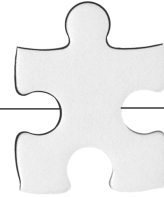




## STAGE FOUR: **WHITE IDENTITY**



# Living in the Truth About White History and Racism

*Paula Harris*

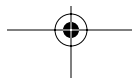


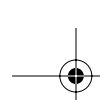
When whites choose to become the minority in numbers and in power, people of color start to tell us more stories about what whites have done. When they see our commitment to keep coming back to their church or stay in their neighborhood, they trust us a bit more. This is an invitation to us to learn the other side of the story. In order to become a godly white person in a multiethnic community, we have to learn the whole truth about interracial encounters.

Racism divides us. But what is it? Whites and people of color often don't agree. Whites have to learn to see and confront racial sin. We have to learn the truth about white history.

Perhaps my learning begins when I see pain on my nonwhite friend's faces and ask why. The Holy Spirit convicts me of my sin and strengthens me to confess it. Gradually I learn to see and understand racial dynamics around me, in my personal networks, in my church, my workplace and my city. God helps us understand our community more deeply and to confess and work to change our group's sins.

When I buy my first house, the black friends I've known since college are





B E I N G   W H I T E

still renting. Why? I get promoted, several times over the years, but my Latino friends struggle to make ends meet. Why? I pray for them, but I also begin to wonder: *Do I have more opportunity than my nonwhite friends? Is it just? Is it right?* When I hear answers to my “whys,” I begin to wonder, *is the explanation true?*

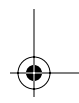
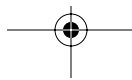
We white people have only part of the multiracial story. We only see in part. To see racial dynamics, I must learn to ask questions, to observe and talk about race.

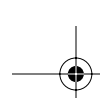
Racism is a somewhat taboo subject in the dominant American culture. Most white people are not very comfortable talking about it. For the most part, mixed-race groups aren't comfortable talking about racial sin either. But if we are to achieve a godly multiracial community, we must break this taboo, put the subject out on the table and look at our different ways of understanding.

Racism has been defined as “a system of advantage based on race” or “prejudice plus power.”<sup>1</sup> Neil Rendall, a white leader in InterVarsity's multi-ethnic ministry, says racism is “our denial that all people are made in the image of God.” Doug and I think of racism as functioning both on the individual level (my racial partiality for my group) and on the group level (our racial partiality plus power). Sometimes we whites think of racism as individual acts of racial violence (lynching African Americans, for example, or the times some white soldiers intentionally killed Native Americans by giving them smallpox-infected blankets). It does include those sins, but it also includes community-wide acts of violence—acts of violence that are so familiar that they are hidden to well-meaning white people.

Here are some of the ways I learned to see racism. A few years ago, I moved into a multiracial neighborhood. My family lives on a mixed-race, mixed-income street. On the upper end of my street is a row of medium-sized houses. One day I realized that white people own most of the houses. Every white family is a combination of adults and young children, or simply one generation—an older couple. There are two black families who own houses; in one home there are two adult generations, the other has three generations of working adults. One older Asian couple lives here; I don't know them yet, but I think they are Chinese.

In the middle of my street there is a section of older duplexes. Rent for





*Living in the Truth About White History and Racism*

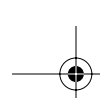
these duplexes is higher than mortgage payments on the houses (I wondered how much the rent was, so I called the landlord). The duplexes are filled with single white adults. The lower half of my street is apartments. Rent for the apartments is about two-thirds of a current mortgage payment, probably higher than the payments of those who bought houses here years ago. The apartments house a great assortment of single people and families; about half are black families, the other half a mix of Latino, Southeast Asian and a handful of whites. How did this happen? Is it okay?

At my kids' school, there is a similar mix of children. Before I moved here, I went to city hall to figure out what schools and neighborhoods were racially diverse and academically challenging. What schools would be a good environment for my biracial kids? The city publishes school performance reports for taxpayers. The reports are not mailed out, however, to the renters on my street, who are disproportionately people of color. Every year when academic performance standards are published, I read the racial comparisons. Every single year, black and Hispanic children in my city and state do worse in school than white children. High school kids around here say, "In West High the basement is full of minority kids"—that's where special ed is. "The top floor is white"—that's where college prep and advanced placement courses are taught.

The studies ask questions about the data. Reading the test score and grade comparisons, I can see them looking for the tangible cause of the racial inequity in academic performance. They compare financial situations: do white kids have better books and educational supplies at home? Maybe, but even when you compare minority and white families with equal income, white kids achieve more in school. They compare parents' education level: do kids whose parents are more educated do better in school? Well, yes, but if these factors are equalized (comparing parents with Ph.D.s to other Ph.D.s and high school grads with each other), white kids still do better in school. Is it that ethnic minority kids move more often and it's hard to learn that way? Well, sometimes, but comparing white and minority "lived-here-one-year" kids with each other and "lived-here-forever" kids with each other, the white kids still get better grades.

Under all the circumstances, white kids do better in school. No matter how





B E I N G   W H I T E

researchers control the studies, comparing only children from similar households, white kids are achieving more. The unasked question is, Is there some kind of systemic bias? Do white kids benefit from subtle academic partiality? This question goes unasked because our culture considers this inequity a part of “normal” society. There must be a “normal” answer for the differing achievement. Racism can’t possibly be that deep in our society. Can it?

This is one way I learned to see racism. The home ownership patterns and the school achievement patterns are both examples of systemic racism. Systemic racism is just what it sounds like: a racist system that operates broadly through a society or group, giving partiality to one racial group over another. Professor Beverly Daniel Tatum writes,

I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyer belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of white supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyer belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyer belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go to the same destination as the white supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyer belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps this is not how you have always understood racism. Racism has many faces.

**AWARE/OVERT RACISM**

Most of us whites find it relatively easy to name the KKK as racist.<sup>3</sup> Lynching is racist. Genocide is racist. Hitler was racist. The Serbian genocide of Muslims was racist. If an ethnic minority person is dying and being raped because of his or her race, a racist was involved. That’s obvious. This is racism we are aware of; it’s blatant.<sup>4</sup> The solution seems obvious too: we must stop





*Living in the Truth About White History and Racism*

it. If the action was done by a racist person, we stop him or her. If it's a racist group or broad pattern like apartheid and genocide, society—whether local, national or international—must stop it. We have to corporately improve laws. We have to enforce good laws that have been ignored. Murderers must be forced to stop. Killers who profess to follow God must confess their sin and stop killing. Perhaps there should be attempts to reach out to the victim's family in reconciliation.

Racism operates on a physical level (killing), a spiritual level (immediate, and then eternal, separation from God), and an emotional and social level (hate). We must identify and repent from racism on all these levels.

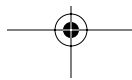
**MORE SUBTLE RACISM**

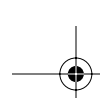
There are other types of racism than the aware/overt one. What I described on my street and in my kids' school, what I could describe in my church and at my workplace—these are also contexts where people of color are experiencing loss. They are losing the chance for a good education. They are losing the economic and emotional stability of owning their own home and land. Paul Kivel writes, "It's also an act of violence to be denied access to a job, housing, educational program, pay raise, or promotion *that one deserves*."<sup>5</sup>

Let's look more deeply at the question of housing and land ownership. A few decades ago, when some of the older couples bought houses on my street, banks in the city practiced redlining. Not many black people got mortgage loans, and when they did it was only to buy in particular neighborhoods. A few generations ago, these same African American families' ancestors were forced to work as slaves without any income. Whites stole their labor, among other things. A few hundred years ago, the land where my house, my street and my whole city are built all belonged to the Ho Chunk tribe.

In the 1700s the Ho Chunk owned one-fourth of my state's land. In 1836 they were subjected to a forced relocation, and one in four died. In 1962 they owned only about five hundred acres. Today they do not even have a reservation.<sup>6</sup>

This might be less obvious, but if a person of color is experiencing systemic loss, probably someone stole something from them. It didn't "just happen" that white people own the land that used to belong to Native Ameri-





B E I N G   W H I T E

cans.<sup>7</sup> It's not "normal" that most black people in America still don't own homes. The system is still based on earlier white violence.

Two dynamics are operating to maintain a racially stratified system. As a white person I am very privileged. Not all white people are better money managers; we don't necessarily deserve more loans. When I bought my second home, I had a bankruptcy and a foreclosure on my credit report. I got a chance anyway—other whites were partial to me. We don't inherently deserve higher-paying jobs. We don't inherently deserve better access to mortgages. At the three banks and mortgage companies where I compared rates and options, the employees I met were all white. White people decided if I would get a loan. The white mortgage officer I worked with knew the white guy who has been writing my paycheck for twelve years. Everyone who has ever given me a job was white. Everyone who has ever given me a raise or promotion was white. All my landlords and realtors have been white. These white people trust me more because I am white. Racial partiality has operated in my favor. They ask fewer questions. I look educated to them. I look reliable. I look predictable.

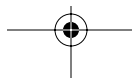
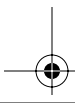
This partiality operates for me when I buy a house or a car, and it operates for me when I go to the neighborhood convenience store. It's interesting: as a white woman alone, I incite no interest. My checks are cashed without ID. I can wander around picking things up in a store. When I bring my black children along, though, suddenly I look slightly less reliable. My ID is checked. My kids and I are watched, and sometimes we are followed around the store to make sure we're not shoplifting.

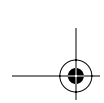
The first time this happened, I brushed it off. The second and third, ninth and tenth times I thought, *Oh no, it's not possible*. But it does happen. Consistently.

**AWARE/COVERT RACISM**

The other dynamic operating is that people of color are victims of racist discrimination. In World War II we put Japanese Americans in internment camps, but not Germans. Japanese American homes and businesses were confiscated, but not German ones.

Some white people actively steal opportunities from ethnic minorities. A





*Living in the Truth About White History and Racism*

few decades ago the banks in my city worked with a red line defining the areas on the city map where black people could or could not get mortgages. Then and now, there are all-white neighborhoods in my city. Today the areas that used to be inside the red line are still almost half African American, and the areas outside are still predominantly white.

Government studies show that there are still more than two million race-based housing discrimination crimes every year.<sup>8</sup> Most people of color eventually face housing discrimination. For this to happen, for all-white neighborhoods to be maintained, some white people say to minority people, whether with words or actions, “I don’t like the look of you; I don’t want to live with you.” It’s illegal, but it is happening.

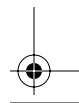
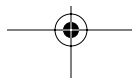
This is called *aware/covert racism*. It’s not hard. The partiality doesn’t have to be publicly visible. A white person can just say to ethnic minority applicants, “That apartment’s been rented” or “I need three months’ rent as a deposit.” For a system with racial privilege to operate once it is set up, all we whites have to do is ignore it. To deconstruct it, first we have to work hard to see it. Then we have to join forces with the people of color around us to rebuild a new, more just and godly system.

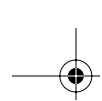
These days, thank God, there is an active fair-housing group in my city. Anybody can ask for an undercover investigation of a racist, or possibly racist, landlord. This is an attempt to break the cycle of aware/covert racism. Some white and nonwhite people concerned about justice came together to create this group.

**UNAWARE/COVERT RACISM**

Racism can operate even if you don’t see it and don’t intend it. My sister Holly is a teacher. Every year the state sends an educational tester to her classroom. The first year, almost all of the kids in Holly’s class failed the basic academic test for kindergarten. They could not follow sequences. Their vocabulary was inadequate. The report came back concluding that the kids all needed special ed.

Holly’s observation was, “This is a fairly average class. Maybe one or two could use some special tutoring, but most of the kids are normal. Some are very smart.” So she asked the tester to return. As the test was repeated, Holly learned





B E I N G   W H I T E

that to measure sequencing the white evaluator had asked each kid to explain the stages of making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. This should be fairly simple for a five-year-old, but they all failed. Why? What was happening?

Holly realized, *None of these kids eat PBJ; they eat burritos and tamales for lunch. They're all Latino.* "Why don't you ask them what are the stages of making a burrito?" she suggested. All the kids but one passed this test. They passed easily, explaining clearly and sequentially how to make a burrito. That year they stayed out of special ed.

Now maybe it would be good for those kids to learn about making peanut butter sandwiches, but why? The point of the test was to measure the kids' capacity to give instructions in stages, with a defined sequence.

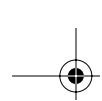
This situation reveals a racism that is more subtle. The white tester was unaware of racism at work. She would have been horrified to be called a racist. The tester didn't intend to hurt the kids. She didn't hate them. She didn't dislike them. She didn't consciously prefer white kids. She wasn't aware of her own partiality. She didn't have to *do* anything for unaware/covert racism to be at work.

The way this type of racism operated was hidden to both the tester and my sister the teacher, until Holly started actively thinking about it. Holly's reflection, *These kids don't need special ed*, caused her to try again, to ask hard questions. Only then was she able to uncover the unaware/covert racism that was at work and to explore the real abilities of the Latino children.

If Holly had not uncovered the racism at work, the kids and their parents would have been left to struggle with a reality gap. *The test says my kid needs special ed, but I think he is smart. What is true? Maybe I don't understand as much as I think I do.* (See the self-doubt beginning to take root?) Eventually, if this happens regularly, the white teachers and testers might have been left believing a lie, "Latino kids are not as smart as white kids." This test could affect the rest of these kids' lives, their education, future job possibilities and income.

The solution to the unaware/covert racism operating in this situation was a little more complex. Holly needed to submit the professional assessment to the "test" of the children. Do the kids understand sequencing or not? Do their parents think they need special ed? Does the teacher? What is the truth about the situation? Does the conclusion hold if I measure differently? What





*Living in the Truth About White History and Racism*

is the history? What is the wider cultural context? Holly even had to ask, what do the children eat? Uncovering this sort of racism required that Holly learn to see in a totally different way, with 3-D glasses.

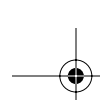
Unaware/covert racism can operate despite our commitment to racial reconciliation, because we cannot see it very well. We whites are not aware of our own partiality; we don't know how to look for it, so it is hidden from us. People of color feel something is not right, but it's hard to name and describe. We white people want to excuse ourselves from it when it's pointed out to us. It makes us appropriately uncomfortable to think about racism operating in our hearts and around us. Kivel rightly observes, "People of color do not protest discrimination lightly. They know that when they do, white people routinely deny or minimize it, blame them for causing trouble, and then counterattack."<sup>9</sup> We create other explanations for the inequity.

If we are going to uncover racism, we cannot be satisfied with easy answers. Scripture says, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (Rom 1:18). The word that is translated "wickedness" can also be translated "injustice." If we continue to live in injustice or wickedness, what happens is that our thinking becomes cloudy, and "claiming to be wise, we become fools." Eventually, we exchange the eternal glory of God by putting something else in God's place (Rom 1:20-25). When we white people do not confront our own racism, we begin to put *ourselves* in God's place. We don't want to commit ourselves to learning to be simply human equals with people of color.

Underneath it all, we white people don't want to do the hard work of uncovering the racism in our systems. The abolitionist movement took decades to change slavery, and still it left us with a racially stratified economic system. How much easier it is to allow our partiality to go unacknowledged. We can just let the system work for us. We don't have to discriminate. The sad truth is, once a type of racism gets started, we don't need to do much for it to keep working. All we have to do is ignore it.

I can recognize unaware/covert racism when a white person (including me) objectifies a person of color, either individually or as a group. If an ex-





B E I N G   W H I T E

planation for apparent inequity seems to demean a minority person, or assumes he is less intelligent or she is less diligent than the whites around, I must keep asking questions.

If whites and minorities have different analyses of the situation, I must keep seeking both perspectives in order to determine the truth. How did this happen? I need to put the situation in a broader context. Where are the roots? What is the history? What is the result? What fruit does the analysis produce in my own soul? (Does it allow me to self-justify, to perpetuate my own partiality? Am I caught up in pride?) What is the fruit in the soul of the ethnic minority person? (Does it cause inappropriate self-doubt? Does it cause self-protective anger? Does it cause self-blaming depression?) Asking these kinds of questions has taught me to see some of the racial dynamics that are operating in my world.

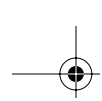
**UNAWARE/SELF-RIGHTEOUS RACISM**

There is a final type of racism that I must include, because it is the type that most tempts me. Sadly, just as Romans says, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), it is also possible to say that all white people are tempted to be racists and imagine ourselves gods over others.

When we are deeply committed to being allies of people of color in the struggle against racial injustice, when we begin to think of ourselves as “anti-racist whites,” a different type of racism tempts us. Jenny Yamato describes it this way:

The newest form of racism I’m hip to is unaware/self-righteous racism. The “good white” racist attempts to shame Blacks into being blacker, scorns Japanese-Americans who don’t speak Japanese, and knows more about the Chicano/a community than the folks who make up the community. They assign themselves as the “good whites” as opposed to the “bad whites,” and are often so busy telling people of color what the issues in the Black, Asian, Indian, Latino(a) communities should be that they don’t have time to deal with their errant sisters and brothers in the white community. Which means that people of color are still left to deal with what the “good whites” don’t want to . . . racism.<sup>10</sup>





*Living in the Truth About White History and Racism*

This type of racism shames people of color. While I am shaming them, this type of racism lets me continue in pride and self-partiality, thinking, *I'm a good white. I'm not a racist.* My sin is left unacknowledged. Not only that, I am alienating myself from other whites and not actively dealing with the sin in my own community.

When I think and act as an unaware, self-righteous racist, Scripture says to me, "You have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (Rom 2:1). Am I thinking that I can escape the judgment of God? Can I judge other white people for doing what I do? Paul asks, shouldn't God's patience, God's kindness, lead me to repentance?

