Talking on the Road to Emmaus: A Paradigm for Deconstructing Racial Hierarchies and Contextualizing Theology

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Our world is afire with tension and angst. The insidious evils of subjugation and dominance that were once more deftly hidden have been brought into the stark light, and play out like a horror story from which we are unable to tear our eyes. In a climate that seems to be getting worse by the moment, it is paramount that conversations on race, power, and privilege take place in our church, in order to repudiate the damage that white supremacy has caused. Despite the reality that white privilege and power have historically been insidiously connected to all attempts to do church and life together, there is the possibility of a grace that can bring redemption. Using broad strokes, this paper traces the formation of race in society as a hierarchical mechanism to maintain privilege. It then tracks Christianity's engorgement on power and its resultant all-encompassing "normed" theology, and the failure of said theology to liberate *all* bodies. Next, I turn toward *contextualization* as a tool for the liberation of marginalized bodies from theologies that privilege whiteness. Then, using the road to Emmaus story from Luke 24:13-35, I argue that the moment of experiencing God through the stranger can be life-giving, as the table of Christ becomes the place where white privilege and power are leveled.

Christian capitulations to the construct of race

We must begin by admitting that race is a construct. We now know that human beings' DNA is 99.9 percent the same—not just across perceived racial boundaries, but even among same people groups. (For example, two black people have the same percentage of shared DNA that a black person shares with someone of a different ethnicity.) The reason that race exists is because it has been used over time to preserve the hierarchy of whiteness. In order for white people to stay in power, they had to maintain this system of oppression; they had to construct this ladder of supremacy and perceived purity. This is the idea, or estimation, that *white is right*. White is normative—white ideals, white theology, white *everything*. This is the idea that you can either be *blessed* to be white, or die trying. This hierarchical ladder creates a chasm of *being*. At the top of the ladder is whiteness, and as one descends the ladder, skin gets darker. The ideal is at the top; the undesirable is at the bottom.

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Eddie Glaude, in his work *Democracy in Black* describes how this chasm of being that exists between whites and non-whites has ultimately affected people of color. Using a term that he coins as "the value Gap," Glaude writes:

> We talk about the achievement gap in education or the wealth gap between white Americans and other groups, but the value gap reflects something more basic: that no matter our stated principles or how much progress we think we've made, white people are valued more than others in this country; and that fact continues to shape the life chances of millions of Americans. The value gap is in our national DNA.[1]

The insidious construction of race breeds privilege: haves and have-nots. The trouble with the hierarchy is that it is far-reaching and insidious; just when it seems that it has been eradicated, it comes back with a vengeance. There is nowhere where these systems of power and privilege cannot be found—they are pervasive and persistent. They also reach their tendrils into the heart of American Christianity, which has its own historical narrative that begs examination.

Though Christianity began as a religion of outsiders, it quickly changed as it gained power. According to Justo and Catherine González's historical account, in the early church, the adherents

1. Eddie Glaude, *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016), 31.

to Christianity were considered to be uncouth and marginalized *other*. After all, Jesus' proclamation of a new way of being was a scandal to the mainstream. As time progressed, however, Christianity assimilated to the structures of power, culminating with Constantine and his successors embracing Christianity.[2] With this embrace, the voices that spoke for justice and equality were now drowned out by the rich and the powerful: "the 'faith of the fathers' became the watchword of orthodoxy. But the 'fathers' were for the most part seen as bishops who sat on thrones, very much like the Emperor in Constantinople and the images of Christ in heaven."[3] Historically, the *Christianization* of power continued with the persecution of Jews, the taking of land from original inhabitants, destruction of ancient civilizations, and black slavery,[4] which began the crystallization of an ethic of white supremacy.

That ethic assumed that the earth was the Lord's, and that it was the responsibility of European Christianity to seize and save it. Christianity became the staple of European existence—its *default* mode. European power coincided with divine right, and the resulting power was concretized and maintained in and through the construction of race. The Christians, in service to God, conquered bodies that got in the way of claiming the world. They made a God in *their* image, and anything that was not this divine, European image was put beneath the feet in servitude or sacrificed for God's greater purpose of winning the world. The powerful exercised this *normative* Christian theology, and this was passed down to the powerful, and ultimately meted out onto the bodies of the powerless. It is from within this historical narrative that we can begin charting a theological extraction of white privilege and white supremacy in our own ministry and scholarship.

Normative and contextual theology

Not surprisingly, the above historical roots of our present systems of power and privilege sustain the way we normally "do" theology. We assume that the "default" or "traditional" or *normal* means of theological method and discourse is that of Euro-Western theology. One who "does" theology should be disinterested and aloof when engaging theological work, because this is the most "objective" stance. A particular theology is thus posited and presented as the norm, default, and ideal. But how can one claim objectivity, when one's theological worldview has been shaped by and steeped in a subjectivity that just seems objective only because it is all-encompassing, having killed its detractors—either with "the Word" or in actual deed? The "traditional" worldview only appears to be objective because its voice has drowned out all others.

The "objective" approach does not at all seem sufficient—or honest. In the place of it, theologian Fernando Segovia calls for a "flesh and blood" *embodied* reader. Although he is talking explicitly about biblical interpretation, we can include a more general theological method, because reading and interpreting the Bible *is* ultimately theology.[5] Using an objective, aloof point of view to do theology has devastating consequences, because it only takes into account *normative* bodies. Normative theology for normative bodies leaves no place for non-normative bodies, for un- or underprivileged bodies.

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An example is from Jacquelyn Grant, who, in *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, rails against white feminism (and its undergirding theology) because she claims that it does not do the work of reconciling *all* bodies. Grant evaluates each major theological stream of feminism: biblical, liberal (both left and right sides), and rejectionist theology. She finds each to be ineffective in relation to the liberation of black women's bodies. Grant emphatically claims that feminist theology is white and racist. It is white, in that it uses white women's experiences as normative for its theology and Christology; it uses (only) white archetypes and symbols.[6] It is racist because it is constructed in/with the hierarchical structures created by race.[7]

Black women cannot be sisters or partners to white women, according to Grant, because as supervisors of black women, white women have historically been the immediate, proximal arm in meting out racism throughout history.[8] Accordingly, for every Angelina and Sarah Grimke [white abolitionists and advocates of women's rights] "there were numerous of those like their mother who not only condoned slavery but thought that abolitionists like Angelina and Sarah were agitators, if not in fact heretics."[9] Black women, Grant argues, reject feminist theology on these grounds, as well others, including (1) the fact that black women are dealing with "survival" issues while white women are dealing with "fulfillment" issues; (2) negative imagery of black women from physical and cultural stereotypes has resulted in the ill treatment

2. Justo L. González and Catherine G. González, *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1994), 15-16.
3. Ibid, 17.
4. Ibid.
5. Fernando F Segovia. "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement" in *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, Vol. 1. Edited by Fernando F. Segovia and Mary AnnTolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 57.
6. Jacquelyn Grant. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1989), 195.
7. Ibid, 197-199.
8. Ibid, 196.
9. Ibid, 197.

of black women; (3) the feminist movement is completely blind to the black struggle; (4) black women feel that feminists only want them so that they can accomplish their own (white) agenda; and (5) the concern that an alliance with white women will leave black men severely wanting.[10]

These are just some of the issues with theologies of the status quo. Theologies which primarily or exclusively lift up norms and livelihoods of those at the top are not adequate. So in the stead of aloof and disinterested, what is our other option? To combat white privilege and supremacy in our theological enterprises, we must include *context.* Grant and other theologians of color *seat* their theology in *context.* Theologian Stephan Bevans compares "classical" theology to contextual theology. Classical theology is an objective "science of faith," whereas contextual theology is a new turn toward the subjective, which means that culture and context are not only external values that act upon objective reality, but are actually intrinsically connected to the *source* of reality itself.[11]

In short, context and culture *are* reality; they do not just inform it. For Bevans, context is comprised of several different features: "the experiences of a person's or group's personal life," a specific cultural context, one's social location *within* said context, and the reality of change within a contextual location.[12] These factors, combined with the rise of modernity, have revealed the necessity that real theology, theology that matters, must meet people where they are—even and especially in distressed and oppressed locations.[13] Bevans illustrates this point by outlining the problems with traditional approaches to theology as being outdated, oppressive, unable to handle the rise of churches with new and different identities, and simply too myopic to address a growing multicultural world. In short, Bevans declares, "There is no such thing as theology: only *contextual theology*."[14] Bevans calls the type of contextual theology that non-whites undertake the liberation or praxis model, which "focuses on the identity of Christians within a context particularly as that context is understood in terms of social change.[15] This model is concerned with *action* that is *reflected upon* for further action.[16] The praxis model's key insight is "that the highest level of knowing is intelligent and responsible doing."[17] Through the process of acting and reflecting, contextual theologians have the opportunity to be relevant to their particular context. The culture aspect of context is vital to "developing and understanding of faith,"[18] and while cultural existence is generally good, there are some places where liberation is necessary. In this model, then, God's revelation and presence are active in history, and invite participation in and through one's daily life. Anyone can do theology in this context, with the minister/theologian serving as "midwife."[19]

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Some may assume that contextual theologies, and more specifically this praxis model, provide resource and methods for people of color, but offer little as a redemptive practice for those with white privilege. James Cone, considered to be the father of Black Theology as we know it today, disagrees. In his autobiography, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody,* Cone explicitly hopes that "whites, too, will be redeemed from their blindness and open their eyes to the terror of their deeds so they will know that we are all of one blood, brothers and sisters, literally and symbolically, and what they do to blacks, they do to themselves."[20] Cone considers all people to be of the family of God. He insists on tearing down the structures of white privilege and power that distort all human flourishing. To lift up one is to lift up all—generating a family of God concerned with equality and justice.

Walking and talking on the way

How does this look on the ground? I here turn to the Emmaus story in Luke's Gospel. Jesus has been put to death just a few days before, and two disciples are dejectedly walking away from Jerusalem. Notice what these two disciples were doing. They were talking. In our first step toward engaging this crucial dividing line of race, we must *engage in dialogue.* And we get a glimpse of their state when they are suddenly joined by a stranger who asks them what they are talking about. Right then, we see how sad they are. They are sad, but still talking. Confused and emotional, but still talking.

And this was not just any kind of dialogue. Luke suggests that they were talking *vigorously.* It was heated and emotional. When

10. Ibid, 200.
11. Stephen B. Bevans. *Models of Contextual Theology,* 2nd ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 3.
12. Ibid., 5-6.
13. Ibid., 6-7.
14. Ibid., 3.
15. Ibid, 70.
16. Ibid, 72.
17. Ibid, 73.
18. Ibid, 75.
19. Ibid. Compare the case for pulpit stewardship by Shauna Hannan in the present issue of *Currents*.
20. James Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2018), ch. 6.

you're talking to somebody and they completely agree with you, you'll probably hear them acquiesce nice and softly. But when you're talking with someone who doesn't agree—things get heated, emotional. Yet the disciples keep striving together and speaking. They are different people, with unique perspectives, united by the common experience of the Crucified God. In the midst of all their differences, one connection brings them together enough for them to have this dialogue. Enter the stranger.

The stranger asks, "What are you talking about?" And the people say, "Did you have your head stuck in the sand?" They talk about what happened with Jesus, and how they'd hoped he would have delivered Israel through the militarily defeat of their Roman captors. They talk about Pontius Pilate, that midlevel manager of the province of Jerusalem, of the Roman occupation's permission for Jews to handle their own business, unless they got out of hand. They talk about all the challenges facing a *minority* people living in a military state.

Those who wish we would get back to preaching the "objective, disinterested" gospel should see that already back then, the gospel was thoroughly entangled with political, social, and racial tensions. And that's exactly what these different disciples were discussing. They were disappointed with Jesus. He had not done what they'd expected him to do. And here we are, with a little bit of that same disappointment: Lord, we've served you and come to your church and tried to be good people and good teachers, and here we are—with perennial problems of systemic racisms, white supremacy, and the failures of the church to life-giving for all—and we thought you would've fixed that by now!

Look what the stranger encourages us to do. Keep dialoging. Keep the door open. Even in the midst of pain, power, and privilege: keep talking. Even when we don't know what's going to happen next: keep talking. Step one: have the dialogue.

How might we get better at dialogue? Immanuel Kant came up with the idea of the *transcendental pretense*, which basically said, "if I can crack the mind of one person, I can crack the minds of *all*—because everybody thinks and exists the same."[21] He assumed, objectively and normatively, that here is only one worldview. And so, we sometimes think that just because we have not had an experience, that the experience is null and void. The key to dialogue is hearing to understand—not just hearing to defend. With the institutionalized structures of racism, we often only hear *one* narrative, but the key to dialogue is listening to voices that are often ignored, hearing the other side of the story.

As they were walking along the Emmaus road, the disciples are kept from recognizing the stranger. Why? Why couldn't the disciples discern who he was? Some commentators say it was Satan's influence that kept them from recognizing him, or their own inadequacy. But the Greek suggests that it was because *God* kept them from recognizing him. And why? Jesus represented the culmination, the answer to their conversation. What would have happened if he were suddenly known to the disciples? All dialogue would have stopped, and they would probably have said, "Jesus is here. We can drop this, now." Sometimes, we are kept from recognizing God because, although God is there, it forces us to continue to work through our issues. We could say, "God is here. Let's ignore this issue of privilege and racism in our society and culture. Let's leave the work undone now. Let's jump to the conclusion." That's like putting a bandage on a wound that hasn't been cleaned.

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No, we have to keep working, keep talking—and keep striving together—because in the striving together, we meet the stranger. And who is to say who that stranger could be?

Real bodies in communion

Some of what I have tried to exhibit in the above interpretation of Luke is indebted to homiletician John McClure, who uses the works of Emmanuel Levinas to chart a path toward seeing glory through the other.[22] He posits that people can exist as they are, as closed and complete selves, *or* they can take a risk and see the infinite glory through the other. As one submits oneself to what McClure calls "self-erasure," one's "boundaried" being becomes open interface with someone else, which often exposes us to the glory of the infinite. As we who are privileged open ourselves to each other—the stranger, whose back may be against the wall—we have the opportunity to encounter something miraculous. But we must first be willing to subject ourselves to self-erasure, to the erasure of dominance, privilege, and power.

You'll recall how the Emmaus story ends. The trio keeps walking, and finally they get home. The stranger turns as if he is going on another way, and they beg him to come to eat at their house. The stranger says a blessing, breaks the bread, and immediately, they realize that the stranger is Jesus. All of a sudden, at the table, angst is abated—and the table is a sign.

We have the opportunity in our theological practices to meet at the table. In that sacramental moment, with burning hearts, the

21. Stanley Grenz. *A Rise of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 79.

22. John S. McClure. *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).

ladder of supremacy and hierarchy is flipped horizontally where all are invited to eat—not in word only, but also in deed. There is grace. Where white privilege and white supremacy have crept into our existences together, and where they seem hopelessly married to even our theology, God gives us grace at the table to exist together.

This reimaging of theological enterprise has real ramifications; it lands on real bodies. Alternatively, when we continue to allow dominant theologies to run rampant, trickling down into our communal lives together through teaching, preaching, lay and ordained ministry of every sort, bodies can be harmed. When decisions are made by the "high ups" with no connection to how they will land on the bodies of the last, lost, and least—whether they be individuals, congregations, or whole denominations—and when there is no representation of said bodies anywhere in sight, then we've missed the call to discipleship and bypassed a feast of costly grace.

I have witnessed the way shortsighted denominational decisions cause real harm to real bodies. The congregation I pastor is a restart (or rebirth) of the historic Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Transfiguration in Harlem. Once touted as the largest Lutheran church in Manhattan, for several reasons the congregation began failing, so that by the early 2000s, it was a shadow of its former self. The people at Transfiguration pleaded for help from the "higher ups"; they assured the regional synod that they could care for themselves if the broader church would only help them call a pastor. There was no help or any real acknowledgement by the larger church body. By 2017, Transfiguration had secured only a long-term *Pentecostal* supply preacher who did not subscribe to Lutheran theology. When some council members tried to develop the church's property without permission, the congregation called on the synod again, only to be told that it needed to consider closing.

As with many other congregations of color before, the voice of the synod was loud and disproportionate. Unlike many white congregations that have received synodical support without stipulation, Transfiguration was asked to be closed in order to be supported. *This* is what happens when privilege informed by bad theology lands on bodies. *This* is what happens when the theological enterprise is not seated in a context where everybody gets a voice. Transfiguration represents the broken record of countless other black and brown congregations in different synods and denominations throughout the United States.

The good news is this: Over the past several years, there have been a number of inroads in remedying this system. The Lutheran Church of the Transfiguration in Harlem is doing well, and the synod administration has gone to great lengths to remedy past damage, particularly in dismantling the systems of oppression that caused many of these issues. Costly grace requires repentance, and the ELCA shows that undergoing graced repentance and repentant grace is possible.

Jesus can still meet us in the sacramental moment that is bound up in examining the way that we do relationships together—the way we find God is in the midst of tension with each other, where we strive to be better people, which then create better institutions.

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In *this* reality, healing can begin, and in *this* reality, our churches and institutions can change. That's why we still hang around, I think—because the hope is *in* our very bodies. Eboni Marshall Turman, in her book *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon,* reimagines the body of Jesus in a way that allows for the reclaiming of black women toward salvific purposes. She reimagines the Council of Chalcedon as holding competing truths about Christ's nature in tension. In Christ's very *bodily-ness,* his complicated physical and spiritual *being* can be a mediating force between opposing viewpoints.[23] While we read the creeds at face value, it is important to remember how politically charged that moment was, and that the bishops who made decisions wanted to come up with some language that preserved unity. In this same way, as we are faced with privilege and power, Christ's body should *mediate* between us, conforming us to his image—an image that lifts up the broken and brings down the proud, an image that looks like healing and justice for all. As Turman elaborates, as Jesus' complicated, non-normal body brings salvation, so also is there the possibility that our complicated, non-normative, non-white bodies can bring about a glimpse of the infinite: Christ in us, the hope of glory.

23. Eboni Marshall Turman. *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2013).