



COLOR- COURAGEOUS DISCIPLESHIP

FOLLOW JESUS,
DISMANTLE RACISM,
AND BUILD
BELOVED COMMUNITY

MICHELLE T. SANCHEZ

FOREWORD BY ED STETZER
AND AFTERWORD BY JEMAR TISBY

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WATERBROOK

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Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous.
Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD
your God will be with you wherever you go.

—JOSHUA 1:9

FOREWORD

by Ed Stetzer

Throughout Scripture, we find a God who confronts, challenges, and upends our prejudice—in particular when it arises from racial or ethnic biases. The Exodus story bears witness to delivering an oppressed Hebrew nation from the bonds of Egyptian slavery. The story of Ruth is one of God providentially placing a young Moabite woman in the lineage of Israel's greatest king and, eventually, the Messiah—who would be not for Israel alone, but for all nations of the world.

The advent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost led to a miraculous understanding of diverse languages. The dispersion of believers following the martyrdom of Stephen led to the gospel spreading throughout the diverse cultures of the Roman world. And John's vision in Revelation 7 of people from every tongue, tribe, and nation singing as a unified choir before the throne of God is a vision of *after* the final resurrection; meaning, John bore witness to the diversity of all God's people that was still represented by their glorified bodies.

Scripture consistently testifies that God's presence works through our cultural and ethnic diversity rather than collapsing

it. The witness and worship of the church is enriched when we model gospel-centered diversity.

The task before us—especially those who are White American evangelicals—is to produce evidence that we are serious about, and driven by, the timeless truth of the Bible and that we are formed by God’s love for all people. We cannot do that without listening to our brothers and sisters of color. And we cannot do that without facing the reality of our own struggles on race and ethnic bias and being disciplined into a more excellent way.

This is why I am so grateful for this book. Michelle Sanchez paves that more excellent way for followers of Jesus to be disciplined out of our racial prejudices, which is precisely what we need. When we come across any issue that is reflected in Scripture, we must look at it from the perspective of discipleship. We cannot separate an issue such as racism into a category that is divorced from our spiritual life. The Bible doesn’t compartmentalize things like that.

A discipleship approach that ignores the marginalized—those who have been historically (and presently) discriminated against—is not a fully orbbed discipleship. Such a discipleship falls short of being discipleship in the way of Jesus, who consistently concerned himself with those who were victims of the unholy stewardship of power.

What’s more, when we consider that an issue like racism has caused such serious divisions within the church, we must admit that it directly affects discipleship in the church. So we must consider Paul’s frequent calls for churches to strive for unity—not to pretend that our differences don’t exist but rather that, through our shared identity in Christ, those differences would become a feature of beauty where before they were a point of contention.

Michelle writes from a perspective we need to hear. First, she is a discipleship leader. She has worked in the area of disciple-

ship, in her local church and now in her denomination. For Michelle, discipleship is not just a subject to be considered; it is at the very heart of our relationship with Christ.

Second, Michelle is an African American woman. She has experienced the realities of racial inequity firsthand. So when she seeks to cultivate ethnic harmony through discipleship, she writes as one who has been working toward this harmony all her life. As a White male, I was both moved and challenged to continue cultivating a posture of listening and receptivity so that I might continue to learn from my brothers and sisters of color.

She writes honestly (and sometimes painfully) from her own experience of prejudice while being a devoted follower of Christ. Through this she shows us how we cannot separate our growth in discipleship from our view on race. She brings both topics—discipleship and race—together to show how we can grow in Christ even as we learn to love others.

Michelle gives us keen insight into the issues that mark our time. She writes in a balanced and hopeful tone, yet she doesn't deny the historic and current problems in the church regarding race. She gives clear evidence and personal testimony to the challenges that are still too common among us. She calls for the community of faith to lament together, to bear one another's pain, and to come together to seek answers.

Weaving biblical content, awareness of the pertinent topics of our current setting, and compelling stories, Michelle pleads for a racial awakening in our time. She calls for all of us, regardless of political leanings or racial identity, to be transformed by Jesus to bring glory to God—by facing the issue of race and resolving to be disciples who engage head-on the challenges before us that stand in the way of true unity and interdependence. We should listen to Michelle's call for transformation and respond with open and humble hearts.

We are living in a time of reckoning. Passions are high, tempers

are short, and division runs deep. But we who love Jesus and serve him as Lord believe change is possible. Fences can be turned into tables. Mistrust can be replaced by mutuality. When we make these changes, we can stand together as disciples in service to our king.

—*Ed Stetzer, professor and dean, Wheaton College*

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PART ONE

**INTRODUCTION TO COLOR-
COURAGEOUS DISCIPLESHIP**

INVITATION TO A RACIAL DISCIPLESHIP JOURNEY

Discipleship has long been my passion. After serving for a number of years as a discipleship pastor in a local church, I could hardly believe it when I was invited to lead discipleship for an entire North American denomination of churches. It was a dream come true. As it happens, I am also an *African American* discipleship leader.

Is that significant? What does race have to do with discipleship, anyway? I'll be honest with you. For most of my life, I did not make many connections between race and discipleship—much less challenge myself to be a “color-courageous” disciple. I have always been *for* Jesus and *against* racism. Most disciples I know would say the same thing. So . . . aren't we good? Racism is such a fraught and depressing topic. I'd much rather talk about Jesus!

But see, that's just it: What I've come to discover is that race and discipleship aren't actually in completely separate categories, like apples and clementines. They are profoundly interrelated. In this book, I will tell the story of my awakening to that fact as both a disciple and a discipleship leader. And here's the crux of it: I

now understand that one of the most meaningful ways to get to know Jesus better is to go deeper with him into our racial challenges. Our generation has a unique invitation to strengthen our connection with Jesus through color-courageous discipleship.

One of the most meaningful ways for our generation to get to know Jesus better is to go deeper with him into our racial challenges.

So back to our question: What does race have to do with discipleship? A whole lot, as it turns out. And my eyes are now open to the reality that by missing that connection, I had been missing out on more of Jesus. Looking back, I'm so grateful that I (finally) accepted Jesus's invitation to the adventure of racial discipleship. Although I'll be sharing more of my story, ultimately this book is about *your* story. Consider this your personal invitation to join the adventure of racial discipleship. Or, if you are already on the journey, consider this your invitation to experience rich and colorful new vistas. I don't want you—or any other disciple—to miss out on *all* that Jesus has for you.

DISCIPLESHIP DEFINED

Since this is a journey about discipleship, let's first get clear on what discipleship is. My favorite definition of **discipleship** comes from Jesus's invitation to his first disciples: "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of people" (Matthew 4:19, NASB). In this brief but brilliant invitation, we discover three elements of discipleship: A disciple (1) follows Jesus, (2) is transformed by Jesus, and (3) is on mission with Jesus.

First, a disciple *follows Jesus*. A disciple's life is completely centered not on religious principles but on the person of Jesus

Christ. A disciple worships Jesus as Lord and Savior of his or her life and of the entire world. A disciple is a friend of Jesus who seeks ever-deepening knowledge of him and intimacy with him. And a disciple looks for opportunities to get to know Jesus better through the Word of God and through every experience.

Second, a disciple *is being transformed by Jesus*. In fact, a disciple submits to a continuous process of being transformed into the likeness of Christ day by day and in every way. There is no area of a disciple's life that is outside of the transforming influence of Christ—character, family, friendship, sexuality, work, politics, you name it. A disciple's holy ambition is to love Christ by obeying him and aligning every aspect of life with his lordship.

Finally, a disciple *is on mission with Jesus*. Disciples are both reconciled reconcilers and disciples who make disciples. They are reconciled reconcilers in that they collaborate with Jesus to see everything broken made whole again. Together with Jesus, disciples bring reconciliation to the world both vertically with God as well as horizontally with one another. They seek to reconcile the world at every level—individuals, families, people groups, systems, and creation. Furthermore, healthy disciples make disciples who make disciples who make disciples. Thus, like Jesus, they have an exponential impact as they multiply disciples who are themselves ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11–21).

SO WHAT IS RACIAL DISCIPLESHIP?

In the same way, robust racial discipleship encompasses all three discipleship dimensions. Racial discipleship is about following Jesus more closely as we engage racial challenges; being transformed by Jesus as we remove sinful racial tendencies and put on better ones; and embarking on mission with Jesus as we foster shalom and multiply disciples who do the same. As we pursue all

three dimensions, we will pursue antiracism not as a societal trend but as an ongoing expression of our discipleship—which is exactly what it should be.

This brings us to what might seem like an unconventional idea: *You have already been racially disciplined.* In other words, we each have already been shaped and formed by the racial dynamics of our society. We have all been subtly conditioned by the culture, practices, and perspectives of the family we were reared in, the place we grew up, and even the era that we find ourselves in. The question is not *if* you have been racially disciplined; the question is *how*. The problem, of course, is that much of the racial discipleship you have received throughout your life has been unconscious, unintentional, and—in many cases—misaligned with God’s heart. But that doesn’t make your racial formation to this point any less real.

That is why what many disciples need now is to embark on a different kind of racial discipleship journey. Different, in that this time it will be intentional. Different, in that this time we will orient ourselves as disciples of Jesus Christ to engage effectively with the racial challenges we face, in Jesus’s name. When it comes to race, most of us need to be intentionally “redisciplined.”¹ That is, we need to be disciplined again. What’s more, on this journey we will discover that racial discipleship is not just about resisting racism or transforming the world. It is certainly that, but it is far more: Racial discipleship is about being personally transformed so that you can experience more of Jesus. And *that* is what has been the most exciting part of the journey for me.

By the way, yes, this invitation is for you—whatever your race. The journey of racial discipleship is for people of every race and ethnic background. It is not for Whites only, nor is it a journey that is the special preoccupation of pilgrims of color. As fallen creatures in a fallen world, we have all been infected with sinful inclinations and wedded to imperfect perspectives on race, whether we realize it or not. Ironically, this may perhaps be es-

pecially true today in more subtle and insidious ways for people of color—like me. Imagine my surprise when I gradually came to understand that I, as an African American woman, was reinforcing racism in different ways myself! We all need awakening, transformation, healing, and fresh vision for a new day.

Although our individual racial discipleship journeys will have different starting points and milestones, in our racialized world, I believe the journey itself is universal. As disciples of Christ, we are all invited to awaken to the broken racial realities of our world and to see how we may have contributed to them. Rather than unintentionally perpetuate existing problems, we are all invited to courageously discover and advance God’s solutions.

NOW IS THE RIGHT TIME TO DO SOMETHING

While racial unrest in our world is nothing new, many experienced the devastating death of George Floyd in 2020 as an important juncture. A brief review: George Perry Floyd, Jr., was an African American man killed during an arrest in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020. Despite Floyd’s desperate pleas of “I can’t breathe,” Derek Chauvin (one of four police officers who were at the scene) knelt on Floyd’s neck and back for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds. After Floyd’s untimely death, protests quickly spread across the United States and around the world. Polls estimate that in the summer of 2020, between fifteen and twenty-six million people participated in the demonstrations in the United States, making these protests the largest in U.S. history.

In the wake of these events, many have asked new questions and taken steps to learn and grow. People of all backgrounds and faith traditions have been asking questions like “What does this all mean? What am I supposed to do? Given my particular place in the world, what *can* I do?”

As followers of Jesus, we are also prompted to ask additional questions in light of our primary allegiance to Christ. Questions like: “Jesus, what are you inviting me, as your disciple, to do? What are you calling the church, as your discipleship community, to do? And how can we grow closer to you in the process?”

Why this book when so many others have been written? As a discipleship practitioner, I have also been enriched by reams of excellent books on *discipleship*. I have also read many enlightening books on *race*. My intention is for this book to take us on a deeper dive into the many life-transforming connections between the two.

I believe that Jesus is grieved by both personal and systemic racism, and as disciples of Jesus, we can choose to be either more faithful or less faithful to him as we face our racial challenges. I believe that our generation of Jesus followers has been given a unique opportunity to understand that it’s no longer enough to identify as “not racist.” As disciples, our call is not simply to avoid racism. We will best align with the heart of God as we pursue not *nonracism* but *antiracism*. These days, antiracism means a lot of different things to a lot of people—and we’ll soon talk more about that. But at its heart, antiracism is simply about making the needful move from *passive* to *proactive* in our resistance of racism. And guess what? That requires courage.

But first things first. I think one reason we get stuck in our conversations about race is that we assign the same words different meanings—and then talk past each other. So let’s first get clear on some key words and ideas that we’ll return to again and again.

RACE VS. ETHNICITY—WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?

We will not be using the words *race* and *ethnicity* interchangeably. From a biblical perspective, there is a difference between race

and ethnicity, and it is helpful for disciples to understand that difference.

I once attended a conference where an African American speaker asserted something like this: “God did not create race. In the beginning, there was no race.” At the time, I was scandalized. What was he talking about? Of course God created race! He loves race! I even remember singing the song about it by C. Herbert Woolston at church: “Red, yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight.” Right? Well, over time I have come to the surprising realization that the provocative presenter had made a legitimate point. Actually, I was the one who was mixed up. What God created—what God delights in—is not race but *ethnicity*. Let’s get clear on the difference by beginning at the beginning.

One day, not so far from today, you will open your eyes in paradise. Imagine: How you arrived—whether by an abrupt accident, a long and excruciating illness, or a soft final sigh—will be a fuzzy memory. In a flash, your former life will be a dream. You are now fully and deliciously awake.

You greedily gulp the air—heavy, fresh, and sweet—as your unfamiliar eyes adjust to the light . . . if this elixir can be called “light.” This light is not insubstantial and fleeting like the light you knew on Earth. No, this radiance is pure, pulsing, weighty. *Light* is too small a word. You are bathed in glory.

What’s more, the *prism* of this glory defies description. This is no monochromatic world. You are awash in color—and what colors these are! Brilliant, mercurial colors you have never before seen, sparking new emotions that you have never before felt.

This glory also glimmers . . . with personality. It welcomes you, floods your heart, embraces your soul, rejoices over every no-longer-hidden part of you. Love, sheer love, unobstructed love, crazy love! Now you understand. Paradise is not a place. It

is a Presence. Paradise is love, the very presence of God. Sweet relief. God is here. God is with you in this place, real and tangible, closer to you than your own self. You will never be afraid again.

You become aware of the gentle trickle of a stream. When you look, you see not a stream but a river of pure crystal. It, too, seems alive. You begin to follow the river and its glory toward their source—a cascading garden city. And you can tell there is a party going on!

You join countless others, transfigured saints of every color, every hue, every variety imaginable. Together you promenade down transparent streets of gold toward the city's center. Without being told, you know this motley crew: These are your friends; this is your family. And only when you're together with them do you see it: love itself, sitting on a throne, ensconced with a rainbow. You erupt with these saints in a symphony of worship, captivated by the *sheer rainbowness* of it all—this gorgeous rainbow God, surrounded by a rainbow throne, worshipped wildly by rainbow people from every tribe, nation, people, language, and culture. And it is in this prismatic moment that you finally behold something that you have been waiting your whole life to see: the forever smile of God.

In this depiction of the new creation, the Bible paints us a beautiful picture of shalom. Quite simply, **shalom** is “the way things ought to be.”² It's what we experience whenever and wherever the kingdom of God is realized. Although sometimes translated as “peace,” *shalom* entails far more than a mere ceasefire or state of tranquility. Biblical shalom entails wholeness and flourishing in every dimension of creation, including ethnicity.

The book of Revelation tells the story of how history will climax in a new creation where people from every nation that

ever existed will gather to worship God: “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9). This will be the breathtaking fulfillment of the Great Commission that Jesus gave us to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

But wait—let’s take a closer look at the word these texts translated as *nation*. When most of us hear the word *nation*, we probably think of a nation-state—a sociopolitical entity like Botswana, Qatar, or Argentina. And that is certainly a legitimate translation. However, the Greek word is *ethnos*.³ It’s where our contemporary word *ethnicity* comes from. So *ethnicity* may actually be a pretty accurate translation of *ethnos*—if not a better one.

Why is this significant? Because the broader translation of *ethnicity* or *ethnic group* would remind us of our call to reach, reconcile, and make disciples of diverse ethnic groups right where we are. It would also keep us focused on the ultimate vision: Around the throne, there will be people not just from every nation. There will also be people from every ethnicity within every nation. History will climax in a multiethnic celebration. God’s throne will not only be encircled by citizens of the United States of America, but among those citizens we will also discover members of America’s diverse ethnic and cultural groups—Apache, Inuit, Hawaiian, Puerto Rican, and beyond.

Here is the definition that we will use for **ethnicity**:

Ethnicity is a God-ordained cultural identity that God delights in as a means of bringing glory to himself and enrichment to his kingdom.

Let’s take a moment with each phrase.

First, *ethnicity is God-ordained*. The grand arc of Scripture displays God’s passionate intention for diversity—including ethnic

diversity—from beginning to end. That arc is often missed, but it's easy to trace: From the teeming diversity of creation, to the inclusion of foreigners in the Exodus, to the temple built for all nations, to the Savior who came as a light to the nations, to the fiery birth of the church at Pentecost, God both ordained and delights in ethnic diversity.

Second, *ethnic diversity brings greater glory to God*. How? Because although we humans were created in the image of God, no one individual, ethnicity, or culture can reflect the fullness of God. We get to know God better when we praise him not only in unity (God is One) but also in diversity (God is Trinity). We learn more about who God is by understanding that he is simultaneously like a man and like a woman, like living water and a consuming fire, like a lion and a lamb.⁴ In the same way, diverse ethnicities and cultures better reflect the unimaginably diverse aspects of God himself.

Finally, *ethnic diversity enriches God's kingdom*. The Scriptures present us with a curious new creation preview: All the ethnic peoples of the world stream into the garden city of God with their unique cultural treasures and contributions (Isaiah 60:11; Revelation 21:26). As a connoisseur of multicultural cuisine, I certainly hope those treasures include food. Who knows what delights we may savor in the new creation? Perhaps not only a feast of Vietnamese pho, Ethiopian flatbread, and French ratatouille, but also New Orleans gumbo, Minnesota wild rice, and Southern fried chicken.

Remember: God delights not only in the diverse riches of the sociopolitical nations, but also, and more broadly, he delights in the riches of ethnic diversity as an essential contribution to the new creation. Ethnic diversity—fully redeemed in all its beauty and brilliance—will be one aspect of the new creation that will make it fascinating and fulfilling beyond anything we have imagined.

You may have noticed that I did not mention the word *race* in the previous biblical discussion. That is because race is not a biblical concept. Other than the concept of the human race, you will find no mention of race in the Bible as we understand *race* today. This may come as surprise for you, as it did for me.

Other than the concept of the human race, you will find no mention of race in the Bible as we understand race today.

So what is race?

Race is a man-made system used to stratify humans into artificial categories based on visible characteristics like skin color, typically for purposes related to power, division, and hierarchy.

Ta-Nehisi Coates makes the intriguing observation that “race is the child of racism, not the father.”⁵ Our contemporary understanding of race is relatively new; previously, ethnicity was a far more common means of identification. The concept of race emerged in past centuries as Europeans sought to justify the colonialization of non-Europeans. European colonialists required a simple, cogent system to rationalize the ongoing subordination of some people to others. So race was created as one of the primary solutions, and it was quite an effective one.⁶

One contributor to the creation of racial divisions was Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist of the eighteenth century commonly known as the “father of taxonomy.” We still study him today in science class when we learn about his concepts of

species, genus, and family. Like an excitable kid arranging his blocks, Linnaeus clearly got a kick out of organizing things into categories. Unfortunately for us, he did not confine his taxonomic efforts to botany and zoology. Linnaeus was one of the first well-known scientists to systematically categorize people along with beasts.⁷

With regard to race, Linnaeus came to delineate categories based primarily on skin color, which included *Europaeus* (white), *Americanus* (reddish), *Asiaticus* (dark), and *Africanus* (black).⁸ Clearly, though, these racial categories emerged from a racist perspective (as we have defined it). This was made clear in that Linnaeus did not stop at creating race categories; he also ordered those races in hierarchies. Of course, Linnaeus always ensured that his own race was at the pinnacle of those hierarchies! In his most famous work, he characterized the entire *H. sapiens europaeus* race as “very smart,” “inventive,” and “ruled by law.”⁹ Unsurprisingly, the darkest races occupied the bottom of the hierarchy in both position and character. He described dark-skinned *H. sapiens afer* as “sluggish, lazy . . . crafty, slow, careless . . . Ruled by caprice.”¹⁰ Actually, Linnaeus is just one example of a long line of thinkers who “created a hierarchy within the animal kingdom and a hierarchy within the human kingdom, and this human hierarchy was based on race.”¹¹

So, we can now clearly differentiate between *ethnicity* and *race*: Ethnicity was God’s idea; race was our idea. Ethnicity is natural; race is artificial. Ethnicity will endure forever; humanity’s racial divisions will cease at the supper of the Lamb.

FROM RACISM TO ANTIRACISM

Now we turn to the definition of *racism*. This is a tricky task. The words *racism* and *racist* are often used in such narrow ways that very few people can relate to them anymore. I think that’s

why we're having so many challenges in this conversation. Moving forward into a better future begins by gaining clarity about what *racism* actually means. We certainly won't fix the problem if we're not clear about what it is. Even some self-proclaimed White supremacists vigorously deny that they are racist. For example, White supremacist Richard Spencer has said, "*Racist* isn't a descriptive word. It's a pejorative word. It is the equivalent of saying, 'I don't like you.'"¹² Spencer identifies as "not racist."¹³ If even White supremacists don't think of themselves as racist, we've got some work to do on developing a common definition.

We will define **racism** as "personal racial prejudice and bias plus systemic practices of institutions that lead to racial inequities in society."

Let's examine the first part of the definition: *personal racial prejudice and bias*. Yes, racism obviously includes personal, consciously chosen prejudice by individuals. However, many are awakening to the reality that racism encompasses much more than this. To be honest, I have known very few people who would self-identify as "racist" by the narrow definition of "conscious prejudice." This is the thing: Racism also includes unconscious racial bias, which we all unwittingly exhibit. In fact, we begin to unconsciously form racial biases when we are two years old.¹⁴ One study found that "three- to five-year-olds in a racially and ethnically diverse day care center used racial categories to identify themselves and others, to include or exclude children from activities, and to negotiate power in their own social/play networks."¹⁵ As we get older, as you might imagine, the problem gets worse, not better.

The second part of our definition of *racism* is *systemic practices of institutions that lead to racial inequities in society*. Here we acknowledge that racism has both personal and systemic dimensions. This shouldn't be a surprise. After all, institutions are run by people—the very same people who have those racial biases we just mentioned. By now there is a vast array of evidence that

many, if not most, of our institutions are racist in that their practices consistently result in racial inequity throughout society. We see this clearly in the fields of education, health care, criminal justice, incarceration, housing, and many, many others. For example, despite our apparent gains in civil rights legislation, White families continue to hold 90 percent of the national wealth while Latino families hold 2.3 percent and Black families hold 2.6 percent.¹⁶ With regard to education, a 2016 survey reported that despite serving the same number of students, U.S. minority school districts received \$23 billion less in funding than majority-White school districts. Better school funding, of course, leads to better educational outcomes.¹⁷ We will explore more examples of systemic racial inequity in chapter 3. Suffice to say, the problem has reached epidemic proportions.

Unfortunately, oversimplified racial categories are here to stay for the foreseeable future. Race, even though it is a false construct, still matters in that it makes a real difference in people's lives—which is why it no longer works for us to have a “color-blind” approach to race. What we need now is to move from move from color-blind to color-courageous. Color-courageous disciples intentionally counteract racism with antiracism. **Antiracism** is essentially racism's opposite: *becoming aware of and uprooting personal racial prejudice and bias plus working to dismantle systemic practices that lead to racial inequities in society*. For Christians, the end goal of antiracism is the restoration of shalom.

Given this definition, you may find the task of antiracism to be overwhelming. After hundreds of years of entrenched racism, can we really hope to make any meaningful progress now? If I have been unconsciously biased my whole life, is there really any hope of reversing that? What's more, can average, ordinary people—schoolteachers, youth pastors, plumbers, stay-at-home moms—really do much to dismantle systemic racism?

The beautiful answer is yes. Because here's the thing: Even if

you can't change *the* world, you can certainly change *your* world. If we all did just that, imagine the difference it would make.

I want to acknowledge that many of us are tired of talking about racism, antiracism, and everything in between. (I am too. I'd much rather talk about my favorite novels and low-carb recipes.) There's already been so much conversation about race, and it's exhausting. Yet being tired of talking about racism is kind of like asking, "Do we really need to keep bringing up sin? We've already talked about it so much." Or "Wouldn't it be better for us to not see sin at all? No one likes to dwell on sin. It's such a downer. We're all quite sorry for the sins we've committed. So let's move on to different topics!"

Even if you can't change the world, you can certainly change your world.

I get it. What helps me continue the conversation is remembering that, at its heart, "the problem of racism is the problem of sin."¹⁸ When we don't comprehensively understand the nature of sin—its hiddenness, its subtlety, its pervasiveness—we are far more prone to perpetuate it. Sin will be a challenge as long as we live. And as long as we inhabit this broken creation, we will need preachers, teachers, prophets, and friends to point out whatever blind spots we may have so that we might better represent Jesus in the world. This may be especially true when it comes to race.

I also want to acknowledge your fears that any talk of "antiracism" is grounded in the secular philosophical framework of critical race theory (CRT). In popular usage, **critical race theory** refers to a framework for processing and understanding the many complex dimensions of how race impacts systems and

society as a whole. While I have certainly come across numerous CRT concepts while writing this book, I am not a critical race theorist and this book is not about critical race theory. I am writing from the perspective of a Christian discipleship leader, and in this book, I seek to explore what the Bible has to say to disciples about our racial challenges. Most importantly, my premise is that the core elements of antiracism ultimately stem not from secular philosophies but from the heart of God. (Space does not permit a full examination of critical race theory here, but you can find more of my reflections on this and many other topics at <https://michelletsanchez.com/colorcourageous>.)

Finally, some have raised important objections to the term *antiracism* itself. They say, “I don’t really want to be ‘anti-’ anything! It sounds so negative.” That does make sense on one level. But think about it: Sometimes it is most constructive to call out exactly what you’re up against. Why is that? So that you can be more targeted and effective in your resistance. For example, if I’m sick, a good bowl of chicken soup is a delight to have. But if given the choice, I’d prefer a targeted *antibiotic* to rid me of my suffering for good. In the same way, it’s lovely for you to improve your scent with the help of cologne or perfume. In the long run, though, it won’t do you much good unless you also avail yourself of *antiperspirant*!

Here’s another important point: At its heart, being antiracist is *not* about being anti-people. It is about being against *racism itself*. This is a critical distinction. It is not ultimately people we want to oppose; God loves and wants to transform all people. As the Scriptures say, “our struggle is not against flesh and blood” (Ephesians 6:12). Rather, our work is to oppose racist ideas, practices, and systemic dynamics that continue to perpetuate racial inequity generation after generation. And in this, we never “arrive.” No one can ever call themselves perfectly “antiracist.” More than a label, it is a journey. At any given time, I might be doing things to promote or dismantle racist ideas, practices, and

systemic dynamics. By that measure, all people—including people of color—are called to move from racism to antiracism.

All that being said, my favorite phrase when it comes to a Christian approach to antiracism is now *color-courageous discipleship*. Implied in the term itself is a positive, proactive call for disciples to courageously resist racism in Jesus's name. So color-courageous disciples are against racism, but what are they for? What is our end goal? For me, the culmination of color-courageous discipleship is the creation of beloved community—community that is grounded in Christlike agape love for God and for one another across all boundaries of difference. So now we come to our definition of **color-courageous discipleship**: *the courageous, lifelong journey of following Jesus, dismantling racism, and building beloved community*. In fact, the highlight of this journey for me is when we begin to envision and unpack God's gorgeous and inspiring dream of beloved community together (chapter 6).¹⁹

INVITATION TO A REDISCIPLESHIP ADVENTURE

I'm sure you know by now that following Jesus is not a one-time invitation. After you initially say yes to Jesus, he will present you with many additional discipleship invitations over the course of your life. And guess what? Each one is an invitation to a new adventure. Consider this book your invitation to a new adventure of *racial rediscipleship*.

My favorite definition of an adventure is a journey that is both exciting *and* hazardous.²⁰ For me, this is an excellent reminder of what discipleship is really like. Discipleship adventures are exciting because of all the opportunities they give us to know Christ better and partner with him to see God's dreams come true. Yet discipleship adventures are also inescapably hazardous because they require us to take risks and possibly experience loss

and pain. In other words, *every true discipleship adventure requires courage.*

As disciples of Christ, our call to courage is simultaneously a call to the cross.

As disciples of Christ, our call to courage is simultaneously a call to the cross. That's why so many are unwilling to pursue or to persist on new discipleship adventures, including the racial discipleship adventure. I have no idea what your unique cross may entail on this journey, but God may invite you to

- enter into repentance, confession, and forgiveness
- engage in conversations that produce discomfort, anger, and disagreement
- uncover unconscious biases that have caused harm
- revisit painful moments
- acknowledge the shortcomings of the church or other institutions you love
- experience suspicion or rejection by others
- sacrifice in unfamiliar ways as you courageously love God and others

Yet, let's also remember that discipleship never ends with the cross. It ends with *resurrection*. On the other side of the cross, there is always new life. What that resurrection life will entail for you on this journey is God's surprise, but perhaps you may

- grow in your ability to see the world and its people from God's perspective
- understand the gospel more deeply, both with regard to the depths of your own brokenness as well as the heights of God's grace

- awaken to life-changing insights through the racial and ethnic journeys of others
- enjoy new friendships and richer, more authentic community
- experience more extensive liberation from fear, sin, and shame
- discover God's presence and experience him in new ways
- be healed or help others to heal
- become more effective at bringing shalom and beloved community to your world
- celebrate when witnesses to all these events find new life in Christ as a result!

At times, color-courageous discipleship will feel difficult, dangerous, or both—which is precisely why we need Jesus as our leader and the Bible as our anchor. We need supernatural courage for the journey. Courage is the “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty.”²¹ Only in Christ will we find the inexhaustible power, wisdom, and grace we need to flourish as color-courageous disciples.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE JOURNEY

Our racial discipleship journey will have three main parts. This is part 1, your invitation to pursue a racial discipleship journey grounded in Jesus Christ. I hope that you will accept!

Part 2 will explore four color-courageous paradigm shifts, which will empower you not only to grow in antiracism but also to experience Jesus in new ways as you do.

Part 3 will investigate the place of spiritual practices (also known as spiritual disciplines) in the life of color-courageous disciples. In this section we will reframe our daily spiritual practices because racism is, at its core, a spiritual problem—which

means that racism requires spiritual solutions. Without spiritual practices, we are left to pursue color-courageous discipleship in our own strength. But *with* spiritual practices, color-courageous discipleship can become an intimate and exciting journey with Jesus Christ. What's more, *spiritual practices provide the means for us to be transformed so that we can transform the world.*

This book will likely serve as both a review and a revelation. It may be a review for some in that certain antiracism concepts covered are familiar to you—I hope they are! Yet I have also sought to provide you with a resource that features *in one place* a full range of antiracism concepts and ideas. At the same, this book can also be a revelation, even if you are familiar with antiracism concepts. My project has been to *freshly connect* antiracism principles to the fundamental principles and dynamics of Christian discipleship. Regardless of where you find yourself on the color-courageous journey, I pray that in this work you will find both education and inspiration.

Our entire project will be grounded in and guided by the Word of God. With that in mind, let me make one important point of clarification about the Bible and race: It would be anachronistic to say that the Bible *directly* addresses race. The Bible does not explicitly condemn racism and it does not explicitly encourage antiracism *because the concept of race wasn't invented yet*. Nevertheless, the Bible does portray plenty of conflict between diverse groups, including diverse ethnic groups. For example, in the Bible we do find **ethnocentrism**—the much more ancient belief that one's ethnic group is normative or superior to others. That being said, I believe we can deduce many important insights about race and racism from the Bible by virtue of how Scripture engages ethnicity, ethnocentrism, and other analogous dynamics.

While our journey will be firmly grounded in Bible, along the way we also learn from a wide variety of writers and thought leaders who, I believe, have important insights for color-

courageous disciples. To be clear, this does not mean that I agree with or condone the whole of their thought or approach. For example, from my vantage point, secular antiracist movements do lack components that I believe are vital for those committed to a biblical worldview. At the same time, I believe there are many things we can learn. Like the “fair-minded” Berean disciples who “searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so,” we can separate the wheat from the chaff according to God’s Word and to the glory of God (Acts 17:11, NKJV). We, too, can hold on to what is helpful, let go of what is not, and faithfully pursue color-courageous discipleship in Jesus’s name.

A FEW NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

Since color-courageous discipleship involves seeing the world in some new ways, it will help us tremendously to have some new words. New vocabulary can open our eyes to racial realities that may have previously been hidden to us. Once we learn to notice and name the unique dynamics at play in our racial challenges, we can also identify more effective solutions. That’s why you’ll find an extensive glossary in the back of this book. When I was a kid, I read the dictionary for fun. Yes, I’m aware that makes me weird! With that caveat, I’ll still say that the glossary is worth a read in itself as a way to expand your world. Throughout this book, you will find glossary words in bold text (usually at their first mention).

When I refer to people, I will use the following terms interchangeably: **people of color** and **minority** as well as **White** and **majority**. I do fully acknowledge the limitations of these terms. For example, the use of the words *minority* and *majority* is waning because they are becoming outdated: The census predicts that by 2045, if not sooner, the United States is projected to be “minority White.”²²

I will use *people of color* to refer primarily to people of African, Native, Asian, Latino, or Middle Eastern descent. Many people push back on the term *people of color* by rightly pointing out that White people have color, too—which of course they do! White people are not the color of snow just as Black people aren't the color of the night sky. At the same time, *people of color* has resonated with many because it meets “a deeply felt need expressed within all of these groups to *build unity*” among themselves.²³ It's also noteworthy that the term has precedent. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr., used the phrase *citizens of color* in his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech.²⁴ So, for now, we'll go with it.

A final grammatical note. As of this writing, there is no general consensus on whether the words Black and White—and similar race-related terms of color—should be capitalized. Many commentators have given compelling reasons for why one, both, or neither word should be capitalized.²⁵ For simplicity and consistency, this text will capitalize both terms.

Now, let's dive in with a story. Hearing stories from your church community—learning about the experiences of other disciples—is one of the most surefire ways to grow. In fact, that's precisely what the Bible does for us. The Bible is a rich repository of stories about the saints who have walked the path of discipleship before us. Their narratives are meant to encourage, to teach, and to inspire. That is why, throughout this journey, we will also explore stories and interviews with a diverse set of color-courageous disciples. These individuals have been profoundly impacted by the journey of racial discipleship, and they seek to foster racial shalom on a daily basis. By sharing their stories, I hope to make color-courageous discipleship concrete and personal. May their stories impact you as much as they have impacted me.

A COLOR-COURAGEOUS DISCIPLESHIP PORTRAIT: DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Pop quiz! When I say “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” what comes to mind?²⁶ Perhaps *costly discipleship*, *anti-Nazi*, *German prophet*, *Confessing Church*, or *Christian community*. Far more rarely would someone reply with *Black church*, *Black theology*, *Harlem*, or *anti-racist*. But these responses are just as true.

Bonhoeffer became the hero, prophet, and discipleship leader that we know today precisely because of his time worshipping, serving, and learning with the Black church in Harlem. In fact, when Bonhoeffer reflected on the state of his discipleship prior to his sojourn in New York, he bluntly stated: “I had not yet become a Christian.”²⁷

Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent a year of his theological training studying at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Unfortunately, he found his predominantly White seminary and church experiences to be mostly uninspiring—with a notable exception. He became quick friends with Albert Fisher, an African American classmate descended from Black Baptist clergy. Bonhoeffer went with Fisher to visit Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, and he never left. He marveled that he was “increasingly discovering greater religious power and originality among the Negroes” and, furthermore, that he had “only heard a genuine proclamation of the gospel from a Negro.”²⁸

As Bonhoeffer experienced the fresh spiritual power and vitality of the Black church, he simultaneously made salient observations about the American church as a whole. As a foreigner, Bonhoeffer was much more adept at spotting serious contradictions in America’s Christian culture. He warned: “For American Christendom the racial issue has been a real problem from the beginning . . . and [it is] a grave problem for the future.”²⁹ In a country that touted freedom, equality, and opportunity for all,

Bonhoeffer was troubled by America's widespread blindness to its own double standard for people of color.

Later, Bonhoeffer wrote about the two incompatible versions of Jesus in America that he experienced—a “Black Christ” and a “White Christ” who were pitted against each other in a “destructive rift.”³⁰ Of the two, it was clear that Bonhoeffer related far more profoundly to the Black Christ. Bonhoeffer did not recraft Jesus into a man of African descent, but he understood Jesus to identify as a co-sufferer with the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.

In the Black church, Bonhoeffer learned that discipleship necessitated costly suffering in solidarity with disenfranchised people. And it was in the Black church that one of Bonhoeffer's friends concluded that he was witnessing in Bonhoeffer “a beginning of his identification with the oppressed which played a role in the decision that led to his death.”³¹

As many of us know, in 1945 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazi regime: Bonhoeffer courageously sacrificed his own life for the sake of the Jewish people. Unlike so many of his German colleagues, Bonhoeffer applied what he learned about American racism back in Germany in a surprising way: He resisted the Nazi regime and became a courageous advocate for Jewish lives.



In the racial upheaval and racial awakening of our generation, we must consider, *Why should we as believers expand our understanding of racial realities and injustices?* Like Bonhoeffer, we do so as a matter of discipleship. We do so to experience more of Jesus Christ, who so profoundly identifies with those who suffer. And we do so to open our eyes to all kinds of injustices everywhere, injustices that we might otherwise miss.

We also seek to expand our understanding of racial realities

so that we might experience greater joy! Remember that while racism is a scourge on God's creation, ethnicity is a God-ordained cultural identity that God delights in to bring glory to himself and enrichment to everyone in his kingdom—including you. Those who take steps to dismantle racism will undoubtedly discover new opportunities to enjoy more of the surprising riches of God's colorful kingdom.

As you go deeper now into this journey of color-courageous discipleship, may you—like Bonhoeffer—be surprised by how God works both to bring greater shalom to your corner of the world and to draw you closer to Jesus Christ.

FURTHER READING

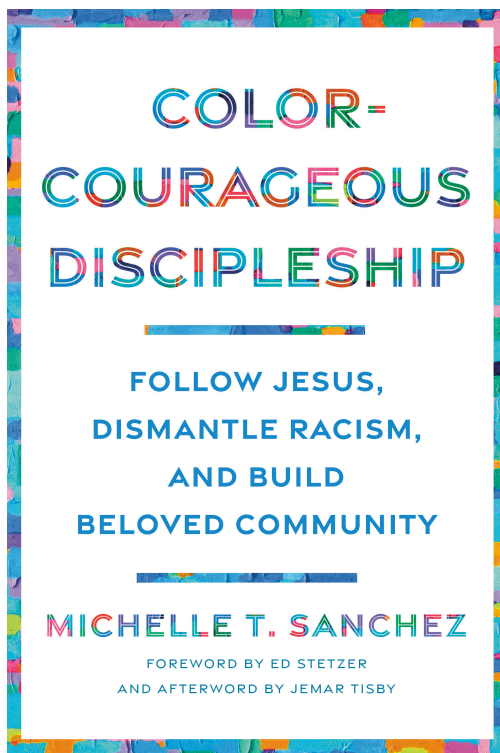
Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance by Reggie L. Williams

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Faithful Antiracism: Moving Past Talk to Systemic Change by Christina Barland Edmondson and Chad Brennan

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