

The Cheap Grace of White Privilege and the Costly Grace of Repentant Antiracism

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When I've attended white privilege summits and spoken about my own white privilege in the white spaces of white churches, it's clear that the mood shifts—and some participants explicitly object—when we turn from discussing white *privilege* to its necessarily correlate, white *supremacy*. Many of us who have been raised to believe ourselves white¹ can be convinced that we benefit from unjust racial hierarchies; yet when those hierarchies of human value² are named “white supremacy,” we quickly dissociate, qualify, or tap-out altogether. But certainly we live in a white supremacist culture—a culture that extends a sometimes subtle but everywhere systematic preferential option for those called white, and that does so not only in comparison with, but also by virtue of, the more limited protections for, as well as state-supported or extralegal violence against, people and communities of color.

I am making final revisions to this essay one week after the murder of George Floyd. Today, the day after Christians commemorated the movement of the Holy Spirit through raging wind and tongues of fire, fires burn in Minneapolis and protests rage throughout our country. The uprisings are cries of pain for over 400 years of slavery, disenfranchisement, *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, lynching, mass-incarceration, and a carceral state that wields its lethal violence largely to protect the property of white people like me.

I'm writing this from the safety of my home, and from the protection of a white supremacist culture and as a privileged beneficiary of that culture. The fact that I am working from home while others risk their lives as “essential” (disposable) workers or

1. The phrasing is from Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 11.

2. This was the preferred phrasing of the 2019 Institute on Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation, which convened at Villanova University, June 25–28, and which I attended as a member of my campus team under the leadership of Dr. Monica Smith, Augustana's Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

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while protesting in the streets or while running—or birdwatching-while-black—shows that I am a privileged beneficiary of a white supremacist culture. The fact that I can choose whether or not to recognize my privilege is evidence of that privilege. I think about our white supremacist culture and my own white privilege frequently, but actively repent from and seek to dismantle them in order to become an anti-racist ally infrequently, although I pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to fan these flames.

In what follows, I juxtapose contemporary culture wars over white privilege with the critique of Lutheran espousals of cheap grace. I do this to show that invocations of “free grace” can be used ideologically to justify the status quo no less than the meritocratic works-righteousness they seek to upend. Christians must continuously interrogate the use of grace to ask who benefits from it. Second, I pair broader Lutheran theological staples (bondage to sin, the call to repentance, a theology of the cross, and kenotic discipleship) with leading black prophetic voices and analyses of white privilege. I do so to argue that self-reflective Lutherans and other Christians are well-positioned to live into costly grace by hearing and heeding the call to become anti-racist disciples of Jesus.

Grace and privilege in an alleged meritocracy

Clifton Mark recently wrote an online article titled, “Meritocracy doesn't exist, and believing it is bad for you.” He notes just how

widespread in white U.S. culture is the ideology that people get what they earn and deserve what they get. The irony, though, is that the belief in meritocracy undercuts itself. It leads, in his words, to:

the kinds of inequalities that it aims to eliminate.... Explicitly adopting meritocracy as a value convinces subjects of their own moral bona fides. Satisfied that they are just, they become less inclined to examine their own behavior for signs of prejudice...As with any ideology, part of its draw is that it justifies the status quo, explaining why people belong where they happen to be in the social order.³

What is the alternative to belief in meritocracy? According to the author, knowing oneself as just plain lucky rather than deserving might better cultivate the self-critical consciousness necessary for social justice.

Considering one's privilege is another way around belief in merit. However, as soon as one dons a t-shirt with the simple phrase, "got privilege?" on it, one finds oneself enlisted in divisive culture wars. Like luck, the privileges with which one is born, especially the intersecting privileges of white, cis-gender, straight, able-bodied male Christians like me, are not something that we have earned or otherwise deserve. But unlike glib acceptance of having been born lucky, to ask about privilege is also to acknowledge that certain legal and dominant cultural systems have been created and sustained for the benefit of particular people and not for others. The recognition of privilege demands a repentant response by those so privileged.

Accordingly, the simple question, "got privilege?" feels threatening to the beneficiaries of that privilege. Many mount defensive responses, some by wearing their own t-shirts with thinly veiled racist charges of reverse racism, such as one that says this: "White privilege is being held responsible for the actions of your ancestors, by people who accept no responsibility for the actions of their children." Other t-shirts redirect attention to the political correctness or "sensitivities" of victims, such as one announcing: "I Am VERY Privileged. Get over it." Still others suggest that those with privilege are the ones in need of affirmation, given a perceived "assault" on whiteness. One of them modeled online by a blond woman in sunglasses reads: "IT'S OKAY TO BE WHITE."⁴

Where does a theological account of God's unmerited grace

3. Clifton Mark, "Meritocracy doesn't exist, and believing it is bad for you," *Fast Company*, March 13, 2019, available at: <https://www.fastcompany.com/40510522/meritocracy-doesnt-exist-and-believing-it-does-is-bad-for-you>

4. As with the counter-slogan, "All Lives Matter," the saying "It's okay to be white" is true in the abstract but malicious in its function. Under the cover of a more objective, universal ethic of care, it deflects attention from the victims of systemic racism, redirecting concern to those made uncomfortable by the exposure of their privilege. These t-shirts, and a fascinating array of others, can be found online by searching for "privilege" and "t-shirt."

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and justification by God apart from human effort and desert fit with contemporary contests about white privilege, luck, and merit? Martin Luther's proclamation of free grace was, of course, a direct critique of the sanctioned socio-religious meritocracy of his own time and place. To many Lutherans today, a theology of "free grace" seems extractable from Luther's context and directly importable to our own. The whole debate over human work versus justification by grace through faith seems like a conceptual or doctrinal dispute that need not attend to the systems of power that create belief in meritocracy in the first place. Yet, beginning already in his "95 Theses," Luther carefully attends to how language of human work, salvation, and grace *function*; he asks *who benefits* and *what power is legitimated* by their use. Immediately after Luther critiques the ideological justifications of the status quo through the sanctioned meritocracy of the Church, he also critiques the ideological justifications of other "evangelical" (Lutheran) Christians who take their ease with faith and grace.

In other words, because Luther attends to the function of grace, grace as proclaimed and lived out, rather than to some stable doctrinal meaning, he unequivocally names the perverse possibility that, after receiving the gift of grace, so-called Christians "will take our ease and do no works and be content with faith."⁵ Other Lutherans continue this intra-Lutheran critique of what Bonhoeffer calls cheap grace. Søren Kierkegaard narrates the slippage from Luther's emphasis on grace as it incites repentant striving to grace as ideological cover for our self-satisfaction, which enables us to "become Christian as cheaply as possible."⁶ Bonhoeffer's account

5. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian" (1520), trans. W. A. Lambert, *Luther's Works*, volume 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 358.

6. Many "want to become Christian as cheaply as possible," Kierkegaard says. This mentality abstracts from Luther's thought and the whole arc of his life a commodified doctrine of grace through faith and proclaims how "Excellent! [Now] this is something for us." We'll latch onto this doctrine—"and so we are free from all works—long live Luther!" Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self Examination*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1990),

is similar: “what emerged victorious from Reformation history was not Luther’s recognition of pure, costly grace, but the alert religious instinct...for the place where grace could be had the cheapest.”⁷

If more t-shirts of our culture wars are any indication, invocations of having “got grace” continue to deflect questions of privilege, transmuted its charge of injustice into the justness of God’s favor. “Grace” (as with the popular material signs of having been “blessed”) can forestall responsible action with the assertion that everything is good the way it is. The invocation of free grace becomes cheap grace whenever it is used to further secure privileged individuals, justifying their religious-racial power apart from just social relations.

Undoing white privilege

Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously opened *Discipleship* with the stark distinction between costly grace and cheap grace. He sharply contrasts the grace that cost Jesus his life and that continues to bid Christians to “come and die,” with “grace” that offers license and latitude, “grace” as ideological justification for refusing to hear and respond to Jesus’ call to radical discipleship. Whereas cheap grace means “bargain-basement goods” and “cut-rate” forgiveness and comfort—each “doled out by careless hands” from the church’s “inexhaustible pantry,” costly grace is the hidden treasure in the field or the costly pearl, for which people sell all to go and find (Matt 13:44-45). While cheap grace is an idea, doctrine, principle, or system—essentially, an *abstraction* that denies God’s intimacy with bodies of all kinds—costly grace “*is the incarnation of God.*” It is costly because it calls a person to leave her prior life behind; it is grace, though, “because it calls [her] to follow *Jesus Christ.*” Whereas cheap grace is forgiveness without repentance, absolution without confession of sin, and baptism without “the discipline of community,” costly grace holds each of these together, as well as suffering, death, and cross together with the joy and blessedness of new life.⁸

A final contrast between cheap and costly grace points to the deep resonance between cheap grace and white privilege. Cheap grace promises comfort and security to the one “in possession” of it; it justifies sin but leaves the sinner untouched. By comparison, and in the words of Adam Clayton Powell, Bonhoeffer’s black pastor in Harlem, costly grace knows that humans “need to be done over, but [they] cannot be done over until they are undone.”⁹

The resonance between cheap grace and a white Christianity that is unwilling to be undone and redone is not a-historical or merely conceptual. As Reggie Williams so artfully shows, Bonhoeffer’s eventual resistance to Nazi persecution of Jews depends on his having recognized and repented from the interlocking ideologies of Christian supersessionism and white supremacy. Bonhoeffer was

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able to learn such resistance, to unlearn (at least in part) his own racism, and to come to discern the will of God from the underside of history only by stepping out of his own white, privileged spaces. In the academic year of 1930-31, Bonhoeffer came to Harlem; he worked beside black youth at Abyssinian Baptist church; he felt convicted by the preaching of Adam Clayton Powell of Abyssinian Baptist Church; he learned prayerful lament through black spirituals, and he read and reflected on Harlem Renaissance literature and theology. In short, *Bonhoeffer got woke in Harlem.*

His later scathing critique of cheap grace was not only an intra-Lutheran, intra-white argument, but also the reception and reiteration of what the American black church showed him. Costly grace empowered him to follow-after a black Christ, a Christ who is known only in and through the marginalized and oppressed. That grace is costly because it calls people like Bonhoeffer and me and others to leave their white privilege behind, a departure that will undo much of what we have become. It is grace, though, “because it calls us to follow *Jesus*” and to come to new life in and through a beloved community.

As Lenny Duncan so frankly reminds us, the ELCA is “the whitest denomination in the United States.”¹⁰ How does a white church, and we who teach at historically, predominantly, and persistently white institutions, repent from—turn from—the white supremacy and white privilege in which so many of us have been schooled, and from which we receive a legion of cultural and material benefits? How might we follow the challenge posed by womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas to step out of our own cherished white spaces to be where Jesus is?¹¹ How can those spaces cease to be white,¹² become spaces in which people of color thrive and where white folk get re-formed into antiracist disciples?

16-17.

7. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 49.

8. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 43-45, 87-89; emphases added.

9. Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco, Texas: Baylor UP, 2014), 96.

10. Lenny Duncan, *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019).

11. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2015), 201.

12. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “A Place to Appear: Ecclesiology as if Bodies Mattered,” *Theology Today* 64 (2007), 167.

Lutheran theology as antiracist practice

The discipline and discipleship of recognizing white privilege and divesting from it will look different in different contexts. Lutherans, though, have certain theological commitments that can and should expose white supremacy and pull us toward engaging in anti-racist work.¹³

Bondage to systemic sin

First, Lutheran Christians should join others in diagnosing racism as a structural evil because Lutherans believe in the bondage of sin. When our churches baptize babies and renounce the power of sin and death and the devil and all of his ways, we should call to mind white supremacy, as well as patriarchy, heteronormativity, xenophobia, and other structural evils. Lutherans understand sin at full stretch—not only as that which an individual chooses to do, but also that which we are born into and which “does” us.

Almost every study of structural racism in our so-called “colorblind society” sees things similarly. American dominant society assumes that people are only responsible for what they consciously do as individuals, individuals unfettered with history and as abstracted from the structural powers and principalities that shape them. We want to reduce racism to a personal choice. White supremacists choose to wear hoods or chant slogans in Charlottesville; the rest of us are innocent, or so we’d like to believe. Lutheran Christians and anti-racists (and Lutheran anti-racists) know this to be false. Hear the way Lenny Duncan writes about the systemic, trans-personal sin of racism:

The enemy’s greatest illusion is the belief that radical evil doesn’t exist. If you are reading this as a white person in this country, you probably believe you aren’t racist....[True] most folks aren’t actively racist. But you are passively participating in the spiritual and economic enslavement of every person of color in this church.¹⁴

Duncan urges his own ELCA church to exorcize the sin into which people like me are born and which we passively participate in and benefit from. He likens that exorcism to the way of costly grace: “Again I’ll say it: this is a dangerous experiment. But so is Christianity. If we don’t somehow find the moral courage to face systemic racism, name it as demonic, and have a proper exorcism,

13. Lutheran denominations also have a special responsibility to do this work precisely because they are so white, and because the concept of race, which is born from racism, was itself born from a Christian supersessionistic mindset that Luther explicitly advanced: “When modern European racialized continents... the racializing process worked in tandem with a European supersessionistic worldview that made Europe, not Israel, the center of God’s creative and salvific purpose in the world,” to the point where “Christian redemption became synonymous with assimilation into the community of God’s chosen people—the European body of Christ.” Williams, *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*, 46-47, drawing on Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010).

14. Duncan, *Dear Church*, 16.

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we will continue to be attacked by a legion of problems.”¹⁵

Ta-Nehisi Coates likewise diagnoses the manifold myths of dominant white America—what he refers to simply as “the Dream”—as turning continually on “the lie of innocence,” on the “façade of morality,” and on a “politics of personal exoneration.” The lie of innocence *is* the Dream, according to Coates. It is a dream “conjured by historians,” and “fortified by Hollywood.”¹⁶

The late James Cone repeatedly made the point that, while the more obvious victims of the sin of white supremacy are people of color, white oppressors are also bound by and to their own oppression, and thus are also in need of salvation. Cone notes that King lived with the daily threat of death not only because he considered it a sacrifice for his black brothers and sisters, but also for the redemption of whites. Says King, “If physical death is the price I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from the permanent death of the spirit, then nothing could be more redemptive.”¹⁷

Coates, too, understands that whites do not live free until we “repent of our whiteness,” though he remains “convinced that the Dreamers, at least the Dreamers of today, would rather live white than live free.”¹⁸ Duncan is equally emphatic about the need for the liberation of whites alongside people of color from the structural sin of white supremacy. He is aware of the high cost of that liberation:

To actively work with me in lockstep to bring about justice and equity to my people—that’s going to cost you. That may cost you everything. You may have to

15. *Ibid.*, 47.

16. Coates, *Between the World*, 36, 97, 102.

17. James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2011), 82.

18. Coates, *Between the World*, 143.

lay aside years of beliefs and practices. You may have to give up your very grip on world history and your place in it. You may have to share or give up real power. Yet it's not just my freedom you are risking it all for, but also your own. *You are just as trapped* by the effects of chattel slavery and the broken cycles it has set in motion in our nation and church.¹⁹

The lifelong work of repentance

The second Lutheran staple informing antiracist discipleship is a necessary corollary to the first. The easy and cheap response to knowing oneself as bound to sin is to know oneself as entirely dependent on God's grace *and then to deduce from this* that no work, not even the work of repentance, characterizes a graced life. Grace is seen as the alternative not only to works righteousness but to the work of repentance itself. For example, many assume that Luther first critiqued the sale of indulgences for demanding too much of Christians, thereby pitting "free grace" against human effort and striving. On my reading of Luther's objections, the commodification of indulgences curtail *not only* God's grace, *but also* human striving; it cheapens *both*, making *both* into quantifiable goods that can be exchanged, transferred, or withdrawn. The first thesis announces that "when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed *the entire life of believers* to be one of repentance."²⁰ Uncoupling Christ's command from a codified system of exchange demands a whole life of turning around. Grace calls us to do and be more than any spiritual booking can register.

Critical whiteness theorists such as Jennifer Harvey²¹ or Robin DiAngelo make a similar case about the repentant work of antiracism. DiAngelo is aware of all the ways that white guilt, taken in and of itself, typically functions to maintain the status quo. She quotes an address by Audre Lorde speaking to white women in 1981:

I cannot hide my anger to spare your [white] guilt ... for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of actions.... All too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.²²

The proper response to guilt—or to sin, which is more accurate, less self-deflecting language—is active repentance and

19. Duncan, *Dear White Church*, 48; italics added.

20. Martin Luther, "The Ninety-Five Theses (1517)," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, second ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 40-46.

21. Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2014).

22. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon, 2018), 148-149.

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resistance. DiAngelo, a white anti-racist, says that she strives to be "less white."²³ She explains:

To be less white is to be less racially oppressive. This requires me to be more racially aware, to be better educated about racism, and to continually challenge racial certitude and arrogance. To be less white is to be open to, interested in, and compassionate toward the racial realities of people of color... To be less white is to break with white silence and white solidarity, to stop privileging the comfort of white people over the pain of racism for people of color, to move past guilt into action.²⁴

DiAngelo concludes by noting that such a turning from the sin of white supremacy is not about being a white savior, but about working out her *own* salvation. In her own secular-theological language, "I strive for a less white identity for my own liberation and sense of justice, not to save people of color."²⁵

A theology of the crucified

Third, there is a deep connection (historical and otherwise) between Luther's theology of the cross, especially as recovered and reconstructed by twentieth-century feminist Lutheran theologians, and the repeated claim of black liberation and womanist theologians that the presence and power of God is revealed in black bodies such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Trayvon Martin, and others within the "crucified class of people."

Some of the connections between those famous Theses 19 through 22 of Luther's 1518 Heidelberg Disputation and God's preferential option for black bodies remain striking. Compare, for example, Luther's assertion that "God can be found only in

23. *Ibid.*, 150. Coates also associates whiteness with dominance per se: "the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, 'white people' would cease to exist for want of reason" (Coates, *Between the World*, 42).

24. DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 150.

25. *Ibid.*

suffering and the cross,”²⁶ with Kelly Brown Douglas’s assertion that “God is where the crucified are.”²⁷ In both cases, crosses and lynchings and other human suffering primarily signify not atoning self-sacrifice, but rather theology proper—who God is, who God through Christ identifies with, and how one comes to know this God. So long as privileged people traffic in theological abstractions that are projected from their own privileged places—for Luther, these abstractions include “virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth” (Thesis 19)—they miss God as God chooses to be revealed: in those who suffer and are crucified, the very victims of white supremacy.

That God must reveal Godself in such foolish and offensive ways remains critical. Without the scandalous revelation, so-called Christians will remain blinded by their white privilege, ignorant of both their sin and of God. According to Tim Wise, Peggy McIntosh, and quite literally every other white privilege theorist, one clear sign of privilege is a learned ignorance about it.²⁸ Privileged people don’t have to think about their privilege if they don’t want to. They can opt out and continue to assume their relative innocence. Likewise, the whole of Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation is about the epistemological consequences of sin. To not recognize one’s sin is to be thoroughly embroiled in it, adding sin upon sin. Needed, again, is a scandalous revelation of God that people with cultural-political power cannot confuse with their own projected self-images. People like me will get the God of Jesus, the God of George Floyd wrong if we do not manage to leave our cherished white spaces long enough to be where God is, with those whose lands are seized and “settled” under a doctrine of discovery and whose bodies are incarcerated *en masse*.

Social justice as second righteousness

Douglas names the costliness of the grace of Jesus: “The challenge for white churches is to step out of the space of cherished white property to be where Jesus is, with the crucified class of people.”²⁹ This call for whites to divest themselves of white power and privilege brings us to a final parallel with central Lutheran themes. We return here to the heart of the matter—to Luther’s understanding of grace, or what he preferred to call justification through God’s gracious regard, or a person’s righteousness as instilled by Christ and lived out before the neighbor in need.

I’ve already quoted Luther’s early concern in *Freedom of a Christian* that Christians will take their ease with grace and use it as

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permission *not* to be a disciple. True Christian freedom is freedom from having to earn one’s righteousness, true, but that freedom paradoxically and persistently redoubles as freedom for others in solidarity and service. A similar simultaneous redoubling characterizes Luther’s 1519 sermon, “Two Kinds of Righteousness”:

The first righteousness (or God’s grace) is “instilled from without.” But once grace has become “ours,” we should “work with it,” or help bring about its natural “product,” “fruit,” and “consequence.”³⁰

This suggests that the natural, ineluctable flowering of God’s “alien” grace is a second, “proper” form of righteousness as the would-be Christian lives into just relationships with others. Indeed, the “others” with whom the justified one is in right relations cease to be something “other.” Once a person receives grace, “then the soul no longer seeks to be righteous *in and for itself*; but it has Christ as its righteousness and *therefore* seeks only the welfare of others.”³¹

In other words, God’s free gift of grace interrupts a person’s fearful desire to be righteous alone—“in and for itself.” God’s unmerited grace changes the way “individuals” live out who they are. (This is especially important in the United States’ individualistic, allegedly meritocratic culture.) They are finally free from their self-enclosing bondage to individual merit and the bargain goods of whiteness in order to be who they are called to be in and through a just community.

Luther calls this second form of righteousness one’s proper righteousness. Samuel Torvend, noting that it characterizes the justice of communities and the common good rather than the righteousness of individuals, renames it “social righteousness.”³² Social justice seems just as good a word.

26. Martin Luther, Heidelberg Disputation (1518), in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, second ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 57 (thesis 20).

27. Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 193.

28. Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*. The Remix: Revised and Updated Edition (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press / Counterpoint, 2011), 2; Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in *Peace and Freedom*, July/August, 1989, 12 (as excerpted from Peggy McIntosh, working paper: “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondence through Work in Women’s Studies”).

29. Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 201.

30. Martin Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness” (1519), trans. Lowell J. Satre, *Luther’s Works*, volume 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg), 299-300.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Samuel Torvend, *Luther and the Hungry Poor: Gathered Fragments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 50, 85.

Both *Freedom of a Christian* and “Two Kinds of Righteousness” have Philippians 2 as their subtext. In receiving grace without possessing it, in receiving it and then simultaneously emptying oneself of its status and privilege for the benefit of the neighbor, Christian communities have the same mind among them as is in the mind of Jesus, whose own status with God was not grasped or possessed but rather emptied out in radical solidarity with the crucified class. As Paul and the early Luther see it, Christ’s self-emptying serves and saves, but does so as it redoubles in the kenotic discipleship of those who follow after him. For white Christians, such kenosis means becoming less white. It means learning to release the false power and privilege that we believe secures our identities, but which actually possesses us, blinds us, and protects us from the grace of justice.

Douglas’ account of Jesus’ life and death also echoes the Christ Hymn, and with it, Luther’s early musings on emptying oneself into the work of justice. She writes of Jesus as the “New Exodus”—as one “who departs the space of the privileged class.”³³ Jesus “fully divests himself of all pretensions to power, privilege, and exceptionalism.”³⁴ Determinative is his “free and steadfast identification with crucified bodies.”³⁵ Jesus enters Samaritan space. He leaves his own cherished male Jewish spaces to be with the bodies of Samaritan women. He “lets go”³⁶ of anything that would compromise absolute allegiance with those whose marginalization and exploitation would otherwise fuel his privilege. Their salvation does not depend on assimilating to his world; rather Jesus’ wholeness and the wholeness of Israel and the church depends on their crossing of boundaries, on leaving white spaces, on listening and learning from others.

Conclusion: The costly grace of repentance

Bonhoeffer writes that cheap grace is forgiveness without repentance. Luther from the start makes clear that God’s grace doesn’t make things easier but calls one to lifelong repentance. Both pair discipleship with repentance; following Jesus entails a letting go, a willingness to allow one’s self-secured status to “be undone.” Adam Clayton Powell, the black Baptist preacher who helps Bonhoeffer recognize and repent from his own white privilege, says that repentance will be painful: “No one has ever turned from sin until he has felt the evil effects of sin so keenly that he [or she] cries with Isaiah: ‘Woe is me for I am undone.’”³⁷ Bonhoeffer experienced that pain as he woke when returning to Germany from Harlem, as he gradually but faithfully turned from the supersessionism and white supremacy of his German culture in order to be with those who are scapegoated, and so also with Jesus through them. The grace he experienced is costly, and it eventually cost him his life.

We who believe ourselves white and call ourselves Christian are called to be turned, to undergo conversion, to be made undone. ... We must instead humbly submit ourselves to undergo the monotonous, difficult process of unlearning white privilege and undoing our racist dispositions. That will be painful insofar as we have confused privilege with power and grace.

But repentant discipleship *is* grace—the very presence of God.

I end this essay by underscoring this connection between discipleship and repentance in order to resist a “white savior complex” when imaging the work that is before white people. Too often we understand people such as Bonhoeffer as bravely giving up what is rightfully theirs, as heroically standing with those beneath them. I have learned from Reggie Williams and others that the real agent in Bonhoeffer’s conversion and costly discipleship was not he, but rather God through Jesus through Harlem’s black church. Bonhoeffer answered his call to repentance when others would not have; perhaps he can be “credited” in part with that “work.” But the “work” is an undergoing, a suffering.

We who believe ourselves white and call ourselves Christian are called to be turned, to undergo conversion, to be made undone. If we answer this call, I and other white, privileged beneficiaries of a white supremacist culture won’t choose to sacrifice what is rightfully ours, nor will we unilaterally decide to become antiracist. We must instead humbly submit ourselves to undergo the monotonous, difficult process of unlearning white privilege and undoing our racist dispositions. That will be painful insofar as we have confused privilege with power and grace. As Toni Morrison suggests: “Anything dead coming back to life hurts.”³⁸ But there will be deep joy there, too—a joy that far surpasses the cheap and easy comfort that is predicated on the anguish of others. We should call it grace.

33. Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 176.

34. *Ibid.*, 177.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.* Douglas here borrows from Rosemary Radford Ruether, “A U.S. Theology of Letting Go,” in *The Emergence of Liberation Theologies*, ed. Thia Cooper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

37. As cited in Williams, *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*, 96.

38. Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 42.