

MEKDES HADDIS

FOREWORD BY LATASHA MORRISON

A JUST MISSION



**LAYING DOWN POWER AND
EMBRACING MUTUALITY**



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ONE



THE AWAKENING

*We will never understand the significance of Jesus Christ
if we do not understand the rage he can provoke.*

EUGENE PETERSON

MOVING TO THE UNITED STATES at the age of nineteen had crucial racial implications for someone like me who grew up sheltered and surrounded by role models who were all Black. Although I was inundated by Western culture in Ethiopia, I experienced it as an international introduction to prepare me for the real world ruled by such a culture. My parents knew to give me a leg up so I would have a fighting chance of surviving a world ruled by Western influence. Part of that process was making sure I spoke English and was familiar with American culture, but that preparation failed to factor in my race. Where I am from, people fully understand the economic disadvantage of living in a developing country, but they don't consider their race as a factor because everybody looks the same. In that regard we were the majority living in a colorblind world.

In her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Beverly Tatum details how microaggressions and

subtle racial profiling place a chip on the shoulders of Black and Brown American adolescents, who begin to develop a racial identity far earlier than their white peers. She writes, “As the result of a new and heightened awareness of the significance of race, the individual begins to grapple with what it means to be a member of a group targeted by racism. Research suggests that this focused process of examination of one’s racial or ethnic identity may begin as early as middle or junior high school.”¹ As an outsider I experienced this process later in life, while in college. Although it was delayed for me because I grew up in Ethiopia, it began as soon as my feet touched American soil.

I came expecting to experience a sense of discomfort until I was integrated into the new culture. For the first couple of years I was okay with that discomfort and I took my time being an outsider learning to become an insider. It’s not like my new friends had any prior memory or experience of living a similar type of life as me, so I had no expectations of fitting in. I thought my peers were trying to figure me out as much as I was trying to figure them out. The racial problems became apparent once I got used to the culture and started working my way toward rightfully earning a spot in this new society I was now part of. I had done my part in speaking the language, winning scholarships, working on campus and appreciating the culture, even to the extent of understanding their humor. I knew once I started laughing with my friends while watching *Napoleon Dynamite* or *Elf* that I truly had arrived at a level of understanding the college culture I was a part of. I expected to eventually find a welcoming community that

would extend hospitality, teach me its ways, and help me make this place my new home.

Unfortunately the natural progression of cultural integration didn't seem to work in my case. I benefited from the hospitality of a few wonderful friends, but they were the exception and not the rule. There were no open arms welcoming me to my global church family; I was invisible and my story irrelevant. My dream of linking up arm in arm to worship Jesus and reach the world together with the hope of his gospel remained a dream. My ultimate goal in coming to the United States was to eventually go back home to serve my people, so I was purposeful in learning Scripture and finding a community of believers that would rally behind me.

Even though there were subtle hints that told me true hospitality was out of the question for someone like me, I didn't have the framework to understand why. I was too naive and colorblind to associate the distance being placed between me and others who were white as a racial issue. On top of that, my immigration process and my studies kept me busy. Renewing visas every now and then to make sure I remained in good status while trying to keep my grades up and going through homesickness and loneliness all took on a life of their own. One thing I didn't have was time to sit down and contemplate the larger racial framework that was impacting my daily life.

I experienced uncomfortable but oddly similar interactions with my new friends and strangers alike. For example, the first time I was made aware that I was Black was when a man who hosted a church barbecue at his house approached me and asked, "Do you feel like you have an easier time being

accepted in white circles as a Black woman because you are light-skinned?” You can imagine my shock as I had no idea what he was talking about. My cultural identity didn’t have a race. It certainly had an ethnicity—Ethiopian—but not a race. I was flustered because I had many questions of my own but, most importantly, at that moment I was deeply hurt because I realized he did not see me as one of his own. No matter how much I loved Jesus, I was never going to be one of them. I felt unwelcome in his home and wanted to run back to my dorm.

Despite my pain and feeling of being blindsided, I had to find a respectful way to excuse myself from the conversation. The emotions that came after were new, anger and confusion that became sadness, which added to my homesickness. There was no one in that circle with whom I could have processed what I had just experienced. It was now my problem to deal with, even though it was this man who saw me differently and pointed it out. I had to carry the burden of his ignorance and deal with it, alone. This experience marked the beginning of the rest of my journey in white evangelical circles.

Jesus expects us to love even our enemies, but how do we love someone who wounds us so deeply and doesn’t even know it? It is difficult to apply Scripture in this dynamic so the relationship can be restored: “If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he won’t listen, take one or two others with you, so that by the testimony of two or three witnesses every fact may be established” (Matthew 18:15-16). I was invited into this man’s home after entering his church and living in his country. There was no way I could express my grievance to someone

with a visible advantage over me in every sense. I had to deal with it in my own way. I minimized the impact and kept looking for other circles where people might think differently. It's sad to think back and realize that it was only once I had endured the microaggressions that doors opened and allowed me to step into leadership and ministry roles. I guess I passed the test of being a "safe Black person" who wasn't going to be a troublemaker.

I forced myself to accept life in America as it was presented to me in my white evangelical spaces. It didn't take much time to learn that I needed to lean on my international friends for support and community, because they were going through similar situations based on their skin tone and where they were from. According to student mission organization The Traveling Team, there are almost a million international students in the United States each year. Sixty-two percent of these international students are from 10/40 Window countries—nearly half a million students. Eighty percent will return to their countries having never been invited to an American home. Forty percent of the world's heads of state have studied in the United States, but only 10 percent of international students are reached by US ministries.² Most, if not all, of my friends and I were already believers who chose to go to a Christian college, but our race was a roadblock preventing us from fully being part of the community that intentionally kept us at bay. So how would nonbelievers who need to be pursued, loved, invited in, and welcomed feel about their experience with American Christians?

We became each other's support system, and we came up with ways to answer questions from our white peers that we

felt were intrusive, insensitive, or asked too frequently. We needed quick and witty responses that would satisfy their curiosity so they would leave us alone. It was clear to us that their questions were not meant to get closer to us but about research. For example, my top three most-asked questions were, “What’s Ethiopia like?” “Were you a Christian before coming to the United States?” and “Can I touch your hair?” My answers were: “It’s home,” “Ethiopia is one of the oldest Christian nations in the world,” and “No.” Someone once had the audacity to ask a Kenyan friend if she had seen a car before coming here. She responded sarcastically, “No, I rode lions to school.” The idea of being from a country in Africa somehow made us primitive to them and shaped how our peers saw us. It hindered their ability to extend a dignified question that would be a bridge to building a relationship. It was obvious that while we were crossculturally trained from a young age to not only function but lead in Western culture, our white peers were not even aware of their own culture. Our interaction was not harmonious; in fact it was frustrating to have to be the object of their crosscultural training when their parents and churches should have done that for them.

These people, who believed they were called to be missionaries to our countries, could not even have a simple conversation with us as their peers. We were extensions of our people; therefore we were probably put in place by God to help them learn and grow while in the comfort of their home. Their training for missions focused on finding primitive people somewhere around the world and saving them, so they didn’t have the lens to see how building a friendship with Black and Brown people in their communities was the first step to

building a bridge to the larger work God was calling them to. Seeing this missed opportunity, it was natural for us to wonder why they were being sent to our people. How would they be called to the nations when they couldn't even be friends with their neighbors? For my part, I wanted to do everything I could to mitigate the issue of white saviorism on the mission field so my people would not be exposed to such ignorance.

I found some relief from the condescending culture when I moved to the DC area after college. The Lord opened an internship opportunity at a megachurch, which became my home. It was a place where I was mentored and discipled by some of the most dynamic leaders who loved God and honored his name. My particular campus was very diverse. It had no single ethnic group that could be considered a majority. I imagine heaven is like that, with everyone equally represented. It was in that place that I started to feel normal again and to understand that true multiethnic churches can exist. I saw men and women from all ethnicities and walks of life choosing to follow Jesus. It was spiritually vibrant and physically colorful. It was a place of rest, healing, and restoration. Learning how to minister to people who were different from me prepared me for what was to come in my future ministry career. And it gave me a desire to see true multiethnic churches that will set the stage for the global mission movement and beautiful mutuality.

FINDING A NEW COMMUNITY

In September of 2016, while my husband and I were in the process of moving to Charlotte, North Carolina, news broke about the shooting of Keith Lamont Scott by a police officer.

The Queen City's streets filled with mourners lamenting Scott's death and protesting for justice. At the time I had just started to develop a deeper understanding of the framework of racism and how it had shaped America. Since this was happening so close to my new home, it forced me to open my eyes and confront realities that had real implications for my family. As the wife of a Black man and mother of a Black child, I needed to understand what it meant for us to live in the South and how my faith plays a role in this intersection.

As I look back today on our move, I see that it was not a coincidence that I was introduced to Charlotte during a public outcry for justice. I had just been invited to join a Christ-centered racial reconciliation Facebook group called Be the Bridge by a friend who had adopted her kids from Ethiopia and was starting to wrestle with their experience of being Black in America. As I watched her grow in her role as a white parent who was engaged in their cultural struggles, I was impressed by her cultural awareness. It was encouraging to see the work she was doing on herself so her kids wouldn't have to be her educators. I rarely saw this type of dedication in other white friends, so I jumped into this group to see what type of environment had given her such sensitivity to her kids' cultural experience.

That environment quickly became the place where I began to awaken to my own blindness to racial injustice and inequalities all around me. Living half my life surrounded by people who looked and talked like me had given me the experience of the majority culture; therefore I had a lot of listening to do to Black and Brown voices with minority experiences.

Listening to them gave me the language I needed to voice my own experience and tell my story in a culture that no longer centers my experience. Once I learned the implications of systemic racism, I understood that as the larger racial problem people of color deal with every day in America. I realized I was not constantly running into unkind or ignorant white people, nor were they reacting to something I had done; they, too, were taught to see me differently. What a deeply strategized spiritual warfare that has plagued the church for centuries and prevented her from experiencing true community! Yet no one was talking about the spiritual implications of racism, giving the enemy further power to divide us.

While I was in the midst of this awakening, Scott's death was the backdrop against which I finally pieced together an understanding of the systemic racism America was built around. The protesters of his death on the screen of my TV were not a distant annoyance or a disconnected group to which I got to assign a biased narrative in my head. They were my brothers and sisters, my new neighbors and descendants of my people. These were the people who fought for equality and freedom so I could proudly declare myself a Black immigrant woman and walk with my head held high. They were people who continued to fight for their rights and had not chosen cruel retaliation as payment for what they had endured for generations. These were the descendants of strong and powerful men and women who had not only survived but continued to excel against all odds. This time around, those faces on the screen were kin to me and I had nothing but compassion. I finally understood what Dr. King meant when he said, "A riot is the language of the unheard."

When things calmed down in the city, the talk of racial reconciliation died down in our new church, and it seemed to be completely forgotten within six months or so. In my online community full of Black and Brown people, however, the issues never died. We faced them every day, sharing prayer requests about how to teach our children about racism without destroying their innocence. We discussed how to lovingly confront coworkers about their racist behavior. Trying to apply Matthew 18 to this dynamic seemed impossible, since the white evangelical spaces we found ourselves in don't recognize racism as a corporate or individual sin needing to be addressed biblically. We had to sit with the sorrow of these realizations and lick our own wounds without community. A dear friend Karen, who recognized the need, assembled female ministry leaders working in white spaces and created a support group for us, a collective for women of color that helped us find the encouragement our churches and para-church ministries were not able to give. She said, "We are the Brown faces in white spaces that God has placed to do his work of reconciliation, and that is our mission field."

AWAKE AND ON MISSION

Although the city of Charlotte was racially divided, my church was heavily involved in annual short-term mission trips to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. By then I had made the decision not to participate in any missional activities that didn't start from their own neighborhoods. Every time an invitation to go on one of these short-term trips was extended to me, I found myself tensing up, wondering how in the world this made sense to my fellow church family. Our city was still

wounded from communal trauma and Black people were still trying to heal, but instead of pouring our resources into restoring trust and praying for healing, we were making a tone-deaf move: mobilizing white people to go reach Black people in a faraway land. I suspected perhaps this was a subconscious effort to ease the guilt and discomfort racism brought up in our church folks. It broke my heart that the remedy for the privileged was to go to another Black community to make themselves feel better while they ignored the needs nearby.

As a person of the Black diaspora who is part of both the Black community in America and the Black global community, I don't agree with such a mission. I feel like I have been given a front-row seat to watch how a system that builds up one group of people and suppresses another continues to run without hindrance because we insist on being colorblind. A church that turns a blind eye to her neighbors but travels around the world to feed the "poor" is not only hypocritical but actively hurting the Great Commission:

Jesus came near and said to them, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

The Great Commission was given to disciples who knew Christ and gave up everything to follow him. It was given to those who had experienced a life-altering faith, one they were eager to share with the world. The life they lived with Christ

compelled them to speak to everyone they encountered so that they became carriers of the gospel around the world. How can there be a mission movement without such disciples? Jesus didn't mince words; he wants those who go to be his true followers, not hug givers or housepainters. This means that as much as we're eager to fulfill the Great Commission, we must first start with the great commandment—loving our neighbor as ourselves.

One of the best things I've seen and learned from ten plus years of ministry in majority culture churches is the careful attention given to local discipleship. I've been a part of small group ministry movements that transform church culture in evangelical spaces. I have learned a great deal about the meticulous processes and checks and balances designed to help churches avoid placing people in leadership who are harboring or vulnerable to moral failure. The selection process for these leaders is deliberate and detailed, and as a result it is difficult to find an unqualified person leading. We have created intricate applications and scrupulous interview strategies to help us select leaders who will care for the spiritual well-being of the body, while preparing ongoing trainings and coaching to help them grow. There are teams that write curricula and create tactics to make small groups something people want to be a part of. I have acquired a great deal of knowledge and confidence in choosing whose leadership I submit to in my personal spiritual journey because of what I have seen done right in these places. If there is a topic I can talk about for days, it is how many guardrails healthy churches have placed around their processes as safeguards from failure. But when it comes to selecting and preparing individuals to

do the very thing Jesus commanded his church to do before ascending into heaven, integrity is lacking.

What continues to floor me is the lack of connection between all these values and processes and the mission movement. I have not seen any of the leadership models we use to develop our small group leaders locally or any of the processes designed to ensure accountability in our local congregations being carried over as we send people off to other countries to “lead.” I have seen these responsibilities handed off to parachurch ministries when it comes to sending long-term missionaries, but they’re completely overlooked in short-term missions. This neglect results from a lack of knowledge as well as biased assumptions that the ends justify the means. These practices give churches permission to send people they have no business sending at the expense of the receiver.

As I noticed the church’s failure to uphold standards of leadership and accountability on the mission field, it occurred to me that it was catering to the needs of its consumers—the goers. Who was looking out for the receivers who would be consumed by these unhealthy practices? It made me wonder what would motivate people to go to a place or a people group they didn’t value. Did they know what the impact of their good intentions would be?

If we truly loved God’s global church, we would not give her our bare minimum or send underqualified workers for the sake of their “experience.” We would send people who saw her people as image bearers of the king and had hearts of servant leaders, wanting to wash the feet of the people to whom they were called. Instead, what we see in these mission trips is a

desire to center oneself and exploit the other. The individualistic nature of the Western church is a byproduct of secular culture, and as a result it has failed to fulfill the call to make disciples of all nations.

This practice continues when white saviorism is the vehicle used to make an emotional appeal and recruit “missionaries” to go instead of equipping disciples to become witnesses wherever they are. Race and socioeconomic status are used as the number-one method for recruiting workers. Appeals such as this excerpt from a 2017 article are very common:

Africa was once known as the “white man’s graveyard.” In the early days of the modern missionary movement, wave after wave of pioneer missionaries landed on the shores of this continent determined to establish a beachhead for the gospel of Jesus Christ. These early men and women laid down their lives to disease and a hostile population for the sake of the gospel. As historian Ruth Tucker notes, “Africa has claimed the lives of more . . . missionaries than any other area of the world.” Yet still they came. It was these 19th-century missionary pioneers, Tucker writes, “who risked all to open the way for Christianity in Africa.”

Today there are cures for diseases like malaria and dysentery, and many indigenous peoples in Africa have joined the urbanization migration. Still, the challenge facing our generation to bring the gospel to every corner of the continent is no less daunting than it was 200 years ago.³

This is a perfectly crafted appeal to white saviorism, informed by a racist and colonial picture of mission. What’s

rarely seen is the other perspective. If we rewrote this appeal to read as follows, we'd see how divided the global mission movement is:

Colonialism is known as “the Black man’s graveyard.” After white people stepped foot on the beautiful continent of Africa, death and desolation followed. Many families were ripped apart, little boys and girls stolen from their homes and sold off into slavery in a faraway land. While treated in the most inhumane conditions, they had to begin a life of enslavement away from the land where God created them to be free and to possess. The white man has claimed more African lives than any other race in the world and has done so in the name of Jesus Christ.

As shocking and even offensive as this might sound, it is just a hint of how my people see Western mission. The difference between what Africans think the white man has done to them and what the white man thinks he’s done for them is like night and day. It’s why we need to explore this topic further.

If white churches continue using racial and emotional appeals to mobilize their people, the response will be a racial and emotional resistance to their efforts. We do in fact reap what we sow, and the time has come to pause and reflect on the methods being used to do mission. Although the white savior version of mission might resonate with white people, it is met with resistance by people of color, who have always struggled with the version of Western mission that dehumanized their ancestors. The claim that the white man opened the door to African Christianity in the nineteenth

century is untrue, as African Christianity dates all the way back to the first century. As the BBC's *Story of Africa* series states, "The Christian communities in North Africa were among the earliest in the world."⁴ Just because the white man got to participate in the nineteenth century doesn't mean we have to rewrite our history.

This is something too important to ignore, something that is damaging the name of Christ and the work of the gospel throughout the global church. Unless we confront the elephant in the room that's standing in the way of us seeing each other as equals, we cannot work together. Western Christians who have the power and means to inflict pain and walk away without immediate repercussion have little awareness of the magnitude of their negative impact on the global church and the work of the Great Commission. Scripture is clear that God has given every part of his body an essential role in building his kingdom. In 1 Corinthians 12:

But as it is, God has arranged each one of the parts in the body just as he wanted. And if they were all the same part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" Or again, the head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that are weaker are indispensable. And those parts of the body that we consider less honorable, we clothe these with greater honor, and our unrespectable parts are treated with greater respect, which our respectable parts do not need. (1 Corinthians 12:18-24)

The cultural superiority of the West has inflicted a one-sided mission movement on the rest of the world, demanding that all cultures embrace and elevate their superior approach to theology and godliness as their own. How can we be united in our efforts to reach the lost when we are lost ourselves?

The need to intersect justice with the mission movement is undeniably central to the gospel because of how valuable Jesus made it to be. He always saw and addressed the social conditions of people, and by doing so he revealed his power to them. When it comes to any social issue other than racism, Western Christianity actively uses social justice as a catalyst and a strategy to do mission work effectively. For example, it has helped rescue women from sex trafficking and organized conferences around that particular issue of injustice. This response is necessary, but it misses the mark when it leaves out one of the central injustices in the world: racism. Whether it's been the inflicter of injustice or played a role of the "savior," Western Christianity has always had a part in social justice. Therefore it's incumbent on leaders of the modern mission movement to pay attention to the racial injustices that have infiltrated the Western church and have been packaged and sent out with their missionaries. As fish don't know when they're in water, most mission organizations are unaware of the cultural burden they impose on indigenous leaders when they demand their way as the best to reach a people group that has graciously invited them in. Keeping the autonomy of the culture gives indigenous leaders a wider reach, therefore Western leaders must pull back and do some work to gain the self-awareness required to pursue justice for the kingdom. When they do that, they make a way for the gospel to be

preached in all cultures, languages, and tongues freely. This is the only way it can spread like wildfire without the hindrance of modern-day colonialism that demands conformity to white culture. Being awake to racism only creates a greater awareness to the restoration work that awaits God's people in the global mission movement. And that's exactly what the church of Christ needs to lead with.

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