



Texts in Context

“A Word to the Whites”: Whites Preaching about Racism in White Congregations

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The value in pulling racism out of its obscurity and stripping it of its rationalizations lies in the confidence that it can be changed.... The prescription for the cure rests with the accurate diagnosis of the disease. A people who began a national life inspired by a vision of a society of brotherhood can redeem itself. But redemption can come only through a humble acknowledgement of guilt and an honest knowledge of self.¹

—Martin Luther King Jr.

“As a white preacher, how can I proclaim the word of God to white persons such as myself, who may or may not realize their own complicity in the ongoing problem of racism in our society and in our churches?” This article is a brief response to this complicated question, as I have sought to answer it for myself and for the many other white preachers who struggle to address this complex issue.

“A Word to the Whites” is a pun on the phrase “a word to the wise,” meant to address whites like myself in our whiteness, and naming whites as a racial group, a naming that is essential in developing a positive racial identity and better relationships with persons from other racial groupings. The title is also a critique of the illusions of supremacy in which whites have consciously or subconsciously

¹Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos Or Community?* (Boston: Beacon, 2010) 88.

White preachers can help white congregants (and themselves) overcome racism by facing the problem directly and by communicating the great love of God for both the oppressor and the oppressed. At stake is nothing less than Christ's own ministry of reconciliation.

conflated being white with being wise, or with having the most to say about any particular subject. Third, I hope that this “word” to the whites would help preachers proclaim the word of God in a way that enables us to further understand the complicated situation regarding the continued existence of racism, and to see how we can further the work of Christ in breaking down the dividing walls of hostility.

RACE AWARENESS: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

In seminary, I reluctantly took a course that proved to be transformational in awakening me to the continued presence of sexism and racism, and my complicit role in such systems. Then I took more courses that enabled me to read the perspectives of feminist and womanist theologians, liberation theologians, gay and lesbian theologians, as well as others who pointed out to me the oppressive systems of classism, ageism, able-ism, and the many other ways our society “others” one another.

Upon graduating from seminary, I completed a yearlong CPE residency in Yuma, Arizona, a town that borders California and Mexico. Issues of immigration as well as the painful history of the treatment of indigenous Americans were regularly on my mind. During my year there, I ministered to persons picked up by border patrols in the desert after being abandoned by their “coyote.” I was a participant-observer in spiritual rituals with Native Americans who lost a loved one or prepared for surgery, and I consoled elderly “snowbirds” who came down in their large campers to spend the winter and did not anticipate a lengthy hospital stay. Throughout my experiences with Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, white baby boomers, and a few other members from racial-ethnic groups whom I met in the hospital, the dynamics of racism were easy to discern. While whites were in the minority, they were almost always in highest positions of power.

Experiencing so closely the borders of our society—both literally and figuratively—provided an interesting background for my return to the mainstream, serving the predominantly white congregation where I received my first call as a pastor. I served as an associate pastor at a mid-sized congregation in San Antonio, where our evangelistic attempts focused only on the growing parts of town rather than the nearby neighborhoods populated by poorer African Americans and Hispanics. The pastor’s son played basketball with several of his friends who were African American, and his friends were often included in youth mission trips, but the fear and suspicion of the members of the church towards these black teenagers, when they came to use our gym, was palpable. And yet this was a congregation I grew to love very deeply. A congregation so deeply beloved deserved to hear a word that could liberate it from its self-imposed alienation from much of the world, but I felt ill-equipped to provide such a word, particularly since I did not know the appropriate words for myself, or how to convey them in a way in which they could be well received.

From my own experience, I have noticed that messages about racism tend to evoke one of two reactions: an immediate raising of defenses, or an immobilizing sense of guilt. How, as a white preacher, do I begin to take account of these reactions, maneuvering through the varying levels of resistance among white congregants so as to enable an antiracist sermon to be heard effectively? This article issues from a longer thesis resulting from several years of ruminating on this question.

HOW TO HELP WHITES?

My experience has been that, among most white communities, talking about racism is considered taboo and inappropriate. Secretly, we hope that by ignoring the issue, we can continue to congratulate ourselves on our progress. Yet in listening to the stories of persons of color, we learn that racism still exists, and in fact our denial and ignorance enable racism to continue.

Still a classic in the field, Judith Katz's *White Awareness* (1978) was one of the earliest antiracism training handbooks.² The title itself demonstrates her emphasis throughout that racism is a white problem. To work against racism by "helping" persons of color is another way of perpetuating a paternalistic (and hence, racist) stance. In confronting the realities of racism and our complicity in it, white persons must in part be motivated for reasons relating to their own self-development, that is, a desire that stems from recognizing the ugliness of racism in one's own person and wanting to grow beyond its self-imposed limitations.

RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: WHAT IS IT?

To begin to understand how a person can more effectively confront racism, white preachers can turn to the theory of racial identity development. My primary sources have been two developmental psychologists, both African American women: Janet Helms of Boston College and Beverly Daniel Tatum, President of Spelman College. Helms has written extensively on racial identity development among whites and persons of color, identifying stages or statuses along a continuum that leads to a more mature and sophisticated understanding of one's racial identity.³ Beverly Daniel Tatum wrote an article in 1992 about the application of racial identity development theory in the classroom. In her article as well as her later books, she describes how, both for whites and persons of color, understanding the stages of racial identity development helped students stay engaged when discussing racism, when they otherwise would want to withdraw from the conversation altogether.⁴ Educating students ahead of time about the difficult emotions

²Judy H. Katz, *White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-Racism Training*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2003).

³Janet E. Helms, *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1990).

⁴Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Talking about Race, Learning about Racism: An Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom," *Harvard Educational Review* 62/1 (1992) 1–24.

they might experience was what helped them to accept those emotions when they recognized them and still work towards a healthier understanding of themselves and others, not giving up on talking about racism, but pressing on in hopes of gaining greater understanding and working to dismantle racism.

Preachers can employ similar educational tactics and can confront racism by understanding racial identity development and working towards their own antiracist white identity. To encourage white congregants to address the realities of racism and to address racism more faithfully from the pulpit, the preacher should be journeying along with the congregation, working on her own antiracist white identity.

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To help visualize how the stages of racial identity formation may function in the work of the preacher, I have incorporated material from the works of Philip Wogaman and Christine Smith—two homileticians who write from the perspective of white persons preaching predominantly to other whites about racism. Christine Smith confronts white preachers with the realities of racism and other forms of oppression, offering messages that challenge the unconscious construction of white identity held by many congregants, accomplishing this through placing strong emphasis on the role of whites (even well-meaning whites) in perpetuating racism.⁵

Philip Wogaman emphasizes that controversial subjects in sermons must involve a deeply pastoral commitment: that each human being is of extreme value and worth to God—both the oppressed and the oppressor.⁶ In order for the preacher to communicate this great love of God, the preacher herself must love the congregation authentically and preach with that love in mind. This message is crucial for preaching about racism in white congregations, where persons are learning about white privilege and beginning to feel guilt and shame about participating in a racist system. To stay engaged in this process, as well as to move beyond these immobilizing emotions, congregants need to feel that the preacher authentically embodies this love.

THE STAGES OF WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Despite the fact that race itself is an illusion—there is no biological evidence for race or the theory of distinct, genetically similar races—persons in this country and in other parts of the world are stereotyped based on the perception of racial

⁵Christine M. Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

⁶J. Philip Wogaman, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Prophetic Preaching to a Broken World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

distinctions.⁷ Because these stereotypes have very real implications for members of socially constructed racial groupings, it is vital to understand how one comes to view oneself as a member of a “race.” This is true in the case of whites, as persons who may not even feel they have a race, yet who have benefited from a long history of social structures that have privileged persons on the basis of having white skin.

For whites, the stages of racial identity development described by Helms and Tatum include: contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, immersion, and autonomy. Movement to a nonracist white identity takes multiple moments of conversion, moving from one stage to another. At the same time, these statuses are not static—you do not stay in one stage, but can rather go back multiple times to earlier stages of development. Helms describes these stages as worldviews, or prominent modes of thinking. When your thinking shifts because of an encounter or pressure to conform and to stop talking about racism, you may regress to an earlier mode of thinking.

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Stage One: Contact

This process begins when a white individual first comes into contact with persons of color. In much of suburban America, the racial homogeneity of neighborhoods and racial discrimination in housing makes it easy for many whites to grow up knowing few if any persons of color. A white person at this stage generally lacks experiences of real engagement with persons of color.⁸ Comments Tatum received in classes were that white students viewed themselves as “just normal.” They did not see themselves as having a race, nor were they aware of ongoing racism. In the preaching context, the white preacher may assume that many in her predominantly white congregation may be at this first stage. The fact that the church itself is highly homogenous testifies to the discomfort many white congregants feel towards building relationships with persons of color.

Stage Two: Disintegration

Stage two involves losing one’s positive view of oneself by recognizing the implications of being a member of the white, dominant racial group in a racist society. As whites begin learning about the realities of racism, they enter this stage when they experience the cognitive dissonance between how they *perceive* the state of race relations and the *reality* of racial discrimination. Discovering unearned benefits and privileges accredited to whites can create significant inner conflict for

⁷For an excellent resource on this, see the DVD by Larry Adelman, *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 2003).

⁸Helms, *Black and White Racial Identity*, 55–58.

the white person. This process is painful; disorientation and confusion result for many whites upon realizing their own complicity in and ignorance about racism. It can be uncomfortable for white persons to become aware that they are guilty of daily offenses of “microaggression” against persons of color, offhand comments or responses that are unintentional but nevertheless perpetuate a cultural racism.⁹

Stage Three: Reintegration

Helms defines the third stage as reintegration, which is a regression. The white person responds to the disorienting sense of guilt experienced in the disintegration stage by “reintegrating” previous understandings of whiteness and adapting to the status quo. Possible responses include avoiding future interactions with persons of color if at all possible or trying to learn from blacks or other whites why it is that racism is not really a white problem. The perceived superiority of whites over nonwhites is maintained, and the white person alleviates the cognitive dissonance by turning negative emotions away from the self and onto nonwhites. The white person responds by further distancing him or herself from persons of color, or might actively express hostility through racial discrimination or racist jokes. While reintegration is clearly not a positive move, it is important to recognize that it is a common part of the developmental process in order to help persons move beyond it. As the preacher exposes the stage of reintegration as a predictable but negative reaction to learning about racism, the preacher can challenge white congregants to remain engaged in the learning process, for experiencing shame and guilt is not the final goal, nor is denial or abdication of one’s duty to address injustice.

Stage Four: Pseudo-Independent

The pseudo-independent stage involves white persons accepting that they are white and understanding the political and societal advantages held by whites.¹⁰ However, the individual is most likely to intellectualize this criticism. She is not yet ready to have real relationships with persons of color. The white person in the pseudo-independent stage may still wonder whether the reason for the existence of racism can be found in the perceived negative traits of nonwhite cultures, basing these judgments on the self-referential paradigm of white cultural supremacy. Hence, while the pseudo-independent white individual may feel convicted of the immorality of racism emotionally and intellectually, behaviorally she may still exhibit symptoms of a racist system.¹¹

Stage Five: Immersion

In the fifth stage, immersion, the white individual learns more about the real-

⁹For more information on “microaggressions,” see Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010).

¹⁰A good resource for this is Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in *Re-Visioning Family Therapy: Race, Culture and Gender in Clinical Practice*, ed. Monica McGoldrick (New York: Guilford, 1998).

¹¹Helms, *Black and White Racial Identity*, 61–62.

ities of racism, as well as the history of other whites who have fought for civil liberties for all persons. Additionally, the white person immerses himself in the wealth of available scholarship from persons of color, scholarship frequently kept outside the dominant mainstream of educational curricula. Reading such scholarship and learning about the history of the fight for civil liberties enables the white person to imagine himself part of the effort as well, seeing himself as one of the many allies in the fight against racism and other forms of oppression, not in order to help persons of color, which is another form of patronization, but in order to promote awareness among other whites, perhaps sharing the stories of the antiracist white allies who have gone on before.¹²

Stage Six: Autonomy

The final stage in Helms's theory is labeled "autonomy," designating an autonomous position over against the culture of white supremacy and an active seeking of ways to resist it. The stage is best summarized in her words:

Internalizing, nurturing, and applying the new definition of whiteness evolved in the earlier stages are major *goals* of the Autonomy stage. In this stage, the person no longer feels a need to oppress, idealize, or denigrate people on the basis of group membership characteristics such as race because *race no longer symbolizes threat*....[T]he Autonomous person actively seek[s] opportunities to learn from other cultural groups. One also finds him or her actively becoming increasingly aware of how other forms of oppression are related to racism and acting to eliminate [these injustices] as well....It is a process wherein the person is continually open to new information and new ways of thinking about racial and cultural variables.¹³

Again, this process is not strictly linear—persons can return to previous stages as they go through life, as a result of difficult interactions. Persons may not always be thinking at their highest levels, but may resort to lower levels of racial understanding in response to conflict.

Christine Smith provides helpful advice to the preacher and the congregant who are willing to engage the process of dismantling racism. She asserts that the role of whites today is to remain in the mystery of uncertainty, not trying to "fix" the problem of whiteness, but continuing to engage in learning more about racism. Smith urges whites to recognize that one continues to perpetuate racism unintentionally, thus allowing others to call our "lives into question...allowing one's self to be challenged and changed."¹⁴ Remaining humble about one's race consciousness can help an individual continue to engage the process of racial identity development, rather than feeling as though one has "arrived." In Smith's words I hear echoes of the theological understanding of salvation and redemption being an "already—not yet" phenomenon: that we are already saved and redeemed through

¹²Ibid., 62.

¹³Ibid., 62–66, emphasis mine.

¹⁴Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance*, 134.

Christ, but we have not yet seen the fulfillment of that redemption. Whites need to keep in mind that even as they seek to become antiracist allies, they continue to be involved in racist systems that must be challenged.

The most socially transformative preacher of our time, Martin Luther King Jr., advocated discussing racism, not to instill pessimism but to raise awareness in order to work towards its possible disarmament. In his final book, when he speaks of his vision of the “beloved community,” he urges white Americans to engage in the discussion on racism so that it can no longer hide behind our ignorance. King suggested that in order for citizens of this country to live out fully the meaning of equality, racism must be exposed as an existing part of our social relations so that it may be faced directly and honestly. To attribute racism only to those whose comments or actions are overtly racist enables racism to hide behind the behavior of well-meaning whites. King advocates a “humble acknowledgement of guilt and an honest knowledge of self” as necessary for all whites to begin the process of “redemption” from racism.¹⁵

To help us understand how whites can come to a “humble acknowledgement of guilt and an honest knowledge of self,” this article has introduced the work of developmental psychologists Janet Helms and Beverly Daniel Tatum in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of preaching that is informed by racial identity development theory. Preaching with an awareness of racial identity development theory can *expose* the continued problem of racism in predominantly white congregations and *envision* a new reality by helping individuals work towards an antiracist white racial identity, no longer denying the reality of racism and instead feeling empowered to fight it. Congregations must not remain as they are; through segregation and discrimination whites have rejected what Christ has done in his ministry of reconciliation. In order to embrace a more diverse image of the body of Christ, whites must come first to accept their whiteness and then to learn about new ways of being white. Racial identity development provides preachers with a description for this otherwise uncharted territory of moving from ignorance of racism to acknowledging guilt, and moving beyond guilt towards acts of justice and kindness. ⊕

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¹⁵King, *Where Do We Go from Here?* 88.