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# FAITHFUL ANTI- RACISM

MOVING PAST

TALK TO

**SYSTEMIC CHANGE**



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## CHAPTER ONE

# FAITHFUL ANTIRACISTS HAVE WISDOM

### THE ART OF BEING A FAITHFUL ANTIRACIST (CHRISTINA)

A few years ago, after the mass shooting at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, I taught a group of grief-stricken and frustrated churchgoers and clergy. During the teaching, to the side of the stage, was a local artist hired to paint in real time an image of the speakers and the heart of their message. Throughout my talk, she created a beautiful painting. There were times as the image was being developed it only looked like flashes of color with no rhyme or reason. However, by the end of my teaching it became clear the artist had a plan and skills to accomplish it. As I exited the stage, there it was. A large painting with my likeness and an image of growth and restoration. The artist's observations, skill, patience, and time-management were on full display. The artist demonstrated wisdom and skill so apparent that it felt like magic. How did she pull this off?

It is fascinating to watch a skilled artist at work. A carpenter building a chair. A fashion designer shaping a dress. A chef meticulously crafting a meal. Step by step, they apply their knowledge, skill, experience, and creativity. Eventually, something functional, stunning, or delicious appears. To those like myself, without such skills, the creation is even more intriguing and beautiful.

Being a faithful antiracist is an art, not a formulaic process. Like painting a picture, building a chair, shaping a dress, or crafting a meal, it requires knowledge, skill, experience, and creativity. Most importantly, it

requires the leading of the Holy Spirit. No amount of knowledge or experience can prepare us for every question and situation that will come up. We need a master artist who can guide our hands and help us to create something beautiful.

### THE BIBLE'S TEACHINGS ON WISDOM

The Bible's description of wisdom includes much more than simply knowing facts. It is a combination of humility, creativity, skill, expertise, and competence. For example, in Exodus we see that God gave Bezalel "wisdom" as a master artist so that he could help decorate the tabernacle: "And [God] has filled [Bezalel] with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills" (Exodus 35:31).

The same Hebrew word that is translated "wisdom" (*chokmah*) in Exodus 35:31 is also used in Psalm 107:27 as a description for sailors who are unable to navigate through a challenging storm. In the NIV, the verse is translated, "they were at their wits' end." More literally, "they were at their wisdom's end." In other words, their experience, skill, and ingenuity were not enough to save them from an overwhelming circumstance. For a helpful visual overview of the Bible's teachings on wisdom, we recommend the five-minute video *The Book of Proverbs* by the BibleProject.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible calls us to live with wisdom—effectively applying our knowledge and skills to everyday life in ways that align with God's will and that benefit our own lives, our neighbors, and society. This is true in all areas of our lives, including our approach to racial dynamics. Wisdom isn't something we muster up in our own strength or by academic study alone. Wisdom is given as a gift and even more specifically as an answer to prayer. As James explains, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you" (James 1:5).

The Bible also emphasizes we must have a healthy "fear" of God in order to grow in wisdom. As Solomon explains, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10). *Fear* in this sense refers to honoring and submitting to God's will and taking on a posture of humility and teachability. It is acknowledging that God is the source of all wisdom, not ourselves.

We hope and pray this book will help you grow in your *wisdom in regard to racial dynamics*—that is, your ability to apply your creativity, skills, and knowledge to the complexities of racial dynamics. That requires more than just learning facts and principles. It requires you to ask God for wisdom in a posture of humility and teachability. It also requires you to reflect on the unique mix of experiences and abilities God has given you. How have you been uniquely equipped to be a faithful antiracist?

### **A DIFFICULT REALITY TO ACCEPT (CHAD)**

In the following sections, we will look at research data showing that Christians in some racial groups generally have less accurate racial views than non-Christians within their racial group. When I first began to study racial dynamics in the United States, that was a difficult reality for me to accept. I have been a Christian for as long as I can remember, and I have been surrounded by loving, committed Christians throughout my life. I grew up viewing Christians as people who stand for what is right, love their neighbors, turn the other cheek, and walk the extra mile. But the more I learned about the relationship between Christianity and racial injustice in our country, the more I was disturbed by what I saw.

Studying racial dynamics in US Christianity can challenge our view of our Christian heritage, our respected mentors, our organizations, and ourselves. In the past, I have wanted to dismiss the realities we share in this book as inaccurate, exaggerated, politically motivated, or unfair. If you feel that way, I encourage you to take the time to explore with an open mind the data and historical examples we share, and I believe you will discover what I discovered. There is a tremendous amount of evidence that the views and actions of many Christians, both in the past and present, are very far from what Christ taught and modeled.

Oftentimes, I have wanted to close my eyes and wish it all away or go back to the days when I wasn't able to see what I can see now, but I am thankful that is not possible. I now realize that my desire to “unsee” racial injustice is an expression of my privilege.<sup>2</sup> As Christians we do not need to be afraid of the truth, even when it hurts. As Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the

truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). The truth gives us freedom. Lies, denial, and willful ignorance keep us trapped in bondage.

Throughout this book, some readers may feel we are being overly critical of US Christianity. James Baldwin famously said, “I love America . . . and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, it is our love for the church that compels us to point out the weaknesses that keep it from being the source of light, hope, truth, and love that God desires for it to be. Our criticism is an act of love. We point out these areas of concern for the benefit of the church, individual Christians, and our society.

### ABOUT THE GRAPHS WE SHARE

In the remainder of this book, we share graphs displaying how different groups responded in our research. The following are some questions we anticipate may be on your mind.

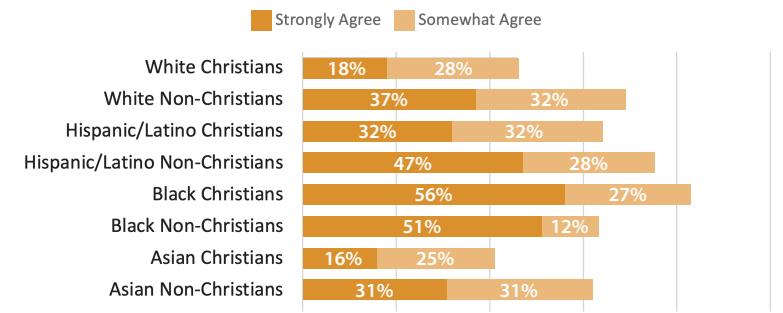
***Why don't you include the views of multiracial or Indigenous Americans?*** The data we share in this book primarily focuses White Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, Black Americans, and Asian Americans because they are the four largest racial groups in the United States.<sup>4</sup> As of 2020, the population of the United States was approximately 60% White, 17% Hispanic/Latino, 13% Black, and 6% Asian.<sup>5</sup> The data we have collected to date has not included a large enough sample of multiracial Americans (3% of the United States), Indigenous Americans (1% of the United States), or other racial groups for us to make accurate statements about dynamics within those groups. In the coming years, we hope the assessment tools we share in chapter ten, as well as other research, will allow us to capture data for additional groups. Also, the size constraints of this book make it difficult for us to go into detail about the dynamics outside of the four largest racial groups. We need to leave that important topic to other books. For an exploration of Indigenous American Christian views on racial dynamics in the United States, we recommend the book *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: Native American Expression of the Jesus Way* by Richard Twiss.<sup>6</sup>

***Why don't you compare the views of different types of Christians?*** Many books that are focused on racial dynamics in US Christianity compare the views of various Christian groups such as evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Catholics.<sup>7</sup> In this book we take a simplified approach and primarily

focus on the differences in views between Christians and non-Christians and the differences between Christians in different racial groups.<sup>8</sup> It is important to realize there are significant differences in the dynamics in various Christian groups, but there are also many similarities. This is especially true when we look at Christians in the same racial group. For example, the views of White Christians are often very similar regardless if they are evangelical, mainline Protestant, or Catholic. With the data we share, we prioritize simplicity so we can get to the primary focus of the book, which is practical action steps.

### SOME FINDINGS FROM OUR RESEARCH

**Christians often have less accurate racial views.** Figure 1.1 displays responses to the question, “Do you agree or disagree with the statement, ‘Historically, the United States has been oppressive to minorities?’” The options were: *strongly agree*, *somewhat agree*, *neutral*, *somewhat disagree*, *strongly disagree*. Notice that White, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian Christians were less likely than non-Christians in their racial group to agree. Black Christians, on the other hand, were more likely than non-Christians in their racial group to agree.

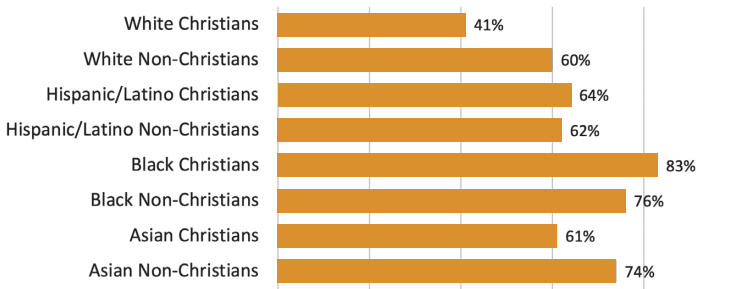


**Figure 1.1.** Respondents who agreed that historically the United States has been oppressive to minorities (Barna Group, Race Today, June/July 2020, n=1464)

The most accurate response to the question above is *strongly agree*. Tragically, the history of the United States is filled with examples of minority groups being oppressed. The following are a few examples; we share additional examples throughout the book.

- Between 1492 and 1880, between 2 and 5.5 million Indigenous Americans were enslaved in the Americas.<sup>9</sup> In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the US government authorized over 1,500 wars, attacks, and raids on Indigenous Americans.<sup>10</sup>
- Between 1525 and 1866, approximately 12.5 million Africans were shipped to the Americas. Of the 10.7 million who survived the journey, approximately 388,000 were shipped directly to North America.<sup>11</sup> Historians estimate “as many as 6 million people lived and died in the American slave industry before 4 million people were declared free by 1865.”<sup>12</sup>
- During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, historians estimate thousands of Hispanic/Latino Americans were killed due to acts of racial violence.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 1.2 displays responses to the question, “In general, in our country these days, would you say that [Black people are treated less fairly than White people or White people are treated less fairly than Black people], or both are treated about equally in each of the following situations?” (The two phrases in the brackets were randomly rotated during the survey.) Notice that White Christians and Asian Christians were less likely than non-Christians in their racial group to indicate that Black people are generally treated less fairly in regard to hiring, pay, and promotions. Black Christians, on the other hand, were more likely than non-Christians in their racial group to



**Figure 1.2.** Respondents who indicated that Black people are generally treated less fairly than White people in regard to hiring, pay, and promotions (RRJP Survey, July/Aug 2019, n=2797)

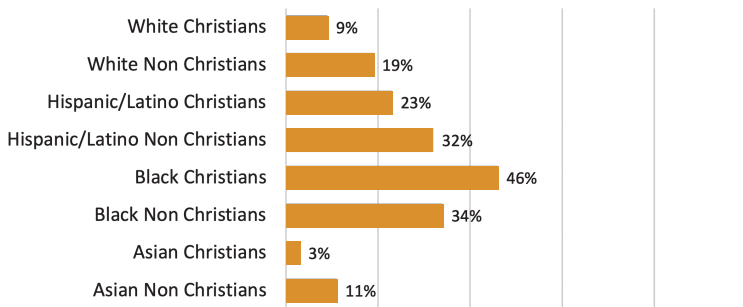


indicate that Black people are generally treated less fairly. The responses by Hispanic/Latino Christians and Hispanic/Latino non-Christians were nearly the same.<sup>14</sup>

The most accurate response to the question above is, Black people are generally treated less fairly than White people in regard to hiring, pay, and promotions. Studies focused on employment practices consistently determine this to be the case. For example, a recent analysis of twenty-four field experiments, which included data from more than 54,000 applications across more than 25,000 positions, determined, “At the initial point of entry—hiring decisions—Blacks remain substantially disadvantaged relative to equally qualified Whites, and we see little indication of progress over time.”<sup>15</sup>

**Christians are often less motivated to address racial injustice.** In figure 1.3, you can see the respondents who selected “very motivated” for the question, “How motivated are you to address racial injustice in our society?” Notice that White, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian Christians were less likely than non-Christians in their racial group to be very motivated to address racial injustice in our society. Black Christians, on the other hand, were more likely to be very motivated to address racial injustice in our society than non-Christians in their racial group.

**Understanding the above trends should not lead us to false assumptions.** It is important to keep in mind that being a White, Hispanic/Latino, or Asian Christian does not always correlate with having inaccurate



**Figure 1.3.** Respondents who indicated they were very motivated to address racial injustice in our society (Barna Group, Race Today, June/July 2020, n=1464)

views and being a Black Christian does not always correlate with having accurate views. For example, notice that almost half (46%) of White Christians agreed that historically the United States has been oppressive to minorities. And, that one in six (17%) of Black Christians did not agree that historically the United States has been oppressive to minorities.

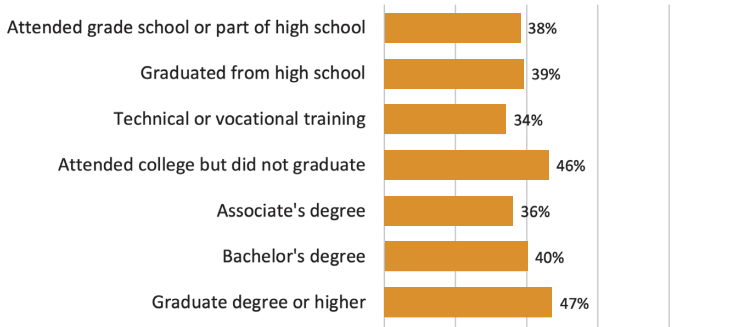
### COMMON QUESTIONS

The following are some common questions that come up when we share about the differences in views described above.

***Are Black Christians' views different from the other groups because they are deceived?*** Some readers may believe the differences in racial perspectives are caused by Black Christians being deceived because of their personal experiences, social circles, or political affiliations. But this explanation denies the extensive data that exists on racial dynamics in our country. The views of Black Christians tend to line up more closely with the racial realities consistently measured by national research. For a more in-depth exploration of reasons why Black Christians typically have more accurate racial views, we recommend the book *Blacks and Whites in Christian America* by Michael Emerson and Jason Shelton.<sup>16</sup>

***Are some Christians simply uninformed about racial issues?*** Some readers may wonder if Christians have less accurate racial views because they have never been provided accurate information. It is important to keep in mind the survey respondents were at least eighteen years old (the average age was forty-six). It is unlikely that the respondents had never been told or been given access to accurate information about past and present racial injustice in the United States. Accurate information was likely available to them through personal experiences, their education, training programs, the internet, movies, documentaries, museums, and more.

If people have less accurate racial views because they have not received enough education, we would expect there to be a strong correlation between having more accurate views and the level of education attained. But we find that Christians in the same racial group typically have similar views, regardless of their level of education. Notice in figure 1.4 that White Christians had similar responses to the question, regardless of their level of education.



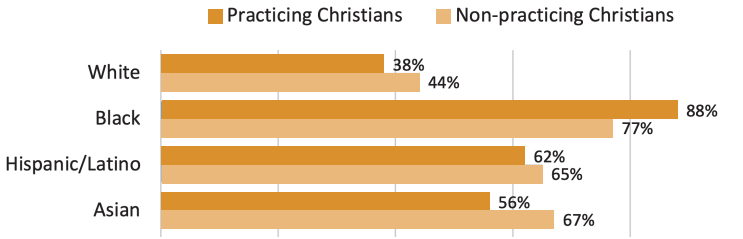
**Figure 1.4.** Respondents by level of education who indicated that Black people are generally treated less fairly than White people in regard to hiring, pay, and promotions (RRJP Survey, July/Aug 2019, n=2797, White Christians only)

With our work and research we find there are more complex reasons why people have inaccurate racial views than simply being uninformed. Providing education on racial realities can be helpful, but there are other barriers that prevent people from accepting the information as accurate. We look at some of these barriers throughout this book.

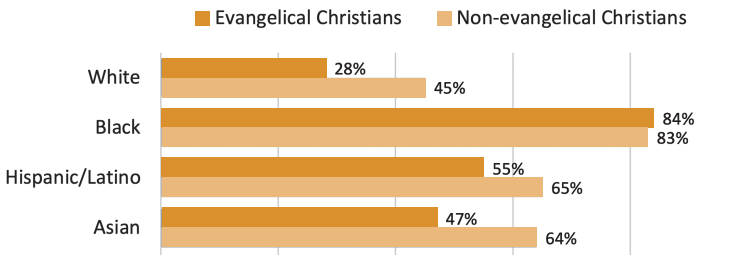
***Are the Christians you studied only Christians by name?*** Some readers may wonder if the Christians we studied describe themselves as Christians but their faith has little impact on their life and they rarely read the Bible or go to church. Perhaps that can explain why the Christians we studied have less accurate racial views. Unfortunately, we find that White, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian Christians who are more active in their faith tend to have less accurate racial views than Christians who are not active in their faith. The following are two examples.

***Practicing Christians.***<sup>17</sup> Notice in figure 1.5 the difference between White and Asian Christians who are “practicing” and White and Asian Christians who are “not practicing.” The practicing Christians were less likely than non-practicing Christians in their racial group to indicate that Black people are generally treated less fairly than White people in regard to hiring, pay, and promotions.

***Evangelical Christians.***<sup>18</sup> Note in figure 1.6 that White, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian evangelical Christians were much less likely than non-evangelical Christians in their racial group to indicate that Black people



**Figure 1.5.** Respondents by practicing and non-practicing Christians who indicated that Black people are generally treated less fairly than White people in regard to hiring, pay, and promotions (RRJP Survey, July/Aug 2019, n=2797)



**Figure 1.6.** Respondents by evangelical and non-evangelical Christians who indicated that Black people are generally treated less fairly than White people in regard to hiring, pay, and promotions (RRJP Survey, July/Aug 2019, n=2797)

are generally treated less fairly than White people in regard to hiring, pay, and promotions.

### ACCURATE EXPLANATIONS FOR THE ABOVE TRENDS

The following is an introductory summary of some of the more likely explanations why a high percentage of Christians in some racial groups have inaccurate racial views and a lack of motivation to address racial injustice.

**The historic legacy of racism.** European Christian colonists who first settled on this continent believed they were “a chosen people, endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights, and able to bring civilization and Christianity to a savage ‘New World.’”<sup>19</sup> As we will see in chapter four, racism was woven into the economic, political, and religious systems of our

country from its earliest stages. That tragic legacy continues to powerfully affect views and dynamics in the United States today.

**Motivated reasoning.** Social scientists find that people are more inclined to accept new information that supports their existing assumptions and desires. This is called *motivated reasoning*. Individuals are especially prone to motivated reasoning “when their self-worth, their future, or their understanding and valuation of the world are at stake.”<sup>20</sup> It is “a way to avoid or lessen cognitive dissonance, the mental discomfort people experience when confronted by contradictory information, especially on matters that directly relate to their comfort, happiness, and mental health.”<sup>21</sup> In our research, we see a consistent pattern of Christians rejecting new information because receiving the information would challenge their existing views, disrupt their sense of identity, or produce a sense of responsibility to change their actions. It is much easier to dismiss the challenging information. Simply put, it is harder to learn something new, even if proven true, that doesn’t align with our biases or convictions.

**Cultural toolkit.** As part of his research in the late 1990s, Michael Emerson identified a cultural toolkit that many Christians use to understand racial dynamics. The toolkit includes the following emphases:

- *Accountable freewill individualism:* Many Christians believe “individuals exist independent of structures and institutions, have freewill, and are individually accountable for their own actions.”<sup>22</sup>
- *Relationalism:* Many Christians place a strong emphasis on the role that interpersonal relationships play in racial dynamics.
- *Antistructuralism:* Many Christians believe it is wrongheaded to blame systems and structures for problems or inequalities in society; the root of all problems is individuals who are making bad decisions.

Our research from 2019 to 2020 confirmed that the cultural toolkit Emerson observed twenty years ago continues to describe the views of a large percentage of Christians today. Many Christians use the toolkit to evaluate whether information they receive about racial dynamics in the United States is true or false. If the information does not align with their toolkit, then they reject the information as fake, misguided, or counterproductive. What Emerson and Smith wrote in 2001 is still true today: “Suggesting social causes of

the race problem challenges the cultural elements with which they construct their lives. . . . This is why anyone, any group, or any program that challenges their accountable freewill individualist perspective comes itself to be seen as a cause of the race problem.”<sup>23</sup>

**Social circles.** The above barriers to racial wisdom are compounded by the fact that the social circles of Christians are typically composed almost exclusively of people who share their race and religion. For example, a 2013 study by the Public Religion Research Institute found that “among White Americans, 91 percent of people comprising their social networks were also White.”<sup>24</sup>

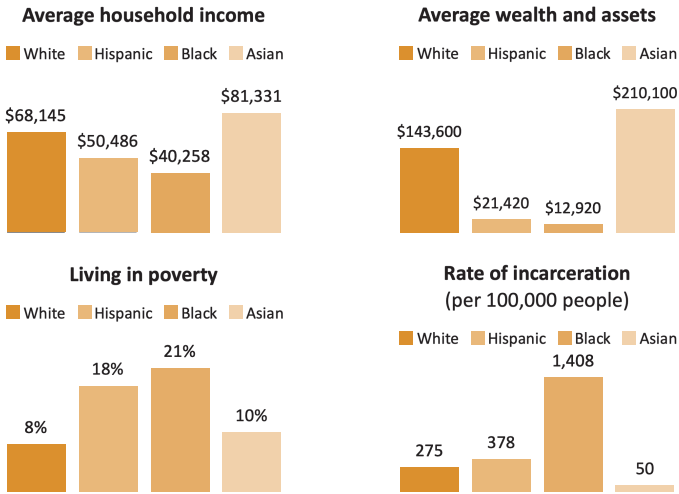
**Influences.** It is easy for us to be powerfully influenced by the organizations we are a part of and the media outlets we rely on for information. Unfortunately, many of the organizations and media outlets Christians rely on for information about racial dynamics provide inaccurate and misleading information. We will explore that reality in chapter five.

## RACIAL HIERARCHY IN THE UNITED STATES

In order to be effective faithful antiracists, it is essential to understand the racial hierarchy in our country. In societies with social hierarchies, some groups have greater power, wealth, and influence than other groups. Social hierarchies can be based on many things such as age, gender, language, family status, citizenship, or physical abilities. In the United States there is a powerful, race-based social hierarchy—we use the term *racial hierarchy* for brevity.

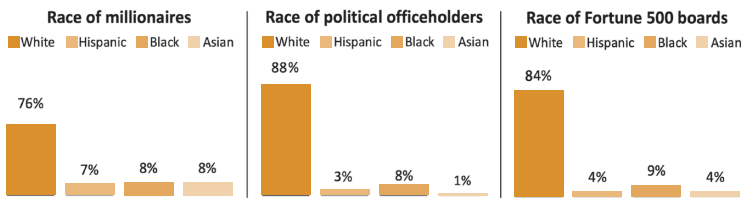
Some of the clearest indicators of the racial hierarchy in the United States are the differences in average income, wealth, poverty, and incarceration rates. Those differences are referred to as *racial disparities*. Figure 1.7 summarizes a few examples.<sup>25</sup>

Notice in the graphs that White and Asian Americans have the highest levels in the desirable categories (*income, wealth*) and the lowest levels in the undesirable categories (*poverty, incarceration*). Some readers may wonder, *Does this data indicate that Asian Americans are at the top of the racial hierarchy because they have the highest average income and wealth?* In order to understand who is at the top of the racial hierarchy, we must also consider who holds the economic and political power in society. Figure 1.8 shows the race of millionaires in the United States,<sup>26</sup> the race of political officeholders,<sup>27</sup> and the race of the board of directors of Fortune 500 companies.<sup>28</sup>



**Figure 1.7.** Racial disparities

As you can see in figure 1.8, the economic and political power of White Americans exceeds their numbers in society. If we take economic and political power and other social indicators into consideration, it is clear that White Americans are at the top of the racial hierarchy, Black Americans are at the bottom, and other racial groups fall somewhere between the two.



**Figure 1.8.** Additional racial disparities

**Why do racial disparities exist?** It is essential to have an accurate answer to this question in order to be an effective faithful antiracist. If we do not understand the problem, it is unlikely we will find an effective solution. For example, imagine a farmer whose crops are infected with a rare insect. As long as she is unaware of what is destroying her crops, it will be impossible for her to effectively address the issue.

Explanations for racial disparities fall into two types of theories:

1. *Structural theories.* People in some racial groups are given advantages or disadvantages through social systems, e.g., economic systems, political systems, educational systems, and criminal justice systems. This is sometimes referred to as *structural racism*. For example, a structural theory would be, “Black Americans have the lowest average household income because they face disadvantages in regard to hiring, pay, and promotions.”
2. *Nonstructural theories.* People in some racial groups make better decisions, have a better work ethic, have more intelligence, value education more, are more skilled, have higher morals, have better cultural values and practices, and so on. For example, a nonstructural theory would be, “Black Americans have the lowest average household income because they do not value education as much as other racial groups.”

Nonstructural theories are rarely, if ever, supported by data. They are typically based on inaccurate views. A few common examples are

- “\_\_\_ work harder than \_\_\_.” Many people assume that people in some racial groups work harder than people in other racial groups. These theories are typically based on superiority mindsets and negative racial stereotypes.<sup>29</sup> In every racial group, there are people with high/low work ethics, high/low intelligence, high/low skills. However, *entire racial groups* do not have high/low work ethics, high/low intelligence, or high/low skills.
- “\_\_\_ have better morals than \_\_\_.” These theories are similar to those above, but are more focused on the general culture or morals of racial groups rather than specific actions. These theories are also typically based on superiority mindsets and negative racial stereotypes. This is sometimes referred to as *cultural racism*.
- “Data proves that \_\_\_.” Unconscious (or implicit) racial prejudice often drives misinterpretations of data. For example, someone may say, “Only 26% of Black Americans earn college degrees, but the national average is 36%. That is one of the reasons why income rates for Black Americans are low. They do not value education as much as other racial



groups.” The statistic is correct,<sup>30</sup> but the interpretation is false. According to a 2016 Pew Study, “79% of Black parents with children under 18 say it is either extremely or very important that their children earn a college degree. By comparison, about two-thirds (67%) of White parents say the same.”<sup>31</sup> Lower college-degree attainment by Black Americans is not caused by not valuing education. It is a product of structural disadvantages like K–12 education disparities.<sup>32</sup>

- *“I know someone who is \_\_\_ who\_\_\_.”* Individuals often base their views about racial groups on statements or actions by a small group of individuals they have interacted with. For example, someone may say, “All of the Hispanic/Latino people I know think talking about race is detrimental.” We cannot reach accurate conclusions about the views and actions of entire racial groups (millions of people) based on our experiences with only a few individuals. It is very easy to fall into the trap of picking out examples that support our theories and ignoring examples that contradict them.

On the other hand, there is an enormous amount of data that supports structural theories. We shared some examples earlier in this chapter. For additional examples, we recommend the five-minute video *Systemic Racism Explained*<sup>33</sup> and the seventeen-minute video *Race in America*.<sup>34</sup>

It is essential to recognize that structural advantages and disadvantages did not appear out of thin air. Structural injustice is not an impersonal “force” of society that operates without the involvement of people. Millions of individuals have played a role in creating and sustaining the racial hierarchy in the United States for over four hundred years. Racial injustice is built and sustained by people, and it must be dismantled by people.

***Is “taking personal responsibility” the solution to racial disparities?***

With our research, we often hear comments like the following:

[Race/ethnicity] is used as a crutch for people to be rude and lazy. Everyone is equal in our society but minorities use [race/ethnicity] to blame for their failures. . . . The only race issue is babying those who use it as an excuse. (White, female, under 20)<sup>35</sup>

Many people argue that racial disparities would be eliminated if people of color took personal responsibility for their actions and stopped

“blaming the system.” However, there is a great deal of evidence that racial disparities are *not* caused by individuals not taking personal responsibility. For a detailed explanation why that is the case along with related statistics, we recommend the paper, “What We Get Wrong About Closing the Racial Wealth Gap.”<sup>36</sup>

However, it is true that our decisions and morals have a powerful impact on our life experiences, regardless of our race. To understand the relationship between structural racism and personal decisions, let’s consider a fictional scenario that is based on likely dynamics.

Brian is White. He is entrepreneurial, hardworking, and has exceptional people skills. After graduating from college, he started a restaurant that quickly grew into a successful business. He currently owns three restaurants and earns \$320,000 per year.

Greg is Black. He is entrepreneurial, hardworking, and has exceptional people skills. After graduating from college, he started a restaurant that quickly grew into a successful business. He currently owns three restaurants and earns \$140,000 per year.

Some people might assume that the difference in income between Brian and Greg is a result of Brian working harder or being a better business owner. But to understand the difference in their income, we must factor in racial dynamics. For a helpful summary of common differences between White and Black small-business ownership, we recommend the paper, “Small Business Owner Race, Liquidity, and Survival.”<sup>37</sup> Here are a few common examples of the many ways that their race could influence Brian’s and Greg’s income:

Brian benefited from generational wealth that was passed down to him through his parents.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, he did not need loans to pay for his college education.<sup>39</sup> He purchased a \$300,000 home in a predominantly White neighborhood that quickly increased in value due to housing segregation.<sup>40</sup> He used the wealth in his home to help fund the expansion of his business. When Brian decided to open additional restaurants, he was able to quickly attain a loan at competitive interest rates. In addition, Brian’s restaurants are located in predominantly White neighborhoods, which have high levels of household wealth. Therefore, he is able to charge higher prices.<sup>41</sup>

As a result of historic racism, Greg's family was not able to provide him with generational wealth or pay for his college education. He purchased a \$300,000 home in a predominantly Black neighborhood that slowly declined in value due to housing segregation.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, he was not able to use the equity in his home to help fund the expansion of his business. When Greg decided to open additional restaurants, he struggled to get a loan because of his college debt and racial bias toward Black business owners. He was forced to acquire loans at high interest rates.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Greg's restaurants are located in predominantly Black neighborhoods, which have low levels of household wealth.

In the example above, both Brian and Greg had positive personal attributes (entrepreneurial, work ethic, and skills) that helped them to be financially successful, but Brian was *more* financially successful because of structural racism. In other words, Greg's "upside" for his positive personal attributes was lower than Brian's.

If Brian and Greg both had negative personal attributes (lazy, poor people skills, dishonest, drug addiction, etc.) it is less likely that Brian would face long-term unemployment<sup>44</sup> or be convicted of drug possession.<sup>45</sup> In other words, Greg's "downside" for negative personal attributes is lower than Brian's.

If we ignore or diminish the reality of structural racism, it hurts rather than helps our efforts to promote good decision-making, a strong work ethic, and good morals. It makes us more prone to misinterpret why people are succeeding or struggling and therefore less likely to encourage them in effective ways. A better path forward is acknowledging the powerful impact of structural dynamics as well as acknowledging the powerful role of decisions, abilities, and morals in determining our life experiences.

#### **ADDITIONAL BARRIERS TO STRUCTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS**

Many people reject the concept of structural racism because they believe the United States is a *meritocracy* or a "society in which people are chosen and moved into positions of success, power, and influence on the basis of their demonstrated abilities and merit."<sup>46</sup> Here is an example comment.

I have worked hard to get where I'm at in my life right now and my race had nothing to do with it. It was my hard work and dedication that got me where I am now. (White, female, 20s)<sup>47</sup>

The reality is that America is not a meritocracy. There are many factors, such as race, that powerfully influence a person's ability to achieve success, power, and influence. Many people reject that reality because it challenges their view of themselves, their family's history, their financial success, and more.

Another common reason people reject the concept of structural racism is because they believe everyone experiences prejudice and challenges, and therefore it is unfair to focus on some people's experiences and not others. For example, a White person might say, "I grew up in a school that was majority Hispanic. I was constantly picked on because I was White. What about the prejudice and challenges I have faced?"

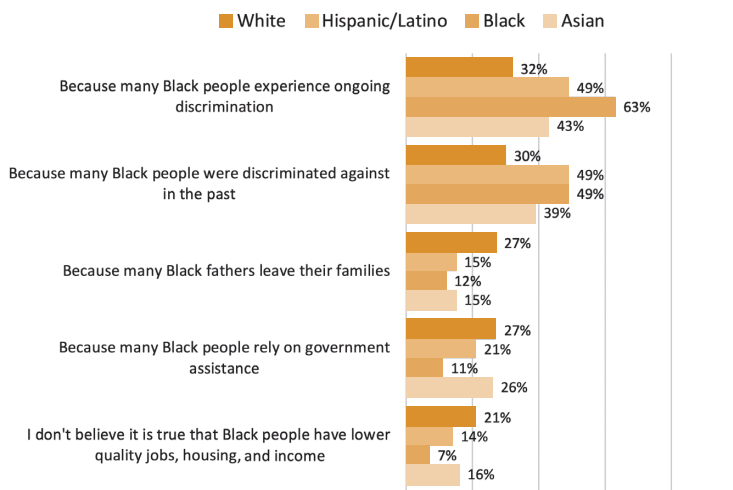
Unfortunately, almost everyone experiences prejudice and challenges throughout their life. Being picked on for being White in school is painful, and we should do everything we can to prevent that from happening. But it is important to recognize the difference between being picked on in school and experiencing a lifetime of systemic disadvantages in terms of employment, housing, education, and criminal justice. In this book, we focus on addressing structural racism because of the uniquely powerful ways that it hurts individuals, Christian organizations, and our society. We believe Christ's love and example should motivate us to especially focus on helping those who are experiencing the most intense levels of hardship and oppression (Matthew 25:31-46).

## EXPLANATIONS FOR RACIAL DISPARITIES

So far in this chapter, we have explained why we believe it is essential to have a structural understanding of racial dynamics in order to be effective faithful antiracists. But what percentage of Christians have a structural understanding? Let's look at some recent data. In our RRJP survey, we asked respondents why Black people have lower quality jobs, housing, and income than White people. Figure 1.9 shows some of the most common responses by Christians.

The first and second responses are examples of structuralist responses. The third and fourth responses are examples of non-structuralist responses. The fifth response is an example of denying that racial disparities exist.

Based on their responses to a variety of questions, we grouped Christians into the following five profiles. Individuals in the "lean structuralists"



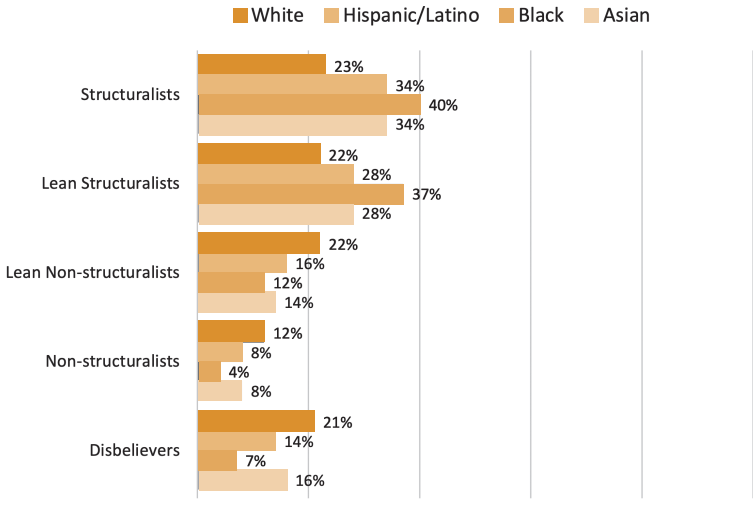
**Figure 1.9.** Responses by Christians why Black people have lower quality jobs, housing, and income than White people (RRJP Survey, July/Aug 2019, n=2797)

profile gave more structural responses than nonstructural. Individuals in the “lean non-structuralists” gave more non-structuralists responses than structuralists. We categorized individuals who denied that racial disparities exist as “disbelievers.”

As seen in figure 1.10, there was a large percentage of Christians in all racial groups who provided nonstructural explanations or denied the existence of racial disparities. That is a major barrier to Christians helping to address racial injustice. If we do not understand the problem, it is much more likely that we will continue to perpetuate it rather than helping to address it.

### ANTI-BLACK AND ANTI-INDIGENOUS RACISM

It is also important to recognize that racism in the United States has not impacted all people of color in the same way. Some assume that all people of color face the same types of structural disadvantages, and therefore make inaccurate assumptions about why Black people are at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. For example, they may believe “Black people and Asian people both face challenges due to racism, but Asian people have higher incomes and wealth. Therefore that shows that Asian people generally have a stronger work



**Figure 1.10.** Structuralists, lean structuralists, lean non-structuralists, non-structuralists, and disbelievers (Christians only) (RRJP Survey, July/Aug 2019, n=2797)

ethic.” This type of belief is based on the inaccurate assumption that Black and Asian individuals face the same types and intensities of challenges.

As we will see in chapters four and five, Black and Indigenous people have faced especially intense racial prejudice and structural disadvantages throughout our country’s history. This is referred to as anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism. We recommend watching the documentaries *Many Rivers to Cross*<sup>48</sup> and *We Shall Remain*<sup>49</sup> to learn about the history of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism in the United States. Some people choose to use the acronym BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) rather than “people of color” in order to make a distinction between the unique challenges faced by Black and Indigenous people and other people of color. Regardless of the terminology, it is important to acknowledge that people in different racial groups often experience different types and intensities of racism.

**SHOULD OTHER MORAL ISSUES TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER RACIAL INJUSTICE?**

We often hear comments like, “I agree that racial injustice is a problem, but I think other moral issues are a higher priority.” Here a few example comments from our surveys.

[Racial dynamics] ought to be addressed, but the church has other top priorities. (White, female, 50s)

I think there are other issues to be talked about. We all know race is an issue but there is more going on in the world—abuse, drugs, war, mental illness, trauma. . . . The church needs to talk about other things. (White, female, 20s)<sup>50</sup>

Should racial justice be a higher or a lower priority than other issues like “abuse, drugs, war, mental illness, trauma”? The following are some important things to keep in mind as we seek to answer that question.

***They are not independent.*** It is difficult to find a moral issue in the United States that is not affected by racism and the racial hierarchy. Passionate about lowering poverty? A person’s race is the most powerful predictor of whether a person will live in poverty.<sup>51</sup> Passionate about education? A person’s race has a powerful impact on the level of education they receive.<sup>52</sup> It is nearly impossible to make progress on any social issue without also understanding and addressing racial dynamics.

***We should emphasize moral issues that are emphasized in Scripture.*** As Christians, we must allow the Bible to shape our prioritization of moral issues. We hinder our effectiveness and witness when we make the minor major and the major minor. We will look at that more in chapter two.

***Our priorities should not be determined by our self-interests.*** If we are not personally suffering from injustice (or we are benefiting from it) it is easy to think, *That issue is not urgent.* As Christians, we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31), feel their pain, and prioritize what is important for them (1 Corinthians 12:26) even if it requires us to make sacrifices (Philippians 2:3).

## THE GIFTS OF LAMENT, CONFESSION, AND REPENTANCE

In this chapter, we have explored some difficult truths. As we learn about difficult truths, it’s easy for us to be defensive, deny their reality, or tune out the message. Our hope and prayer is that we will choose more beneficial responses such as lament, confession, and repentance. These are gifts that God has given us for dealing with the brokenness in our lives and society.

1. *Lament*: Expressing our grief and sorrow over the sin and brokenness in our lives and society
2. *Confession*: Acknowledging the sin in our lives and society
3. *Repentance*: Turning from the sin in our lives and society

Most Christians are familiar with the concept of personal confession for personal sins. But many Christians are not familiar with the idea of individual and communal confession for group sins (family, tribe, nation). The Bible encourages both individual and communal expressions of lament, confession, and repentance for both individual and group sins. As Soong-Chan Rah writes:

Personal and corporate confession is exemplified in Lamentations but also in the corporate laments found in the Psalms, 2 Chronicles 7:14, in the example of Nehemiah, Jeremiah 18:8, in the Gospel of John's use of cosmos, and 1 John 1:9.

Lamentations, therefore, does not limit the understanding of human brokenness exclusively to the realm of corporate responsibility or individual responsibility. Both corporate and personal expressions are necessary. Communal laments are offered on behalf of the entire community, but never lack a personal expression (see Jeremiah's individual confession on behalf of all of the people of God). In the same way, the expressions of individual lament are not spoken in isolation and do not operate separate from each other.<sup>53</sup>

When we are faced with difficult truths about our lives, groups, or society, we must avoid destructive responses such as shame and denial. In order to make progress, we must be willing to acknowledge our individual and group sins and take the restorative path of lament, confession, and repentance. Our grief can lead to growth and new life rather than death: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:10).

#### DISCUSSION/REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think you have *wisdom* (creativity, skill, expertise, and competence) in regard to racial dynamics?



2. We shared some reasons why Christians often have less accurate racial views and less motivation to address racial injustice than non-Christians. Do those reasons influence your understanding and motivation? If so, how?
3. Before reading this chapter, did you believe that racial disparities existed in the United States? If so, what did you believe caused them to exist?
4. We looked at the four common reasons people give for racial disparities (see below). Do you believe they provide an accurate explanation? Did this chapter affect your thinking? If so, how?
  - a. “\_\_\_ work harder than \_\_\_.”
  - b. “\_\_\_ have better morals than \_\_\_.”
  - c. “Data proves that \_\_\_.”
  - d. “I know someone who is \_\_\_ who \_\_\_.”
5. Should racial justice be a high priority for Christians? Why or why not?
6. How can lament, confession, and repentance help us to grow as faithful antiracists?
7. How do you plan to apply the content in this chapter?

#### **RECOMMENDED PRAYER**

*Thank you for the unique way you have created me and the unique experiences you have given me. Please help me to understand how I can apply the creativity, skill, and expertise that you have given me to work toward racial justice. If there are areas where I do not have an accurate understanding, please help me to have clarity.*

*I confess the actions that I have done that are contrary to your will in regard to racial justice.*

*(Take time for reflection.)*

*I confess the actions that the groups that I am a part of have done that are contrary to your will in regard to racial justice.*

*(Take time for reflection.)*

*I confess the actions of our nation that are contrary to your will in regard to racial justice.*

*(Take time for reflection.)*

*Help me to do my part to prevent similar actions from continuing into the future. Thank you for your unending grace and love and the freedom and forgiveness for individual and corporate sin that we can experience through Christ.*

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