

EXCERPT



Redisciplining the White Church *From Cheap Diversity to True Solidarity*

May 19, 2020 | \$16, 208 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4597-2

“David knows that racism is insidious, and he has chosen to expose how it operates so we can all see it and be healed of its power and influence over us. I can’t think of anybody I trust more to write this important book.”

—Brenda Salter McNeil, from the foreword

Discipleship at the Intersection of Race and Christianity

Many white Christians across America are waking up to the fact that something is seriously wrong—but often this is where we get stuck. The prospect of addressing racial blind spots and assumptions can seem impossible, especially when the members of our communities are content with the way things are—or, as is often the case in this country, when our neighborhoods and towns appear to offer little in the way of cultural diversity.

For many of these Christians, the response to these blind spots and assumptions has been to become—or at least try to become—more racially diverse. But is diversity even the answer to the racial blind spots we’re beginning to recognize? Should we pursue racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity as the answer to the racial dysfunctions we are beginning to recognize?

I agree that there is something wrong in white Christianity, though for the past ten years I’ve lived and done ministry largely outside its bounds. Our church’s neighborhood is largely African American, and the congregation itself is racially and ethnically diverse. My own neighborhood is very diverse, as is our children’s public elementary school. The pastors and ministry leaders who have mentored our church are almost all women and men of color. I mention these details to point out that for the past decade my vantage point on white Christianity has been one of distance and reflection. My understanding of homogeneously white ministry has changed over these years, aided by the multiracial community to which I belong. From these women and men, I’ve come to see that the segregation inherent in the Christianity I grew up in is not neutral or merely a reflection of individual choices and preferences.

We don’t really talk about segregation anymore. The word sounds like a relic of the civil rights movement, an era to be studied clinically from the distance of history. Most white people, despite the racial homogeneity of most of our churches, don’t think of ourselves as being segregated from people of color. And we certainly don’t imagine that we actively contribute to the racial segregation of our society.

Consider, though, the racial and ethnic demographics of our churches. As a group, white evangelicals are 76 percent racially homogeneous while mainline Protestant denominations are 86 percent white. Though some denominations are racially diverse, the individual congregations within them are overwhelmingly not. Using a sociological definition, no more than 12 to 14 percent of American congregations are racially mixed.

Typically, Christian organizations that are predominantly white think of their demographics as an accident of personal or cultural preference. Yes, we realize that 11:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning may be the country’s most segregated hour, but we have understood this to be a relatively benign segregation. But now, as racial tensions and divisions become increasingly visible, ministry leaders are rethinking the real-world impact of their churches’ racial homogeneity.



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David W. Swanson is the pastor of New Community Covenant Church, a multicultural congregation in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood. He helps lead New Community Outreach, a nonprofit that collaborates with the community to reduce sources of trauma, and speaks around the country on the topics of racial justice and reconciliation. He has written articles for *Christianity Today*, *The Englewood Review of Books*, and *The Covenant Companion*. He lives in Chicago with his wife and two sons.

With all its ugly implications, *segregation* is the right word for what we have long ignored. It's just that now, in the endless culture wars fought on cable news and social media, it's harder to miss how segregation undermines the witness of the body of Christ.

Despite my own situation in racially diverse communities and my deep commitment to the multiracial church, my years outside of white Christianity have not led me to think of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity as the answer to the problem ailing white Christianity. The reason for this is simple: the segregation within white Christianity is not fundamentally a diversity problem: it's a discipleship problem. Addressing white Christianity's lack of diversity without first reckoning with our discipleship would be like redecorating a house built on a failing foundation. Before white churches pursue racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity as the solution to our segregation, we must first address the discipleship that led to our segregation in the first place.

Discipleship is rarely discussed at the intersection of race and Christianity, even though it is central to the identity of every church seeking to be faithful to Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28. Could this neglect explain why white Christians are better known for partisanship than reconciled communities across cultural lines of division? These days we seem more committed to culture wars than to proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God. The racial isolation that marks white Americans in general is just as pronounced among Christians. And, as has become sadly evident in recent years, our ears are often attuned more to our preferred partisan media sources than to the church of color down the street. Race keeps us from seeing how much we hold in common with our siblings in Christ.

My claim, then, is that in order to address our segregation, white churches and ministries must begin with discipleship, not diversity.

—Taken from the introduction to part one, "From Cheap Diversity . . ."

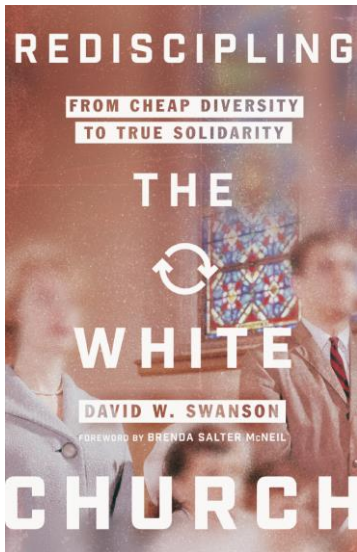


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Q & A



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Before white churches can pursue diversity, we must first address the faulty discipleship that has led to our segregation in the first place. Pastor David Swanson proposes that we rethink our churches' habits, or liturgies, and imagine together holistic, communal discipleship practices that can reform us as members of Christ's diverse body.

Discipleship Before Diversity

What motivated you to write *Redisciplining the White Church*?

David W. Swanson: Watching white evangelical support for President Trump increase pre- and post-election as his rhetoric and policies increasingly marginalized and harmed people of color. I don't write about this in the book, but this was the moment that caused me to begin thinking about racial segregation in the white church through the lens of discipleship.

I also wrote the book to a white pastor or Christian leader who has become aware that there is something wrong within white Christianity, that the segregation that previously seemed neutral has, in fact, a malicious edge to it. Yet the only thing this leader has been told to do is to pursue racial diversity, to become multiethnic. And because this person's church or social setting is mostly white, they feel stuck.

Finally, I wrote from the conviction that discipleship is at the root of white Christianity's complicity with racial segregation and injustice, what keeps us from living into solidarity with the rest of the body of Christ in any meaningful way. I've seen too many predominately white churches and ministries pursue multiethnicity without ever addressing the dysfunctional discipleship that leads to half-hearted attempts at racial reconciliation and, worse, often wounds Christians of color in those ministries.

Why is a discussion of discipleship so critical to the idea of race and the church?

David: Before pursuing racial, ethnic, or cultural diversity, majority white Christian churches/ministries must address the cultural racial discipleship that has deformed them, acknowledge that their current discipleship efforts have not addressed this racial discipleship, and reimagine their current discipleship practices to orient people away from racial segregation and injustice and toward solidarity with the whole body of Christ.

The challenge of this discipleship approach is that it calls all white churches to step into the work of racial reconciliation. The gift of this approach is that all white churches have an important role to play in this critical work!

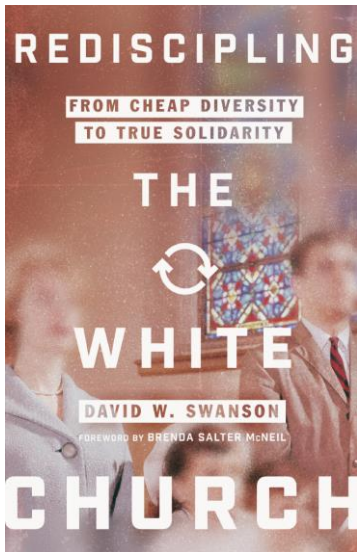


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"This book does not ask you to diversify your congregation. Instead it invites you to join the reconciled body of Christ. To that end, David Swanson has reimagined how to leverage the features of worship and service you already use—preaching, communion, children's ministry, evangelism, and more—to disciple the congregation you already have, regardless of its racial makeup."

—Brandon J. O'Brien, director of content for Redeemer City to City, coauthor of *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*

What do you hope readers, especially church leaders, realize as they read *Rediscipling the White Church*?

David:

- There exists a cultural racial discipleship that has powerfully deformed the imaginations of white Christians, leaving us powerless to pursue genuine reconciliation across lines of cultural division.
- Discipleship before diversity. Before pursuing diversity, white churches/ministries must address this racial discipleship and our historic blindness to it.
- Rather than reinventing entire ministries, white churches can reimagine their discipleship practices intentionally to counter racial discipleship while leading them toward embodied solidarity with their sisters and brothers of color.
- I want my white readers, no matter how racially homogenous their context, to finish the book and say, "We can do this! We have to do this!"
- I want my readers of color to feel a sense of relief, that white Christians are taking responsibility for our discipleship in a way that honors their (Christians of color) experiences.



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