gain a pulse on whether she was demonstrating healthy dependence or unhealthy independence. When she was giving in to pride, she could see how she was thinking more highly of herself than she ought. When she was living from more of a Spirit-filled, humble place, she was able to authentically evaluate her journey through a prism of sober judgment.

3. Develop a God-inspired vision for moving from pride to humility. Behavior modification regarding the words you use has a place, but behavior modification will not help change your heart. I believe the only way we can truly move toward the

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transformation we so badly need is by clearly acknowledging that the desire within us to be deemed as woke is real, and that it is fueled by pride. Once we get in touch with this reality, it becomes much easier to see why it is so dangerous, as pride always is.

From there, we can develop a vision for ourselves that keeps us moving, by the Spirit of God, from pride to humility. We can examine ways we have moved from pride to humility in other arenas in our lives and apply our findings to this journey. From overconfidence in self to reliance on others. From autonomy and independence to collaboration and dependence. From a position of security to a position of vulnerability. From seeking to establish ourselves as experts to seeking a permanent posture of learning.

The problem addressed in this chapter goes far deeper than the word *woke*. Though this word will eventually go out of style, as all co-opted, pop culture phrases do, what it represents for the White person seeking to actively participate in race-based work will not. So the practice of this chapter—stop being woke—remains the starting point of this journey, regardless of which word is currently used to describe it.

This will always need to be the first practice because it represents the most fundamental battle within the human soul: pride versus humility. Is it an overstatement to say that the whole of the Christian message comes down to this? I don't think so. Warnings of the insidious nature of pride are found from the beginning of the Bible to the end. James, the half brother of Jesus, summarizes the warning like this: "That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble'" (James 4:6).