

Straight White Male

A Faith-Based Guide to Deconstructing
Your Privilege and Living with Integrity

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Introduction

This book is not about Donald Trump. I guess it's also not *not* about Donald Trump either, in that the world looked different to me the day after the 2016 election. Two profound things changed for me—the way I saw others, and the way I understood how others saw me. That may be only two things, but there aren't many bigger than that.

Of course, in the light of that Wednesday morning, it had not changed at all for the folks who were most threatened by a Trump presidency. America was as it had always been, a place hostile to people of color, a deeply patriarchal society standing on the foundation of white supremacy. Those who have not been able to afford to trust in America's better angels knew better and were not surprised. But it was an awakening for me, and I hope for others like me. We learned that we could no longer assume that the things we'd learned about in our history classes were, in fact, history. We learned that some of us held drastically different views of the world than others.

I am, by nature, a person who assumes the best about people, which leads me to make assumptions about people that I learned abruptly had not been true. That day, I found I was

looking at people differently. Behind the counter at the sandwich shop where I bought my lunch, I examined the three white guys, roughly my age, wondering how they'd voted. They looked like me. They could be me. Had they preferred Trump? Had they ignored his misogynistic language and behavior? Heard and followed his racial dog whistles? Everywhere I looked, every person I saw, I wondered. The person driving the car next to me at the stoplight. The parents in the carpool line at my kids' school. The white guys on the daily podcast I loved, who dismissed the person of color on the show when he insisted that the results had not been about "economic anxiety" but about race. That was the last episode I ever downloaded.

My illusions had been shattered, I suppose, and the consequence was a silent interrogation of everyone around me, especially the ones who looked like me. I knew the demographics, that the overwhelming majority of college-educated straight white men had voted for Trump. It dawned on me (I will admit to not being the most perceptive person): if I was looking at everyone else this way, this was the way folks were likely looking at me. They could look at the car I drove, the color of my skin, the clothes I wore—even the job I do—and make certain assumptions about my political leanings, and therefore my values. I felt like an impostor in my own skin. I looked at people with whom I have so very much in common and instantly felt as though I was not familiar with them at all.

There is something mind-bending about fitting the appearance of a type, but being unable to understand or identify with the particular attributes that go along with that type, and why exactly it feels so foreign. In one sense, it was profoundly isolating to be walking around in a body that carried deep associations about who I am as a person, values with which I definitely did not want to be associated (again, "welcome," say millions of nonwhite, nonbinary others); to look and sound like one thing but feel internally like something else. It made me think deeply about how I want to be perceived, about how what I hold in my heart or mind isn't as important as where and how

I present my physical self to those around me, in ways that represent who I want to be. It was like one of those bad dreams about being in public with no clothes on. I was all of a sudden aware of what people saw when they looked at me.

The election of Donald Trump was a catalyst for this, but this book is not about him, and the problem I hope to address did not begin with him and certainly will not end with him either. Straight white men have been the apex predators in our culture, and around the world, for centuries. We have wiped out Indigenous populations, owned people as property, used and abused the environment for profit, stigmatized both men and women for their sexual orientation or gender identity to destructive effect—all of this mostly, as I will show, as a means to soothe our own insecurities. This is why “predator” is an appropriate term—because we have made anyone and everyone the prey by which we have sustained ourselves. We may be socialized differently in the context of our communities, churches, parents and family, friends, education, and so on, but there is no escaping the broader context in which we all come up. We have been bred to dominate and consume. Deep down we, like most predators, still have an innate taste for those we can make our prey. We do not know who we are apart from this, or what we could be, if not predators.

However, it is possible for Jesus to ruin our appetite for dominance. Not just any Jesus. Not the one who has been co-opted in the name of justifying toxic masculinity, homophobia, economic oppression, and white supremacy. Not the one who was preached on plantations in the slaveholding South; neither the one conveniently cited by politicians, nor the benign Jesus offered in many mainline congregations by white male pastors, sentimentalized and explained away so as not to offend or demand. But the Jesus of the Gospels, the Jesus who disrupts social and economic systems bent on exploitation and inequality, the Jesus who casts a radical vision built not on consumption but on equity, the Jesus who critiques and questions religious practice that supports the status quo—*that* Jesus will spoil your appetite.

He spoiled mine in the summer of 2004, when I was a seminary intern following around the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II and encountering a kind of salvation that could not be divorced from talking about bodies—about school districts and per pupil spending, affordable housing, and access to early childhood education. On the first day of my internship, the Rev. Barber asked me to meet him at the church in the early morning. I drove us around in his minivan. As we drove through various neighborhoods in Goldsboro, North Carolina, he told me about the demographics of those who lived in each neighborhood, what they had once been, where the children were districted to attend elementary, middle, and high school. We went to City Hall, where we asked for a large map that he had clearly consulted many times before. He spread it out over a large wooden conference table and talked to me about the geography of the place.

I had never considered this to be information that ministry might require—that following Jesus might require me to locate myself, bodily, in the midst of other bodies; to consider that how I sustained and enriched myself might deprive others. It was a new thing for me to consider that understanding how Title I funds are allocated, how schools qualify for them, and how they are used might be a matter of pastoral care to the congregation I serve.

In room after room we entered, often to have tense conversations with local leaders hostile toward him, I saw casual prejudice I had presumably been blind to previously. I learned to feel sorry for those who assumed that Barber's intellect did not match their own, because he was the most intelligent and learned person in whatever room we entered, and often that realization was painful and embarrassing for those who'd taken for granted that he was there to grandstand and had not done his homework (whether this was because of his race or because clergy do not generally possess deep knowledge of public policy, it is hard to say). Most of all, I encountered a Jesus I never knew.

Before that summer, I had an abiding faith: I believed in the power of Christian community; I believed that Jesus

showed up and was present to the people of God in powerful ways, especially when they were serving one another. But I was swimming on the surface of a very deep ocean. I could've kept going just as I was, but I would've missed untold wonders (and dangers) underneath me. On Pentecost, Barber preached about the Holy Spirit—how the Spirit can be like a miner's light for us in dark and unfamiliar places, allowing us to see our surroundings as we never had before. He had a stack of pages on the pulpit but never made it much past page 2. I found myself no longer on the chancel behind the pulpit, but in front of the steps with many in the congregation, tears flowing down my cheeks—because the Spirit of God had done for me just what he described. I could see now, and what I had seen, I could not unsee.

Jesus ruined my appetite the semester that Dr. Peter Storey, who was president of the South African Council of Churches during the struggle against apartheid, introduced me to a Jesus who wasn't wrapped in the flag, but stood against and was executed by empire. Through the lens of his struggle with the apartheid government, Dr. Storey taught us what it looks like when elements of the church clothe themselves in white supremacy, in violence intended to maintain unjust order among God's people. This was, of course, right under my nose, in every American history course I'd ever taken, but the South African narrative helped me to see the narrative that had shaped me. He explained that America was the modern Rome, and that the rest of the world exists in the shadow of its empire. We watch your movies, listen to your music, and pay careful attention to your politics, because one way or another, they all find their way to us, he told us. "To be a responsible citizen in Rome," he said, in one of those moments where you remember where you were sitting, "you must know what it is like to live on the fringes of the empire."

That summer I served as a ministry intern in Pinetown, South Africa, just outside the city of Durban. On Saturdays I would walk to the mall and see hardly any other white faces. It was the first time I'd ever been conscious of myself as a

minority. I did not want to be so ignorant of others' experience of the world any longer. I had been missing too much.

Jesus spoiled my appetite the day a gay woman in my congregation shared from the pulpit that our church was one of three places in the world she felt safe holding her spouse's hand. It was Laity Sunday, and instead of a sermon I asked three members of the congregation to share a Bible passage that had been important to them and why it was significant in their faith journey—a simple task. She chose a passage from the creation story: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them” (Gen. 1:27). She talked about how long it had taken her to believe that those words were true about herself. She shared with us how unsafe she felt, generally, in the world, with a notable exception being the congregation I had been called to serve. I sat on the back row, weeping. I could not think of anything more important. I remembered Jesus calling the kin-dom of God a mustard bush, a place where “the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” (Matt. 13:32), and pondered what it was like to find true sanctuary in the body of Christ. In that moment, I would not have cared if everyone else had left the church and if it were only me and those two women remaining. Even if that were the case, that was a hill on which I was willing to die—that a person should not live in fear because of the form that love takes in their life.

I do not want to belong to a church full of predators wearing Jesus like camouflage. I do not want my existence to be sustained by the suffering of another. This is what occurred to me driving around that day after the 2016 election. Jesus has made me a stranger among my own species. Even though I am surely guilty of operating as a predator, my heart's desire is not to do the harm men who look like me have done and are doing to the people who are nearest to the heart of Jesus. If I'm a predator—a lion—Jesus made me a vegetarian. I spent a lot of time exploring in my own head what it meant to discover that one's inner identity did not match what could be assumed from one's exterior. I think it was the first time I understood

what people who look like me have been doing to everyone else for as long as anyone can remember.

That evening I sat at our dinner table with my wife, discussing how we had processed the day. She listened as I shared the vegetarian lion image, listened as I described this feeling of being unmoored and danced around the edges of feeling sorry for myself (bless her, she is patient). Finally, she looked at me and said, “Yes, but you still get to walk around the world like a lion.” No matter what I feel about it, this identity shapes my existence. It comes with things I’d rather not accept, but it grants me privileges I cannot deny.

What does it mean to wear this identity in the world? What kind of life does this call me to live? What kind of parent, husband, friend, pastor, and disciple does this require me to be? It seems an insurmountable task to disentangle myself from a life in which almost everything I touch, from my iPhone to my groceries to my underwear, is the product of someone who is living poorly so that I do not. The alternative, however, is to march on, unmoved, unchallenged, shrugging my shoulders at what has gone before and accepting that the injustices I’ve inherited will be passed on to my children and theirs. While there are many problems with making that choice, the greatest problems are that it does not take the Jesus I have encountered seriously, and the Jesus I have encountered will not be taken anything but seriously.

Two things occurred to me in that moment. One is that it will never be possible for straight white men to be completely aware of our blindness to our own instincts—how we privilege our own point of view, assume that our voices should be heard and honored (or published), are ignorant of what our presence means to certain people in proximity to us. I cannot cure myself of this ignorance, and whatever ways I am able to unlearn these habits, I can only learn from those who are willing to tell me the truth, be Christ present to me. This is why, from the beginning, I knew that the pages of this book could not be filled only with my words. Inevitably I will speak out of turn, speak an incomplete truth or an outright falsehood, miss

the way toward a redemptive way of living. Those who have offered their own words in the interest of our hearing the truth have offered us grace—words that folks like me are not owed, but are blessed by nonetheless, in the interest of our encountering the transformative grace of Christ.

The second realization I had that day at the dinner table was that men like me need a redemptive way to think about our identities. Learning the destructive legacy of white supremacy and patriarchy is a bit like learning that you have murderers in your family tree (I suppose many of us probably do). What does this mean about who we are? How do we carry this legacy in the world? How do we understand the people who raised us, the family members we loved and who loved us, who made us who we are, for better but also for worse? There is great grief to be encountered here, and too many of us are unwilling to face that reckoning because we do not know who we will be when the shedding of an old identity is underway. There is also guilt and shame, which are complex emotions that can be catalysts for lasting change in a person's life, but are by and large only obstacles if we cannot see a redemptive light at the end of that tunnel.

There are the conversations that justice-minded men are having in public, and then there are the ones they are having in private. In public, we acknowledge the struggles for justice all around us, from #MeToo to Black Lives Matter to LGBTQ+ rights. In private, people who look like me are wondering how to be themselves in this climate, what to do to still be fully ourselves while also acknowledging that people who look like us still have a grossly outsized amount of power and influence. I want to be clear that this is not an attempt to engender sympathy from those who have been harmed by straight white men for centuries, but deconstructing a particular worldview, which is surely required, leaves a raw and unformed possibility. It is in the best interest of everyone if straight white men find redemptive paths forward instead of retreating into destructive habits.

One possible outcome is that, faced with the challenge of departing from a particular identity, we begin to retreat even

deeper into toxic expressions of this identity. One way of rejecting this hard work and the uncertainty that comes with it is to insist that the real problems are cancel culture, political correctness, and liberal politics. Among many other factors, Trumpism seems to be at least a partial response to attempts to redefine whiteness, maleness, straightness—if you say that I must change who I am, I will instead become an extreme version of that part of me which you believe is a problem. This temptation exists even for those not otherwise particularly inclined to extremism. Faced with a reckoning that requires hard work and points toward an unclear path, retreating is a very human response.

There has been much reckoning in our culture—many book clubs, Facebook groups, and organized protests. We have come face-to-face, once again, with the toxic legacy of patriarchy, and facing it is essential. To move beyond reckoning and toward redemption, however, we must begin to articulate a new vision for how we might carry ourselves in relation to others. “Redemptive” is an operative term; while stating the facts of whiteness and patriarchy has punitive elements that are meant to shock the conscience and appeal to our moral center, without a destination to pursue we are left only with shame, a toxic state of being that white men will surely weaponize rather than bearing it on their own. We are doing it now, in a new wave of hate speech and regressive politics.

I am aware that some will accuse me of a kind of self-hatred, will say that this entire project is rooted in a dissatisfaction with who I am that I’ve projected onto everyone else. Straight white men are notoriously aggressive when one of our own breaks rank. Even in informal conversations around patriarchy I have been called a “white knight” (one who comes to a woman’s aid only to endear himself to her). Others seem to be puzzled with how much I think about race and how often it enters my teaching and preaching, but, as you may find, when you begin to see all the ways whiteness touches our life together, you can no longer ignore it; you see it everywhere you look.

I am no more at war with myself than Paul, who wrote to the church in Rome of his struggle to understand his own

motivations, the way he carried himself in the world. Paul writes of a spiritual struggle that expresses itself in embodied ways: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15). Paul believes he has cultivated within himself the will to do what is right, the earnest desire to do what God calls us to do and be, but he finds that the rhythms and habits of his own life betray his will.

Much ink has been spilled over the distinction between flesh and spirit that Paul makes, but through an exploration of how these identities, worn and embodied in the world, have done historic harm, perhaps Paul’s words come into clearer focus. With our hearts and minds we may desire to do and be different. We may have an intellectual grasp of the dynamics of race, sexuality, and gender. We may desire within ourselves to do no harm by our embodiments of these identities, but often we find that the habits and postures we have learned are not so easily broken. We do what we do not want to do, and fail to be what we are willing ourselves to be.

There is a certain peace in acknowledging this ongoing struggle and embracing it. As a child who grew up on the coast, I learned early on that too much fighting against an ocean current you are caught in can be a recipe for disaster—you will find quickly that you do not have the stamina. It is counterintuitive when you feel at risk, but sometimes choosing to breathe, relax your muscles, and embrace an uncomfortable and uncertain situation gives you the best chance to arrive in more peaceful waters with air still in your lungs. By the time most of us awaken to what it means to be white in a racialized society, or a man in a patriarchal culture that has narrowly defined masculinity, the work that must be done to unlearn the bad habits and poor postures we have developed is immense and may take the rest of our lives. The alternative, however, is perpetuating those things, passing them on to our children—and being another generation they read about in their history books and wonder why we lacked the courage and the commitment to face what was in front of us. My hope is that we can learn to

relax and breathe and not fight so hard against the transformation we are being offered. Resisting change won't get us where we really want to go. To that end, I am more at peace with who I am now than I ever have been.

There are times when I wish I had not inherited the legacy that comes with my particular identity, yes; there are times when I hear or see a comment about patriarchy and feel the familiar "not all men" rebuttal rising up within me. Yet renewing my commitment to understanding, to discerning, to self-examination has allowed me to encounter the Spirit of God in new ways, to feel that Spirit resting on my head, lighting my surroundings, as the Rev. Barber said on that Pentecost Sunday. Now I feel that I am walking deeper and deeper into that cave, further along the path of discipleship. I have found a way of being that has meaning and purpose beyond me. I believe this is what Jesus meant when he said, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:25). I am fine with losing the life I was given, because the one I continue to discover is richer and fuller. It is far from any kind of self-loathing. It feels more like loving myself so that I am more capable of loving my neighbor.

To begin, we must name where we are and practice the oft-avoided Christian practice of confession. In my ministry, I frequently have been surprised by the power that simple acknowledgment of past harm can have. There is nothing particularly remarkable about acknowledging the facts of history, though we have had trouble doing this and still do. I have been reminded of its power by the responses I often receive, something like: "I've never heard someone who looks like you acknowledge what you just did." Again, this is not a particular virtue, but it does have restorative power when it comes to our relationships with those who do not share our particular identity. It signals a departure from the legacy of gaslighting we have perpetrated on those around us, who have experienced one reality while we have operated as if another one exists entirely. What a relief it must be to hear the truth of your existence acknowledged by those who have worked so hard

to define (and often diminish) it. This, alone, for the healing power it carries for those whose lives have been unnecessarily made more difficult simply because of who they are, is worth the challenge of truth-telling.

Additionally, there is no way forward without having the courage to tell ourselves the truth. We cannot be so interested in self-preservation that we would rather live a lie than embrace the call of God to work for love and justice—not if we want to call ourselves disciples of Jesus. For that reason, we acknowledge at least a portion of how the lived realities of whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity have been harmful, both to others and to ourselves. This will be woefully incomplete—doubtless many will find unacknowledged history or this confession incomplete, but it is meant to be a beginning, not an ending.

This book is also intended to be a guide to deconstructing a particular worldview and reconstructing a new one—to help develop a distaste for that which harms others and ourselves, in favor of a more redemptive way of being present in the world. In the church, we sometimes call it conversion. Few are converted, however, without an encounter with the liberating power of Christ. For some, like the blind man at Bethsaida or the paralyzed man lowered through the roof by his friends, their transformative encounters with Christ are restorative; where once they were isolated from community, the bodily healing that Christ offers restores them to their place of belonging. For others—the rich man who wants to inherit eternal life, Nicodemus, and Zacchaeus, to name a few—Jesus complicates their lives and becoming his disciple will cost them. What you read in the pages that follow may be one or the other for you, but prayerfully both. There is a life to be gained from shedding the life we have inherited via toxic patterns that have oppressed and dehumanized others. I want to keep walking toward it, to be a predator who has learned other ways to sustain himself besides the same old hunting. And I want to help others come with me. My prayer is that you will come along.