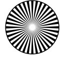
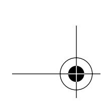
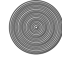
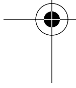
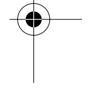


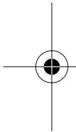
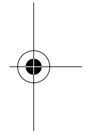





Prologue

SINGING THE RECONCILIATION BLUES

The blues are like spirituals, almost sacred. When we sing blues,
we're singing out our hearts, we're singing out our feelings. Maybe we're hurt
and just can't answer back, then we sing or maybe even hum the blues.
When I sing . . . what I'm doing is letting my soul out.

Alberta Hunter

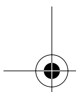
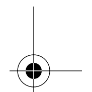
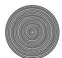
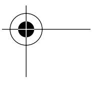
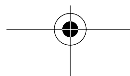
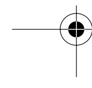
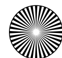



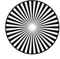
I am sick and tired of racial reconciliation."

That's what a friend of mine e-mailed me recently. We had been talking about Christians and race again, and she was letting off some steam. She's actually a gentle, peace-loving black person, who laughs at cheesy jokes and spends Saturday mornings hunting for Precious Moments figurines at thrift shops. She works at an evangelical Christian company, and white people are generally not afraid of her.

By saying she was sick and tired of racial reconciliation, my friend didn't mean that she was against people of different races coming together in the church. She was simply expressing her fatigue over the running-in-place stagnancy she believed was passing for racial unity among evangelicals.

"I'm roundly discouraged about the possibility of true racial reconciliation in the church," she said. "I honestly don't believe it will ever happen on a large scale—at least not in my lifetime."



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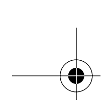
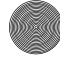
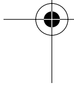
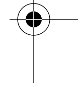
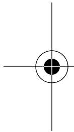
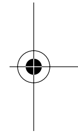





At the time of our correspondence, my friend was twenty-six.

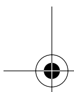
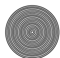
Why did she feel this way? Why would any middle-class black American under forty even need to think about race? After all, Jim Crow flew the coop decades ago. And, save for the occasional overzealous cop or overworked server at Denny's, there's very little daily evidence of racially motivated discrimination in America today. Right?

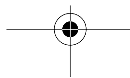
As some of you grumble under your breath at me, allow me to admit that I'm stretching the point a little. Things are by no means all sweet and rosy on the race-relations front. Our nation continues to stumble. But, overall, most people would concede that there's been significant progress. It's almost impossible for people from my thirtysomething generation and below to grasp what racism used to look like. My parents, who adopted me in the early 1970s when they were both well into their fifties, were children of the segregated South—my dad was from Alabama, my mom from Louisiana. For them, "Whites Only" signs were as normal as "No Smoking" signs are for us today. Mom and Dad used to tell me stories about the separate water fountains and the special seating at the back of buses. Yet, like an anthropologist studying a prehistoric civilization, I strained to imagine how it must have felt.

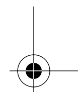
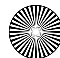



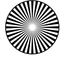
I worked with the evangelist Howard O. Jones on his autobiography a few years ago, and he told me about the backlash he faced when he agreed to become Billy Graham's first African American associate in the late 1950s. Fellow evangelical clergymen shot him dirty looks. A London hotel refused to give him a room. Several of Graham's donors withdrew their support and sent Graham letters with ominous warnings like, "Don't do it, Reverend Graham" and "You're going to ruin your ministry by putting a Negro on your team."

When Howard told me these things, I imagined an uptight white preacher sitting in his church office, turning beet red as he dashed off his angry missive. He probably wrote it right before preparing his Sunday homily on God's unconditional love. And he likely felt he was doing God's will.





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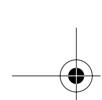
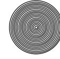
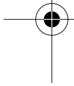
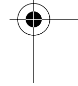
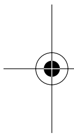
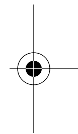





Generally speaking, Christians don't do that stuff anymore. We're more enlightened these days. We've read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and analyzed the movie *Crash* over coffee with our friends. We've heard John Perkins speak at our churches and had our feet stepped on by Tony Campolo at our college chapels. We've lit candles at Promise Keepers and volunteered at inner-city churches. We've prayed, apologized and wept. We've broken down walls, stood in the gap and sung Russ Taff's "We Will Stand" a zillion times at our annual combined services. We know there's a racial divide in the church, and we've been throwing our best stuff at it for the last forty years.

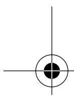
In America, and in the church, things have improved—at least on the surface. While few would say racism is completely dead, most suspect it's at least on life support.

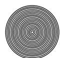



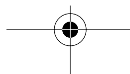
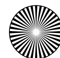
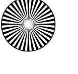
Yet my friend's e-mail sticks in my head. Despite all the visible advances in race relations, something is still broken. And *racism* seems like too convenient of a term to slap on it. No, it's now a more subtle and elusive thing. To paraphrase Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous quote about pornography: "I can't define it, but I know it when I see it."

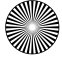
For many people, "institutional racism" is now the term invoked to describe the unnamable brand of discrimination we experience today. The phrase was first coined by controversial black activist Stokely Carmichael and his coauthor, Charles Hamilton, in their 1967 book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. But sociologist James Jones provided the most concise definition in his book *Prejudice and Racism* when he described it as "those established laws, customs, and practices which systematically reflect and produce racial inequities in American society."

Today's most prevalent examples of institutional racism include the failures of public education in urban communities (why are inner-city schools devoid of proper resources?), imbalances in our nation's criminal justice system (what's with the inordinate number of black males in prison?), and the inability of African Americans and other minorities to keep pace with their white counterparts economically (why do some







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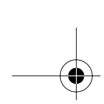
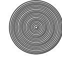
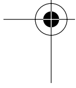
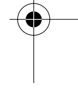
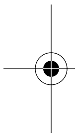
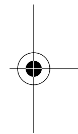





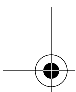
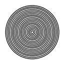
banks charge higher rates on loans to African Americans and Latinos?).

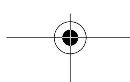
A popular gimmick on some television newsmagazines bears witness to the reality of institutionalized discrimination. Many will remember the hidden-camera segment on ABC's *Primetime* in which the show sent out two undercover investigators, one white and one black, and recorded how they were treated. There were the employees at the dry cleaner who informed the black person that all jobs in the shop were filled, then moments later told the opposite to the white person. There was the employment agency that was polite to the white but lectured the black. Or who could forget the auto salesman who quoted the black person a higher price and stricter terms than his white counterpart on the same car?

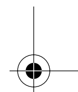
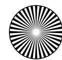



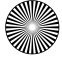
The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was another gut-wrenching reminder that all is not right. “George Bush don't care about black people!” declared rapper Kanye West, implying that something sinister was afoot. But was the Katrina fiasco a symbol of racism? Middle-class black folk got out of the city early just like middle-class whites, and poor whites were left stranded in the devastated metropolis just like poor blacks. Class, the pundits argue, is the new racism. And there's no question that Katrina magnified the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. Nevertheless, the images of throngs of African Americans trapped in a flooded New Orleans were unsettling. Those are the pictures we remember. If that great meteorological and political catastrophe of 2005 has shown us nothing else, it's that in America, it's virtually impossible to separate class from race.

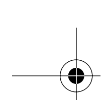
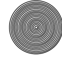
But institutional racism isn't always the culprit. Periodically, even in this enlightened day and age, racism rears its ugly face in a more blatant, retro fashion—like the Ku Klux Klan marching down Main Street, or a high-profile sports commentator's embarrassing slip of the tongue. Every family seems to have a grandparent or uncle who just can't get past skin color. And I've had white people tell me to my face how much they liked me as a person but would never feel comfortable with some-



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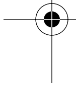
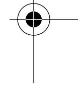
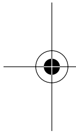
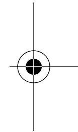



one like me marrying their daughters.

In the summer of 1999, older Americans were reminded of the dark days of commonplace lynchings and other hate crimes when Benjamin Smith, a fanatical white supremacist, went on an evil rampage across Illinois and Indiana. Over the course of four days Smith murdered former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong, a black man who was walking down a neighborhood street with his kids, and college student Won-Joon Yoon, who was standing outside his Korean Methodist church. Smith also wounded an African American minister and six Orthodox Jews before taking his own life.

During Smith's shooting spree, I remember how hard it was to wrap my mind around the fact that this guy was targeting people because of their race and ethnicity. Though the pattern was clear, I couldn't comprehend it. I had to actually think twice before going outside to retrieve the morning paper.

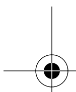
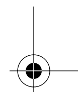
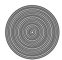



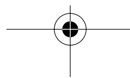
But Aren't Things Better?

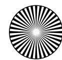
Thankfully, heinous, racially motivated crimes no longer happen with the frequency they once did in our nation. Killing sprees and natural disasters notwithstanding, things have improved. A 2004 Gallup-AARP survey of two thousand people revealed that 55 percent of Americans think the state of race relations is good. And four years earlier, a *New York Times* poll of a thousand African Americans found that only 7 percent thought racism was the most important problem for the next generation of Americans to solve.

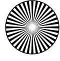
These findings tend to jibe with our everyday experiences too. Though many blacks inevitably have a story or two of being watched closely by a store clerk or having to suffer through a racially insensitive joke, for the most part we no longer worry about the possibility of being lynched when we leave for work in the morning.

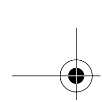
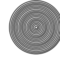
We can see the change in local churches as well. Eleven o'clock Sunday morning may still be "the most segregated hour in America"—what





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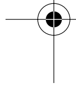
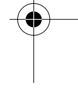
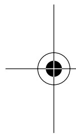
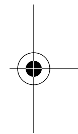



book about religion and race would be complete without that line?—but these days there are more exciting examples of multiracial churches than ever before.

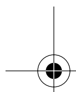
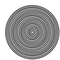
Pentecostal and charismatic-style churches, with their long history of racial diversity, represent some of the most vibrant multiracial congregations. But even among less-expressive evangelicals, it's no longer unusual to see a variety of races and ethnicities worshiping in the same sanctuary. Consider Faith Community Church in West Covina, California, a megachurch with a technicolor blend of whites, Latinos, Asians and blacks, or the Little Rock, Arkansas, congregation Mosaic, whose black, white and Latino members meet in a former Wal-Mart. Then there's Judson Baptist in Oak Park, Illinois, an eighty-five-year-old church just across the western Chicago border that has evolved with its community over the years to become a solidly multicultural congregation.

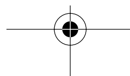



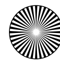
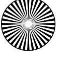
The boldest examples of racially blended congregations are usually the result of an intentional focus on ethnic diversity. But a lot of this new diversity also has to do with the changing face of the middle class.

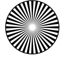
In my daily commute through overwhelmingly white DuPage County, in Chicago's western suburbs, I pass at least three large churches that one might classify as multiracial—or at least they're not exclusively white. American suburbs, once the enclave of white families running away from the cities, are becoming increasingly multiethnic as more African Americans, Latinos and a variety of immigrants stake their claim to a piece of the American dream.

When I began working at the magazine publisher Christianity Today International in 1992, for the longest time I was the only African American on a staff of more than a hundred people. When I did see the occasional black person—who was usually visiting the offices for a business appointment—I gawked in awe. I didn't know whether to be excited or embarrassed. Were they proud to see a brother working at a prominent Christian publisher? Or were they wondering, *What in the world is this guy doing hiding out in this lily-white company?*





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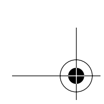
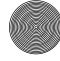
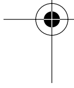
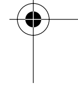
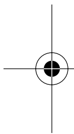
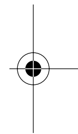





In time, a few other African Americans joined the staff and relieved me of my awkward predicament. Today there are nine African Americans at Christianity Today out of about a hundred and fifty. That falls way below the national percentage of African Americans in the United States (13 percent), but it's a heck of a lot better than where we were. Our company's conservative business philosophy has always been "crawl, walk, run." As far as diversity goes, we're not quite to the toddler stage. But the progress is undeniable.

And Christianity Today is not alone. Once upon a time, finding people of color at any major evangelical organization was as rare as a short-winded preacher. Integration seemed an afterthought. Now, I'm regularly delighted to hear word of a new black or Latino or Asian staff member at a Christian ministry or publisher or college. We've come a long way in a decade. But is it far enough?

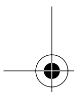
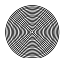
These Folks Are Not Alarmists

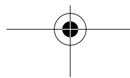
My friend's e-mail reminded me that, even though things are looking up quantitatively, privately many of my fellow evangelical integrators harbor doubts and frustrations. If we've made such progress in race relations, why are many of us so glum about the subject?

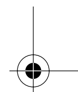
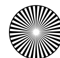
In preparation for this book, I sent out an informal survey to more than fifty African American evangelicals—male and female, young and old, clergy and laypersons. One of the questions I asked was, "Do you think racism is still a problem in the American church?" Here are a few of the comments I received:

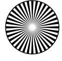
> "If today's brand of racism is financial oppression and blocking access to positions of power and authority, then the American church is guilty."

> "White evangelicals do not on a consistent basis examine or acknowledge the role their racial identity plays in the formation of their faith practice. Just look at the curriculum at





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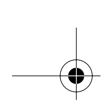
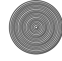
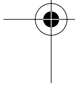
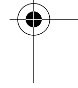
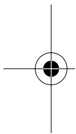
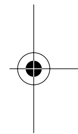





most evangelical seminaries—it's driven by a Eurocentric perspective."

"Two words: white privilege."

"I have had many experiences with the 'institutional racism' that many churches practice. The vast majority of these churches are not ill-intentioned; I am convinced that the major issue is ignorance."

"About ten years ago, I was involved in a sports program at a white church run in part by the youth pastor. When I expressed that softball was not a favorite sport of mine, he made an off-the-cuff comment that he thought 'my people' were good at all kinds of sports. While I knew this man of God meant no harm or malice, it was a statement born out of the ignorance of institutionalized racism. I was young and a new Christian at the time and did not have the eloquence to express how taken aback I was by his statement, considering he was a pastor and I was a baby Christian."

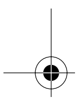
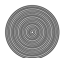



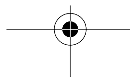
"I've experienced whites who were clearly afraid of me, I believe, because of the stereotypes of how 'black women are forceful and strong-willed.'"

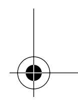
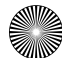
"I recently served on the board of a white evangelical Bible college. I was there to 'integrate' the board. But I found out quickly that integration really meant assimilation."

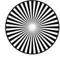
I wasn't shocked by these comments, but I was challenged to ponder their underlying meaning. This wasn't just standard-issue African American griping.

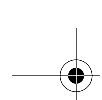
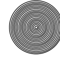
In his much-discussed book *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America,* black scholar John McWhorter explores the self-defeatist attitude he believes is rampant among African Americans. He coined the



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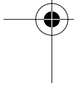
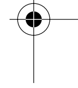
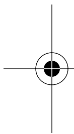
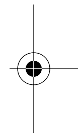



phrase "the cult of victimology" to describe the mindset that leads blacks to blame all of their problems on racism. I've seen this phenomenon in action, maybe I've even participated. But I knew that the common refrain I was hearing from my respondents and friends was not about playing the race card.

The men and women I surveyed were not angry black activists or impetuous loose cannons. They were born-again, Bible-believing, deeply committed Christians who have devoted their lives to serving Christ and humanity. All of them, like me, work closely with whites on a daily basis and have a number of tight interracial friendships. Several of them have white spouses. They are servants and kingdom-builders, pragmatists who would rather pray through a conflict to find understanding than complain for the sake of stirring the pot. I knew their protests and concerns were coming out of a desire for healing, not destruction.

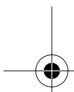
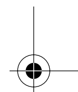
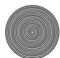
So what's going on here? To paraphrase Louis Armstrong, "What did these evangelicals do . . . to be so black and blue?"

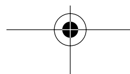
Why We're So Blue

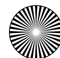
Some people are born into the faith that they will wear, with varying degrees of comfort, for the rest of their lives. Others pick it up as they go, trying on different sizes and styles before realizing what they really are.

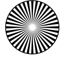
I contemplated the various schools of Protestant Christianity for years, flirting with different varieties of devotion, before I realized that there was a name for the way I believed in God and the manner in which I practiced my faith. I was—and am—an evangelical.

Over the last forty years, a growing number of African American Christians have consciously made their beds in the evangelical wing of the American church. In earlier decades, many black churches subscribed to a biblically conservative but socially progressive theology that would have qualified them, however loosely, as evangelicals—if they had cared about such labels. But they didn't. Identifying themselves with a white-dominated theological movement was not a priority.







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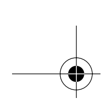
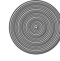
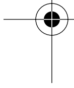
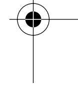
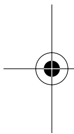
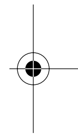





Unlike their predecessors, today's post–civil rights generation of black evangelicals is well aware of the theological nomenclature. And consequently, they're grappling with what it means to live with this strange, DuBoisian dichotomy—a "double-consciousness" that often requires them to see their faith through a white cultural lens.

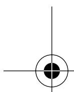
They are people like Dwight Perry, a high-ranking leader of the Baptist General Conference and a former professor at the Moody Bible Institute. Dwight became a Christian as a young adult in the 1970s through an evangelical parachurch ministry. "As a result," he writes in his book *Breaking Down Barriers*, "my perception of my culture was altered, and my theology was filtered through a grid that reinforced middle-class white values. In looking back, I realize that this early influence was beneficial to my spiritual development, but it hindered my ability to connect with my own community."

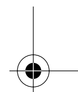
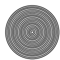



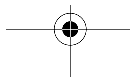
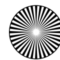
They are people like Brenda Salter McNeil, a consultant on diversity issues and a popular conference speaker. For years, Brenda was a director for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship before launching her own ministry. She relates to Dwight's experience. "In many of our evangelical organizations," says Brenda, "people of color either leave to preserve their racial identity or become so 'white' that they feel alienated in their home community."

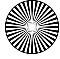
What really troubles some black evangelicals, and you might have picked this up from the earlier comments, is that their white counterparts don't even realize how much their "whiteness" affects their faith. After confessing that she was "sick and tired of racial reconciliation," my young friend who wrote me that e-mail added: "The white Christians I encounter often display a shocking provincialism—a real naiveté about the world around them. Frankly, it's as if they are stunned to find out that their cultural, political, and religious frame of reference is not the only one."

Others share similar observations about feeling disconnected, patronized, marginalized, misunderstood. Yet, like me, they know that the evangelical world is where they belong. For better or worse, this is where





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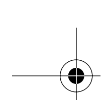
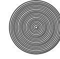
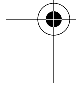
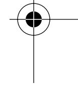
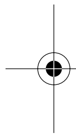
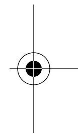





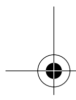
God has called us to serve him. This is home.

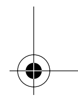
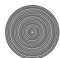
And that, in essence, is what this book is about—the loneliness of being "the only black," the frustration of being expected to represent your race but being stifled when you try, the hidden pain of being invited to the table but shut out from meaningful decisions about that table's future. These "reconciliation blues" are about the despair of knowing that it's still business as usual, even in the friendly context of Christian fellowship and ministry.

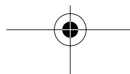
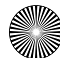
As a journalist, I've had the privilege of interviewing all sorts of people on a wide range of topics. But the subject I tend to come back to again and again is this matter of race relations in the church. In the pages that follow, you will meet some of the individuals I've encountered during my quest to better understand this issue. They are men and women whose faith in God has brought them to serve, work, worship and live within the borders of American evangelicalism. Through their stories and mine, I hope to give you a glimpse of what it means to be black and evangelical. My hope is that this inside perspective on what I regrettably call "white Christianity" can help both blacks and whites get a better sense of the condition of our racial reconciliation and the distance we need to travel to make it something more authentic and true. If you're looking for "three easy steps" or "ten principles," this is probably not the book for you. Instead, my aim here is to share with you voices, opinions and personal stories that can lead us all to a fresh and more honest conversation across racial lines.

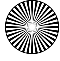



The last thing I want to do is add my voice to the monotonous chorus of black folk crying racism. This book is not meant as an indictment of white Christians. Racism most certainly persists, but my concern is something deeper. Ellis Cose observes in *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, "People do not have to be racist—or have any malicious intent—in order to make decisions that unfairly harm members of another race. They simply have to do what comes naturally." I think this is true for people of all races. Whether it's the sin of racism, greed, pride or indifference, doing what comes naturally is what always gets us in trouble. Better to





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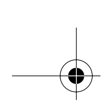
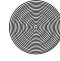
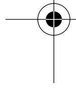
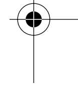
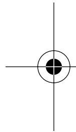
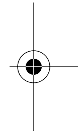





channel our thoughts, actions and desires through the purifying filter of God's Spirit and his Word.

NOT JUST BLACK AND WHITE

Though this book deals primarily with the black-white relationship, since that is my personal experience, this is by no means just a black-white issue. Not anymore.

Native Americans, our nation's first occupants, are a people whose voices are typically forgotten or ignored in our discussions of racial justice. In 2002 the Latino population, boosted by high immigration rates, surpassed African Americans to become the largest minority group in the United States. The Asian American populations are also growing at record paces. Already, in states like California, Texas and Hawaii, whites are no longer the majority race.

Evangelical believers from these ethnic communities know how it feels to live on the margins of the movement. In chapter ten, you'll hear some of their stories as well.

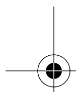
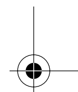
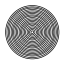
THE CHURCH'S OPPORTUNITY

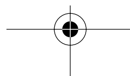
Julius Lester, an award-winning children's author, explains in *The Blues Singers* that the blues "are like having the flu in your feelings. But instead of your nose being stuffed up, it's your heart that needs blowing."

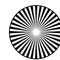
When it comes to race relations among evangelical Christians, our hearts, heads and souls need frequent blowing. For years, evangelicals were on the wrong side of the issue—the conservative, status-quo-maintaining, wait-and-see, please-be-long-suffering, don't-rock-the-boat side. And while things have clearly improved, there remain shadows of distrust, misunderstanding and inequity. To put it gently, we ain't there yet.

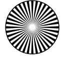
That's why the reconciliation blues isn't just a sob story; it's a call to action.

The good news is that, despite our frequent missteps, the church is







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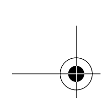
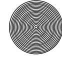
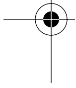
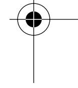

the one institution that's best equipped to overcome the racial divide. In the late nineteenth century, the anti-slavery movement was forged in the Christian church. Despite secularist attempts to marginalize its religious roots, the civil rights movement of the twentieth century was at heart a church-birthed affair. In both of these cases, the faithful response of a few daring believers gave way to powerful demonstrations of God's deliverance, justice and grace. After a long human struggle, God broke through.

That's why the reconciliation blues can also be a harbinger of hope. To paraphrase the psalmist, "The blues may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5).