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VOCATION OF THE ELCA: DISMANTLING WHITE SUPREMACY

by

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Recently, we bore witness to yet another manifestation of white supremacy in the United States of America. A group of pro-Trump insurrectionists stormed the U.S. Capital as congress was set to certify the electoral college results naming President-elect Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 Presidential election. The assumed intention of the violence was to halt this process as many have become convinced that the election was fraudulent. Those claims have been abundantly disproven. In the process of storming the capital, law enforcement seemed to be unable or unwilling to stop the attempt and then later appeared in fuller force and managed to clear the capital. As I listened and watched from afar, I experienced tension in my own body. My stomach knotted in anxiety, my shoulders drooped in anticipatory grief, and my heart rate increased as I began to feel activated. I felt a tension simmer in my sternum as I battled the urge to avoid the news, the urge to consume every piece of information available, and the reality that I needed to get some work done, which wouldn't be possible if I chose to continue doom scrolling, or if I chose to repress and avoid it all together.¹ It would require moving through and processing my thoughts, feelings, and body sensations in response to the insurrection.

¹ Doomscrolling is a newly popularized phrase to describe the excessive consumption of negative online news. The origin of the term is accredited to Twitter, generally. It was popularized by Karen Ho, a finance reporter in October of 2018.

As we bore witness and began to respond to this event, people reflected through various social media platforms, some attributed this attack to a group of extremists, others say it was four years in the making, some compared the law enforcement's double standard in their response, or lack thereof, to the abundant and aggressive responses of Law Enforcement officers during the Black Lives Matter demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd, and many were absolutely shocked and appalled that something like this could happen in this country. I am convinced that this event is revelatory of who we are as a country and who we have been. It was yet another manifestation of the white supremacy that has been baked into the foundation and woven into the fabric of this nation. My hope and prayer are that this moment is a catalyst for people, especially white people, to see and understand the realities of white supremacy. As I work through understanding and experiencing this event in my own body and mind, it leads me to question what I am called to do, or how I am called to be, both as an individual in a white body, and as a member of communities. These questions are questions of vocational discernment. I believe one response to these questions is that we are called to wrestle with the ways that we, and our ancestors, have been affected by white supremacy. For people in white bodies specifically, we must grapple with the ways we have been overtly and covertly involved in the creation, adaptation, and sustaining of racism, and move towards dismantling white supremacy.

My particular experiences, communities of accountability, and spheres of influence call me to focus particularly on the intersections of church and white supremacy. I work, study, and worship at ELCA institutions, so that is the "church" to which I refer throughout this paper. It is important to note that there are diverse

expressions of church throughout the United States, the world, and within the ELCA. For the sake of brevity, this paper will use “church” to refer to the predominantly white congregations within the ELCA and other predominantly white churches that this work may be applicable to.

The insurrection cannot be solely understood with White Supremacy as the only system of oppression at play. This moment in time is an intersection of multiple systems of oppression, including but not limited to Christian nationalism, classism, and economic injustices. The moment in time that we find ourselves in, is just one within a lifetime of moments of conflict, oppression, brutality, etc. that make up the history of the United States. Therefore, how are we called to be and what are we called to do in this time and this place? Predominantly white churches have a particular role in this work of wrestling with and dismantling white supremacy because of their historical complicity, theological commitments, and community practices.

This context and these experiences lead me to wonder: What is the specific role of predominantly white faith communities in working towards a culture, society and community that's multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial, multi gendered, etc.? How are churches already equipped to do this work? What are the barriers that get in the way of mutual flourishing in diverse communities? What are the theological commitments that can keep us rooted? Or more simply: How are we called to be? And what are we called to do?

I assert that white supremacy includes a racist theology of mission, hierarchy, and compromise. This ideology is evident in the history of the United States and in examining White Body Supremacy and Characteristics of White Supremacy. The Lutheran

theological tradition can function as an antidote to white supremacy culture and can ground and compel faith communities in their commitment to dismantling white supremacy.

This research is contextually relevant for a multitude of reasons. We are situated in a moment of history compels and urges us to ask these questions. My personal context, sphere of influence, and communities of accountability are asking these questions.

This particular moment in history might leave people in a state of dissonance that could be a catalyst for learning and unlearning. At this time, white supremacy has been revealed yet again through the attempted coup in addition to the uprisings and racial reckoning this summer following the murder of George Floyd (and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery and Jacob Blake and recently Dollal Idd and the long list of People of Color murdered by police brutality). During the uprising, many white people stood alongside of Black people and People of Color and publicly committed to antiracism. The United States is in a moment of Racial Reckoning.

In my role as congregational coordinator for the Riverside Innovation Hub at Augsburg University, I work and wonder alongside congregations as they wrestle with what it means to practice “place based vocational discernment in the public square for the common good.” More simply, they are asking what is God calling us to do and how is God calling us to be. Most recently those questions have centered around responding to the neighbors’ need and demand for racial justice. Often the church’s response has been book studies, focus groups or committees, and service through a charity model. Each of these well-intentioned responses fall well within the comfort zone of predominantly white communities, and the dissonance of this moment is calling us to go beyond the

typical and comfortable responses. We're being called and urged to reimagine what it means to be churches that are committed to antiracism and dismantling white supremacy, to engage in long-lasting transformation that brings the revelation of the kingdom of God even closer to the now, than the not yet.

Vocation, from the lens of the Lutheran theological tradition, refers to God's call to live one's life for the sake of the neighbor's flourishing, from the mundane tasks of daily life to one's role in their collective community and everything in between. This lens of viewing one's role in community can ground one into the tradition, and it can sustain the efforts toward dismantling white supremacy, beyond the immediate urgent response. Grounding in the theological tradition connects us to our historical past and across communities in the present. This grounding compels us into long term commitment and individual, interpersonal, and institutional transformation. This is also written with a specific attention to ELCA Church communities as communities of practice, rather than for an individual person. Leaning into the theology and practices of a community, means that the conversations, experiences, and transformation around racial identity could have individual, interpersonal, and institutional impact.

This research is necessary because racism and white supremacy are alive and thriving in and around our ELCA communities. The Church has perpetuated and maintained white supremacy as the status quo, therefore there is a clear role and responsibility in dismantling it. For many Churches and Church leaders, the conversation around racism has been primarily focused on increasing diversity. However, there are many barriers in the way that make authentic diversity difficult. The ELCA, including but not limited to, the churches, leaders, and the denominational body, must reckon with our

complicity in white supremacy and commit to dismantling it. We must also draw on the gifts of our communities and the theological commitments to ground and sustain our work. The ELCA, as it is rooted in theological claims, and equipped with practices, gifts and resources, is uniquely positioned to dismantle white supremacy.

There is an abundance of teachers, preachers, public theologians, activists, and organizers that have and continue to be committed to dismantling white supremacy in general and in the church specifically. Some of the more recent works include Rev. Lenny Duncan's, *Dear Church*. This book asserts that the racial disparity in the ELCA is a theological problem, not a sociological one. Willie James Jennings, the author of *The Christian Imagination* and *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, is a leading theologian in the fields of Liberation Theology and Post-Colonial theology. His book, *The Christian Imagination*, is a foundational text for understanding the history and theology of the construction of race. Jemar Tisby, the author of *Color of Compromise* offers a more contemporary history of the church's complicity in racism. James H. Cone, the father of Black Liberation Theology, has many works that are influential, including *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, *Black Theology and Black Power*, and *Martin Malcom and America*. Howard Thurman, author of *Jesus and the Disinherited* and many other works, was a theologian and civil rights leader. His work was also influential to Martin Luther King Jr.'s public theology.

There have also been countless influential books on race, antiracism, and white supremacy published outside of the field of theology. Ibram X. Kendi's *How to be an Antiracist* is a New York Times Bestseller that outlines the concept of antiracism and provides strategies for individual and institutional change. He also wrote *Stamped From*

the Beginning, a thorough telling of the history of racist ideas in the United States. This book was adapted for youth by Jason Reynolds. Layla Saad wrote *Me and White Supremacy*, a step by step reflection process based on her Instagram challenge #MeAndWhiteSupremacy. Resmaa Menakem is a leader in the field of racialized trauma and somatic abolition. His book, *My Grandmother's Hands*, is transforming the field of antiracism by integrating somatics, or the body. These books are just a few recent additions to the ever-growing field. There are countless others that could be included in this list. And many of the books in these lists are deeply influenced by previous scholars, teachers, and theologians, including but not limited to: bell hooks, Delores Williams, Katie Geneva Canon, and James Baldwin.

Through the first few paragraphs alone, it's evident that there are some underlying assumptions. First, the assumption that I'm writing both from and towards a predominantly white perspective. I work, learn, and worship in ELCA institutions. The ELCA is the whitest denomination in the United States.² This is an intentional focus on whiteness. One might critique the focus on whiteness as continuing to center whiteness. This is a valid critique and certainly a pitfall that many white people working towards antiracism have fallen into. Yet, paradoxically, white people must momentarily pivot the center towards whiteness to dismantle white supremacy. In paying particular attention to whiteness and white supremacy, we can remove the labor of that burden from organizers, leaders, and activists of color and focus our attention on healing and dismantling white

² Michael Lipka, "The Most and Least Racially Diverse U.S. Religious Groups," *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed March 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>.

supremacy, so that we reduce and dismantle the barriers of white supremacy that get in the way of mutual flourishing.

Another assumption might be that we have shared understandings of language and concepts. To avoid misunderstandings, here are some definitions to key concepts as I understand them:

Antiracism: simply put, opposed to racism in policy and practice. I also understand antiracism as an umbrella term that includes various antiracist efforts, specifically dismantling white supremacy.

Church: for this particular paper, I use Church to refer to the predominantly white churches, primarily the ELCA. This shorthand isn't intended to unnecessarily exclude or include other churches, this is just the specific context that I'm rooted in and accountable to. There are most likely parallels that can be drawn to churches from other denominations. However, I'm not as familiar with their structures, cultures, or theological commitments and therefore unwilling to assert claims beyond my knowledge base.

Race: Race is a social construct and racism is a reality. Race, simply put, is a social construct that differentiates people into groups based on skin color and physical characteristics. Race, the construct, has been, and continues to be used to determine superiority and inferiority in terms of policies, practices and ideas. It is also important to distinguish between race, culture and ethnicity. Ethnicity is the grouping of people by shared attributes like ancestry, history, language, tribal affiliation, homeland, and ritual. Culture describes the learned and taught behaviors, beliefs, and values of a group. Culture can change over time. It can also be recreated, erased or destroyed.

Whiteness: a socially constructed racial identity referring to people with light skin. This racial identity group also has customs, cultures, and characteristics. It is currently the normalized and dominant racial identity throughout the United States, and through the process of comparison all other nonwhite people are implicitly or explicitly considered abnormal and inferior.

White supremacy: an ideological belief where white people are believed to be superior to nonwhite people. This myth has remained central to the United States, from the settler's arrival, genocide of the Native Americans, slavery, Jim Crow, to the current institutional structures of policing and mass incarceration. White Supremacy is not unique or exclusive to white supremacy extremists (KKK, proud boys, bugaloo bois, etc.) nor is it something that remains in the past. This belief system has been internalized, often unknowingly, through the continuation of dominant white culture.

These brief definitions will offer some shared understandings as we discuss the historical, racist theology of mission, hierarchy, and compromise, the concepts of White Body Supremacy and Characteristics of White Supremacy, and ways The Lutheran theological tradition may function as an antidote to white supremacy culture.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY AND HOW

History

To understand how we are called to be and what we are called to do, we have to understand our story, the story of the interconnectedness of White Christianity and racism in North America. As William James Jennings writes, “American Christians must take on the difficult work of understanding how whiteness has been woven like a cancer into their Christianity. It is the power of that whiteness to shape our social worlds—defining good and bad, beautiful and ugly, true and false—that is at heart the reason this wound will not heal.”³ White supremacy is interconnected, both historically and contemporarily, with the Church in the United States. How did we get to this point in time? What follows is a survey of key thinkers, theologians, and events that highlight the interconnectedness of racist theology and the church through three key themes in their thinking and writing: mission, hierarchy, and compromise.

Before the conception of race as we know it, in the 3rd century, the early Christian thinker Origen of Alexandria, was theologizing about the goodness of God in relation to the prominent theories of superior and inferior ethnic groups.⁴ He did not set out to prove superiority or inferiority of certain ethnic groups, his assumed intention was to respond to his contemporaries' critiques.⁵ They were asserting that the creation of

³ Willie James Jennings, “What Does It Mean to Call ‘God’ a White Racist?,” *Religion Dispatches*, July 17, 2013, <https://religiondispatches.org/what-does-it-mean-to-call-god-a-white-racist/>.

⁴ Matthijs den Dulk, “Origen of Alexandria and the History of Racism as a Theological Problem,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 71, no. 1 (April 1, 2020): 164–95, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flaa025>.

⁵ den Dulk, “Origen,” 170-172.

superior and inferior ethnic groups prove that God is unjust or that there are multiple Gods, one god who created the superior and another god for the inferior.⁶ Yet, in his process to prove that there's one, just God, he unintentionally defended theories and ideologies that have strong parallels to modern racist notions. These ideas and claims are significant to understanding the origins and development of Christian racist theology from early Christianity to modernity. Mathhij Den Dulk argues that Origen supports four claims that have parallels to modern racist thought.

1. There are superior and inferior peoples in the world.
2. Individuals who belong to an inferior people are in this position as a result of their own sinfulness; they have fully merited their inferior status.
3. Some inferior peoples have objectively wicked customs. These were instituted as punishment for their sins.
4. Geographical location and ethnic inferiority are interrelated.⁷

Dulk further demonstrates how each of these claims are supported in Origen's works, *First Principles* and *Against Celsus*. Briefly, the key elements of his thoughts are that "rational beings are assigned a place in the cosmos according to merit."⁸ And that "God has not randomly treated some beings better than others, but he has treated them impartially on the basis of their own prior conduct."⁹ This is crucial for Origen because it allows for a single, just creator rather than multiple creators or an unjust creator. Origen attributes diversity in creation to the results of free choice that each individual had. It was their "prior conduct" that allocated some peoples to be inferior and those that are inferior

⁶ den Dulk, "Origen," 175-176.

⁷ den Dulk, "Origen," 172.

⁸ den Dulk, "Origen," 173.

⁹ den Dulk, "Origen," 176.

are farther removed from the Divine. It would be difficult, and unnecessary, to argue that Origen was responsible for modern racism. However, it is evident that Origen was a firm believer in the superiority and inferiority of certain people groups. His theories were based on ethnicity and his theology of creation, whereas modern racism is based on the superiority and inferiority of racial groups. His theologizing is yet one example of how thinkers tried to understand God through the assumed truths and experiences of their daily lives. They constructed beliefs about who God is to fit their prior beliefs of ethnic hierarchy. This assumption of hierarchy is one of the key components of racist theology.

These assumptions of hierarchy are also evident in John Cotton and Richard Mather. They were Puritans, students of Aristotle, and the founders of Harvard. Aristotle was another thinker that proposed a human hierarchy. They interpreted Aristotle's beliefs and explanations of human hierarchy to see themselves as the chosen people, and therefore everyone else as inferior, including both Indigenous people and enslaved Africans. They solidified that teaching into "truth" by not allowing Greek or Latin texts to be disputed at Harvard and from there it promulgated into colonial people and into America's intellectual beliefs.¹⁰

Another example of an early thinker with great influence would be Zurara. Two important historians begin their works on the history of racism with Gomes Eanes de Zurara. In *The Christian Imagination*, Willie James Jennings writes the first chapter on Zurara's Tears.¹¹ In *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You*, by Jason Reynolds and Ibram

¹⁰ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (United States: Zondervan, 2019).

¹¹ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press, 2010).

X. Kendi, Zurara is given the title of “World’s First Racist.”¹² Both of these historians write of the storytelling power that Zurara held. He was Prince Henry the Navigator’s chronicler and wrote his biography. This book, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, was the first written defense of African slave trading where Zurara made the argument that enslaving people was missionary work. They were called by God to “civilize and Christianize the African savages.”¹³ This vocational claim, from our modern perspective, seems to be absolutely absurd. Yet this claim was central to the European Christians’ justification for enslaving other human beings. All three key components of racist theology are in that claim. First, they believed that they were called by God to enslave people. To understand slavery in terms of missiology and vocation gave them a power, authority, and right-ness to justify their actions and beliefs. The second, is the assumption of hierarchy. They believed themselves to be superior to the African peoples, and this inferred hierarchy led them to claim that African people were savages in need of being civilized and Christianized. The third component of racist theology is compromise. Enslaving another human requires the enslaver to dehumanize the enslaved person, doing so requires them to compromise some of their own humanity. The vocational claim to “civilize and Christianity” was central to European Christian’s domination, destruction and superiority.

¹² Jason Reynolds and Ibram X Kendi, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You: A Remix of the National Book Award-Winning Stamped from the Beginning* (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2020).

¹³ Jason Reynolds and Ibram X Kendi, *Stamped: A Remix*, ebook: loc. 190

These three key concepts were woven into the Doctrine of Discovery, the philosophical framework for the social, political, and spiritual justification of claiming land that was currently inhabited by Indigenous people.¹⁴ The Doctrine influenced King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the financiers of Christopher Columbus's expeditions. Though Columbus never made it to what is now known as the continental United States, his four voyages did reach the Americas, and this discovery sparked further exploration and the colonization of the Americas.

The African Slave trade in America is said to have begun with the arrival of a Dutch trading ship that was carrying enslaved Africans in August of 1619.¹⁵ The Africans on the ship had been re-stolen from a Portuguese slave trading ship and the Dutch landed off the coast of Virginia with the hopes of selling their acquired "cargo."¹⁶ It's interesting to note that the arrival of enslaved Africans had more to do with economic convenience than it did the demand for labor, at that time. Slavery was not a new concept; the trans-Atlantic slave trade had been occurring in South America since 1526.

In 1656, Elizabeth Key was the first woman of African descent in the Virginia colony to file a lawsuit that claimed she should be free, or a freedom suite.¹⁷ Her case rested on three factors, her father, her indentured status, and her religion. First, her father was an Englishman and a member of the House of Burgesses. At this time, the English

¹⁴ "Doctrine of Discovery," Upstander Project, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://upstanderproject.org/firstlight/doctrine>.

¹⁵ The 1619 Project, "The 1619 Project," *The New York Times*, August 14, 2019, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>.

¹⁶ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*. 33.

¹⁷ Taunya Lovell Banks, "Dangerous Woman: Elizabeth Key's Freedom Suit-Subjecthood and Racialized Identity in Seventeenth Century Colonial Virginia," *Akron L. Rev.* 41 (2008): 799.

practice was to inherit status from the father. Second, before her father died, he arranged for her to be indentured, but after he died her indenture was sold to someone else that kept her beyond her agreed years of service. And eventually, when that person died, she became classified as a slave. The third piece was that she was a baptized Christian, and at that time, Christians were not supposed to be slaves. Her major argument was that, as someone with English paternal ancestry and a baptized Christian, she should be tried in the same manner as English indentured servants whose “terms of service had expired.” Eventually she won her case and she and her son were declared free.¹⁸

A few years later, the outcome of her case would have been different because of *Partus sequitur ventrem*, Latin for “that which is brought forth follows the belly (womb).”¹⁹ In 1662, Virginia passed this as the legal doctrine to determine the bond or free status of children based on the status of the mother. There are two things that come from this doctrine that are incredibly influential to slavery in the United States.²⁰ The first is that most of the women who were bonded were of African descent and this made it even more clear that the distinction of status had something to do with race, and later lead to a very clear racial caste system in the U.S. The second outcome of this legal doctrine is that white fathers no longer had to acknowledge, support, or emancipate their illegitimate children by slave women. This ruling gave white men even more power to objectify, brutalize, and harm Black slave women because there were even fewer potential consequences.

¹⁸ Banks, “Elizabeth Key’s Freedom Suite,” 809-824.

¹⁹ Jennifer L. Morgan, “Partus Sequitur Ventrem: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery.,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 22, no. 1 (March 2018): 1–17.

²⁰ Banks, “Elizabeth Key’s Freedom Suite,” 830-837.

Partus sequitur ventrem is an example of a “slave code.” As the economy began to rely more heavily on the labor of enslaved people, the practices of slavery became regulated with “slave codes.” These codes controlled enslaved people’s lives by depriving them of any legal rights. The reliance on the labor of enslaved people and these codes began to raise questions and conflict for some Christians.

The Christian message has an inherent message of human equality and missionaries were working hard to spread the Christian message and proselytize. However, they faced a conundrum. If slaves converted to Christianity, would they also be considered equal and deserving of rights? Would they begin to believe that themselves? To combat this, Christians re-prioritized, or compromised, their values to accommodate the practices of slavery. Missionaries began to preach a Christianity that was more about “spiritual deliverance, not immediate liberation”²¹ so they could continue to profit off of enslaved people, and practice and spread their religion without worrying about revolutionary consequences. The three components of mission, hierarchy, and compromise, are evident throughout the entire history of slavery. This cognitive dissonance between the claimed beliefs of Christianity and the action, or realities of slavery are consistent throughout the beginnings of The USA.

The Declaration of Independence, drafted by the slaveholding Thomas Jefferson, is another clear example of the ongoing compromise and cognitive dissonance. In the first few lines he writes, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among

²¹ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 39.

these are Life Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”²² There are clear references to God or a higher power that passes down the universal human liberty. Yet the universal rights of independence and equality did not apply to enslaved people. Revealing a limited and contradictory understanding of “universal.” This limited and contradictory claim is made possible through compromising their beliefs to uphold the assumed hierarchy of peoples.

The First Great Awakening shaped the religious terrain of the colonies by emphasizing individual piety, personal relationships with God, and evangelism. Many preachers in this time shared dramatic stories that engaged the audience’s emotion. They warned of sin and hell, and taught that Jesus was the only way to salvation. There were many enslaved Africans and free Black people that heard these sermons and converted to Christianity. The message was full of spiritual equality, yet that did not translate into their everyday lives through social equality. Two great examples of white Christian leaders at this time were George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. They were both important clergy people in the 1700’s who preached spiritual equality for everyone and remained in support of slavery, as long as the slaves were treated with dignity.²³

The three components of racist theology: mission, hierarchy, and compromise are evident throughout all of history. In the era of the Civil War and Emancipation Proclamation, the “Lost Cause Narrative” that depicted Robert E. Lee as a manly, chivalrous, crusading Christian confederate is an example of the effects of previous ideological and theological compromises.²⁴ In the Jim Crow era, a time of legal policy

²² Thomas Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence* (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952).

²³ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*,

²⁴ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 95.

and informal traditions that segregated and subjugated Black people, the assumed hierarchy is extremely evident. The Great Migration and the church's role in residential segregation is an example of convoluted missiology and compromise.²⁵ On an anecdotal note, I currently live in a house that used to be a parsonage for a Lutheran church. The house was built in a first ring suburb of Minneapolis in 1949 and there is a racial clause written into the deed of the house. Many churches and church leaders believed they were called to continue segregating. During the integration of schools, Reverend G. T. Gillespie from the Synod of Mississippi of the Presbyterian Church wrote "A Christian View of Segregation" in response to Brown v Board of Education ruling. The pamphlet claims that segregation "promotes progress, is natural, and not based on racial prejudice."²⁶ Martin Luther King wrote the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" to address the white Christian moderates who had compromised their theological commitments to equality for the sake of comfort.²⁷ Billy Graham, a well-known Christian evangelist had an ambiguous, at best, response to the Civil Rights act. He claimed that he was a "preacher not a prophet" and therefore not required to contribute to the discourse.²⁸ He articulated concepts of "Law and Order" in response to the Watts Uprising in 1965.²⁹ Nixon then ran his presidential campaign on "Law and Order Politics." Jemar Tisbey

²⁵ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 127.

²⁶ Rev. G. T. Gillespie, "A Christian View on Segregation; Reprint of an Address By Rev. G. T. Gillespie, D. D. | Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History," November 4, 1954, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection/glc0964127>.

²⁷ Martin Luther King Jr, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," *UC Davis L. Rev.* 26 (1992): 835.

²⁸ Christine A. Scheller, "Billy Graham Helped Give White Evangelicals a Pass on Civil Rights, Scholars Say," accessed March 14, 2021, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2018/03/01/billy-graham-helped-give-white-evangelicals-a-pass-on-civil-rights-scholars-say/>.

²⁹ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 141.

writes, “In effect, Nixon was pointing to the civil rights movement and its nonviolent direct action, not as the endeavor to secure long-denied justice to Black Americans but as the tarmac to tyranny and disregard for the law.”³⁰ A sentiment that echoes into the present. The 81% of White Evangelical Christians that voted for Donald Trump in 2016 can be another example of compromising theological commitments, though many may argue otherwise.³¹ Each of these stories are examples of the way in which racist theology has taken shape over history, and each of the three components of hierarchy, mission, and compromise are evident in these examples and many more.

The legacy and impacts of white supremacy are evident in the historical narrative of the founding of the United States and the history of the Church. These examples show not only the three components of racial theology: hierarchy, mission, and compromise, they also reveal that racism has become the norm or status quo. In order to dismantle racism and white supremacy, one has to be actively antiracist. Continuing to live, gather, work, play, pray, legislate, vote, and shop in the ways that we always have would mean that we continue to be complicit in racism and white supremacy.

How: diversity, antiracism or dismantling white supremacy?

Now that we have a general understanding of the thread of racist thoughts, thinkers, and policies throughout history, we can look next to the how question. How do we combat the mission, hierarchy and compromise that make up racist theology? I assert that one part of the solution to dismantling racism could be focusing more specifically on

³⁰ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 157.

³¹ Ed Stetzer and Andrew Macdonald, “Why Evangelicals Voted Trump: Debunking the 81%,” ChristianityToday.com, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/october/why-evangelicals-trump-vote-81-percent-2016-election.html>.

our vocation as predominantly white institutions to dismantle white supremacy and being intentional about stewarding the work of dismantling White Supremacy within our particular contexts and spheres of influence.

Diversity is a gift and God's loving design for our neighborhoods, communities, and churches. Ideally, we'd be each able to fully belong to multicultural, multi-racial, multiethnic communities. However, this full and authentic belonging is not possible as long as white supremacy continues to be the modus operandi of our spaces. We, as white bodies, must learn how our bodies have and continue to cause harm to Bodies of Color. We must learn how it happens and how to lessen or mitigate that harm.

Conversations about diversity within the context of the ELCA are often about increasing the diversity of the worshiping communities within congregation, with a particular commitment to being welcoming. Making diversity a strategic goal creates both an explicit commitment to God's desires and it has potential for objectification. It is possible that diversity can be considered a goal to achieve and that goal could inadvertently become the priority rather than the relationships and relational work it requires to be in a multiracial and multiethnic community. I argue that the differentiation between achieving diversity as the goal and deeply transformative diverse community is a difference of mission and vocation.

It is also possible that white bodies will strive toward diversity, and in the process to get there bypass the uncomfortable, difficult and tiresome work of dismantling white supremacy. This would likely not be an intentional bypassing, but it makes sense given that white bodies have often been able to compromise our desire for diversity with our desire for comfort. We have, for far too long, relied on Bodies of Color to carry the

burdens of enduring and dismantling white supremacy. White bodies must double down on their vocation and be unwilling to compromise for the sake of comfort.

I believe that it's possible to work on both dismantling white supremacy and simultaneously be fully engaged in diverse communities. The gifts of diversity are never-ending, and especially in terms of theology, they reveal an even wider picture of who God is. We can learn more about who God is, who our neighbor is, and who we are when we encounter, listen and learn from perspectives other than our own. Black theology, liberation theology, womanist theology, queer theology, Crip (disability) theology, Indigenous theology, Latin American liberation theology, Mujerista theology, Trans theology and many unnamed theologies are gifts to the church. These theologies and theologians reveal the vastness of who God is and the particularities of how God is. The theologians and theologies should be studied, read, and heard. Reading and listening to diverse theologies can be a great way to encounter and engage in diverse ideas while learning how to dismantle one's own biases and internalized anti-blackness, homophobia, racism, prejudice, patriarchy, ableism.

Antiracism is another key concept that is a noble and important piece of the work that leads to mutually flourishing and transformative communities. The concept of antiracism has been defined and redefined by many scholars and organizations.

“Anti-racism is the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organizational structures, policies and practices and attitudes, so that power is redistributed and shared equitably.” -NAC International Perspectives: Women and Global Solidarity

“Anti-racism examines the power imbalances between racialized people and non-racialized/white people. These imbalances play out in the form of unearned

privileges that white people benefit from and racialized people do not.” -Peggy McIntosh, 1988³²

“Anti-racism is the practice of identifying, challenging, and changing the values, structures and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism.” -Ontario Anti-Racism Secretariat³³

“Anti-racism is an active way of seeing and being in the world, in order to transform it. Because racism occurs at all levels and spheres of society (and can function to produce and maintain exclusionary "levels" and "spheres"), anti-racism education/activism is necessary in all aspects of society.” -Alberta Civil Liberties Research Center

“To be an antiracist is to set lucid definitions of racism/antiracism, racist/antiracist policies, racist/antiracist ideas, racist/antiracist people. To be a racist is to constantly redefine racist in a way that exonerates one’s changing policies, ideas, and personhood.” - Ibram X. Kendi³⁴

Ibram X. Kendi, in his book *How to be an Antiracist*, goes on to offer definitions for racist and antiracist policies, racist and antiracist ideas, and racist and antiracist people. Each of these definitions offers insight into the different ways in which antiracism can be defined and worked towards. Sometimes, throughout the course of antiracism work, the individual aspects of racism and antiracism are emphasized, other times the institutional and systemic aspects of racism and antiracism are emphasized. Both the individual and the systemic aspects of racism need to be addressed and dismantled. The emphasis on one, both, or intersections between them may vary by the context or spheres of influence that the people or groups are situated in. I assert that the

³² “Anti-Racism,” Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, accessed March 14, 2021, <http://www.aclrc.com/antiracism>.

³³ “Anti-Racism.”

³⁴ Ibram X Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (One world, 2019), 17.

key piece of antiracism, for white people engaging in this work within faith communities, is a specific vocational call to dismantle white supremacy.

It is crucial for all people to engage in the work of antiracism. As a generalization, antiracism as a concept has faded in and out of white people's consciousness throughout the years. Most recently, it's been brought closer to the forefront of many white people's consciousness due to the murder of George Floyd and subsequent uprising. This is not to say that Black people and People of Color haven't been striving for antiracist policies and ideas forever, they have, and the greatest barrier to dismantling white supremacy is the white moderate. Martin Luther King's articulated this sentiment when he said,

I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.³⁵

The various efforts from white people over the years have not been collectively sustained, which is one of the barriers getting in the way of antiracism work. I believe that vastness of the task of antiracism is another barrier that gets in the way. Predominantly white communities can be more effective at transforming community when they/we focus particularly on our vocation at people in white bodies to dismantle white supremacy.

The phrase "white supremacy" often brings to mind images of burning crosses and the KKK. This association isn't necessarily wrong, yet it isn't fully accurate or helpful. According to Layla Saad, the author of *Me and White Supremacy*, "white supremacy is the racist ideology that is based upon the belief that white people are

³⁵ King Jr, "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

superior in many ways to people of other races and that therefore, white people should be dominant over other races"³⁶ This ideology is baked into institutional structures, systems and white bodies. In white-centered societies, like the United States, white supremacy is as common and permeating as the air we breathe. As Kyle “Guante” Tran Myhre says in his poem titled *How to Explain White Supremacy to a White Supremacist*, “white supremacy is not a shark; it is the water.”³⁷ When White supremacy is an abstract concept, or an extremist ideology it is easier to distance oneself from it, and remain blissfully ignorant to the deadly, daily realities of white supremacy. When we begin to understand the commonness of white supremacy, it becomes more difficult to shift the blame to other people and it requires us to wrestle with our complicity in it. White supremacy must become better understood if it is ever going to be dismantled. And who should be responsible for dismantling the systems, institutions, and ideologies of white supremacy? The burden of this labor should lie on the shoulders of those who built, sustained, and perpetuated it, white people and predominantly white institutions.

Key Lutheran Theological Commitments

Lutheran theological claims can serve as both a guiding principle and as potential antidotes to white supremacy culture. The Lutheran Theological tradition has many theological commitments, some of the key components that can inform and root this work

³⁶ Layla F Saad, *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* (Sourcebooks, Inc., 2020) 12.

³⁷ “‘How to Explain White Supremacy to a White Supremacist’ (New Video),” Kyle “Guante” Tran Myhre (blog), March 17, 2016, <https://guante.info/2016/03/17/how-to-explain-white-supremacy-to-a-white-supremacist-new-video/>.

are: vocation, freedom of a Christian, gospel as good news, theology of the cross, and calling a thing what it is.

Vocation, from the lens of the Lutheran theological tradition, refers to God's call to live one's life for the sake of the neighbor's flourishing, from the mundane tasks of daily life to one's role in their collective community and everything in between. Vocation is commonly understood as a choice one makes about their career or family.³⁸ I assert that the Lutheran understanding of vocation is more mundane and ordinary than that. It includes those things, and it includes the daily, moment by moment things. Vocation is striving to align one's espoused theology with their daily actions and choices, or practical theology. Vocation is particular to each individual and their location. It's place-based.

Vocation has to do with all of the roles, communities, and relationships that one occupies, yet it is not centered on oneself.³⁹ Vocation is centered on the neighbor and rooted in relational *hesed*, or loving kindness. This relationality is central to who God is, as demonstrated in the *perichoresis* of the Trinity. *Perichoresis* refers to the in-dwelling and fellowship of each person of the Trinity, and the relationship of the whole Triune God, or more simply put, a relationship of mutual giving and receiving.⁴⁰ This concept further reveals that relationships are the core of who God is and that these relationships are mutual, not hierarchical.

This lens of viewing one's role in community can ground one into the tradition, and it can sustain the efforts toward dismantling white supremacy, as it reveals that

³⁸ "Vocation - Google Search," accessed March 12, 2021, www.google.com/search?q=vocation

³⁹ Martin Luther, "Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat" (1532) LW 21

⁴⁰ Rik Van Nieuwenhove, "Trinitarian Indwelling," *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, February 25, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198722380.013.20>.

dismantling racism is a long-term commitment to the neighbor in the individual, interpersonal, and institutional scales. Viewing dismantling white supremacy through a lens of vocation makes it both urgent and long-term. It grounds us in the collective commitment and compels us to listen to our neighbor and live in a way that brings about mutual flourishing.

In 1520, Martin Luther wrote a treatise called, *The Freedom of A Christian*. In this treatise, Luther was presenting his core claims to Pope Leo X. He wrote that it, “contains a summary of the whole Christian life.” His treatise opens with an explanation of how faith exists and can be experienced.⁴¹ Contrary to popular belief, faith cannot be acquired by practicing it or by reading about it. Faith is a gift from God. Luther presents a paradox to understand this phenomenon. The Christian is free, “subject to none.” And The Christian is a “dutiful servant, subject to all.” This paradox shows the freedom of faith and the duty of love. “Christian[s] ... do not live in themselves but in Christ and their neighbor, or else they are not Christian. They live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. Through faith they are caught up beyond themselves into God; likewise, through love they fall down beneath themselves into the neighbor — remaining nevertheless always in God and God’s love.”⁴² This freedom to do good for the neighbor can get discombobulated with “good works.” The nuance is that the works do not have a morality in and of themselves, it is the work that the neighbor needs. Embodying Christ’s love for the neighbor, human and nonhuman, is what faith frees us up to do.

⁴¹ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian, 1520: The Annotated Luther Study Edition* (Fortress Press, 2016).

⁴² Luther, *Freedom*, 32.

The theological claim that humans are “simultaneously saint and sinner” is one of the characteristically paradoxical claims of the Lutheran tradition. A more direct translation of *simul justus et peccator* is “at once justified and a sinner” meaning that we are, at the same time justified by a righteousness outside of ourselves, and a sinner, incapable of perfection.⁴³ This claim, on face value, may be discouraging, though I believe it’s freeing. We are freed in that we are justified by God in Jesus, and do not have to spend our time and energy consumed by worrying and working towards salvation. The knowledge that perfection is impossible is freeing because we do not need to fret over the “one right way.”⁴⁴ We also do not need to be overly concerned that in our attempts to dismantle white supremacy we end up saying or doing the wrong thing because it’s inevitable. We will fail and the impact may inadvertently be harmful, even though the effort was well intentioned.⁴⁵

The concept of gospel as good news comes from a translating the Greek word of εὐαγγέλιον (euangelion) “good messenger” into the Latin vulgate as *evangelium*.⁴⁶ Then the word was translated into old English as “godspel, or good news. This word was then continued through modern Bible translation and into day. Beyond the etymology of the word, the gospel as good news also has an important contextual application. Douglas John Hall articulates it as the relationship between Good News and Bad News. “The good

⁴³ “Simul Justus et Peccator,” *The Episcopal Church* (blog), accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/simul-justus-et-peccator/>.

⁴⁴ Tema Okun, *Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture* (2001)

⁴⁵ Augie Fleras, “Theorizing Micro-Aggressions as Racism 3.0: Shifting the Discourse,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 48, no. 2 (May 2016): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ces.2016.0011>.

⁴⁶ Millar Burrows, “The Origin of the Term ‘Gospel,’” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 44, no. 1/2 (1925): 21–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3260047>.

news is good because it challenges and displaces bad news. Gospel addresses us at the place where we are overwhelmed by an awareness (as the liberationist, Juan Luis Segundo, has put it) of what is wrong with the world and with ourselves in it. It is good news because it engages, takes on and does battle with the bad news, offering another alternative, another vision of what could be, another way into the future.”⁴⁷ When we learn to listen, it is not hard to find bad news in our own lives and our neighbor’s lives. For all people in the United States, and other white-centric societies, the bad news is White Supremacy and the various ways it manifests itself in our communities. The good news must battle with this way of being in community. It must offer an alternative, mutually flourishing vision, full of healing for all.

Another characteristically Lutheran commitment is the “theology of the cross.” In Luther’s time, the theology of the cross was in response to the “theology of glory” that was characteristic of the scholars and the religious leaders of his time and their unwillingness to talk about sin and sinfulness. Martin Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation* is considered the best-known text for his articulation of the theology of the cross. In it he wrote, “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.”⁴⁸ Douglas John Hall pulls out four things as core to the *theologia crucis*. The first one is reason. This is the part about “calling a thing what it is” it’s an orientation towards truth-telling, and being honest about the realities of life.⁴⁹ This piece is important for the work of dismantling white supremacy because so much of the

⁴⁷ Douglas John Hall, “What Is Theology?,” *CrossCurrents* 53, no. 2 (2003): 171–84.

⁴⁸ Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” *Luther’s Works* 31 (1957): 39.

⁴⁹ Douglas John Hall, “Luther’s Theology of the Cross,” *Consensus* 15, no. 2 (1989): 10–11.

work is learning to recognize and name it. The second core piece of *theologia crucis* is that God lives, loves, and suffers.⁵⁰ God is the God of the oppressed. God is intimately familiar with suffering, grief, and lament. The third core tenet is that one can consider “Theology as a Discipline.”⁵¹ It is a daily, practical theology, informed by life alongside one's neighbors. This practical theology could be in tension with the desire to achieve perfect thinking or perfect understanding of who God is that sometimes arises within the field of systematic theology. This desire to understand who and how God is, in ideological and theoretical terms can be a barrier to being and doing what God calls us to be/do. The fourth core concept that Douglas John Hall presents, is that it is a theology of hope, and hope in suffering. A theology of the cross reveals “God’s own abiding commitment to this world.”⁵²

In Deanna Thomson’s “Calling a Thing What It Is: A Lutheran Approach to Whiteness,” she integrates Luther’s theology of the cross with the sinfulness of whiteness. “Luther insisted; we are fundamentally sinful people, people who are curved in upon ourselves. In contemporary American society, white persons’ participation in whiteness becomes a new model for the self turned in upon itself, believing falsely that their/our white privilege is of their/our own doing.”⁵³ Cynthia Moe-Lobeda writes, “Renouncing or uprooting racism and other forms of structural sin, then demands the truth-telling that enables the sin to be recognized by those once made oblivious to it by

⁵⁰ Hall, 11–14.

⁵¹ Hall, 14–16.

⁵² Hall, 18.

⁵³ Deanna A Thompson, “Calling a Thing What It Is: A Lutheran Approach to Whiteness,” *Dialog* 53, no. 1 (2014): 49–57.

their own privilege. If we do not tell and hear truth about the structural sin in which we live and breathe, we cannot confess it or repent of it, and thus we remain captive to it.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “Being the Church as, in, and against White Privilege,” *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives*, 2010, 199–200.

CHAPTER 3

RECOGNIZING AND DISMANTLING WHITE SUPREMACY

To dismantle white supremacy, it's necessary to understand how white supremacy manifests itself in individual bodies, communities, and institutions. Learning to recognize and name white supremacy will be ongoing work, until it's thoroughly eradicated. I have hope that it's possible to dismantle and eradicate white supremacy, yet it is not likely that it will be fully eradicated within my lifetime. There are two important concepts that could help individuals and communities become more aware of what white supremacy looks like, feels like, and sounds like. This awareness will also aid in dismantling and eradicating it by bringing more awareness to the ways in which we have compromised parts of ourselves or our culture and perpetuated superiority, or hierarchy. Which will lead us to better understand our particular vocation in the work of dismantling racism. The two important concepts are *White Body Supremacy* by Resmaa Menakem and *Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture* by Tema Okun. For both concepts, I will give a brief description of the concepts and some theological framework for integrating these concepts into church communities.

White Body Supremacy

Resmaa Menakem, the author of *My Grandmother's Hands*, is a key leader and teacher in Somatic Abolitionism. His work teaches white bodies, bodies of culture, and police bodies how to expand their capacity to stay engaged through racialized stress responses and in doing so, mitigate harm and bring about healing. Resmaa's work invites people to become aware of how bodies respond in moments of racialized stress and work to heal our bodies and brains through somatic practices and communities of practice. This way of

understanding stress responses can also be applied to communal bodies. His book is separated into three different parts. The first part is called “Unarmed and Dismembered.” The second part is called “Remembering Ourselves.” The third and final section is called “Mending Our Collective Body.” For the purpose of this paper, I will offer brief descriptions of stress responses, the 5 anchors, and some theological framing.

The body’s stress responses come from the limbic system. The limbic system is the region of the brain that is responsible for basic functions including fight, flight, freeze, and feeding. Understanding how brains work is a fascinating and dynamic field. To help understand the basics of stress responses, I offer a “hand model” that was developed by Dr. Daniel J. Siegel and is often used with young children learning to manage emotions and navigate stress.⁵⁵ To use your hand as a model of your brain, follow these steps. First, look at your hand, palm facing you. Place your thumb towards the middle of your palm, and tuck your thumb under your fingers, making a fist. This represents a simplified model of the brain. The wrist represents the brain stem. The vein coming down the wrist and into your arm can represent the spinal cord. The thumb represents the limbic region. The fingers over the thumb are the cerebral cortex, and the last knuckles and fingernails represent the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for executive functions, like problem solving, it also helps supervise the other parts of the brain. The cerebral cortex is the largest region of the brain. This region of the brain plays a role in attention, memory, language, consciousness, thoughts, and awareness. The limbic system is made up of the hypothalamus, amygdala, thalamus and

⁵⁵ Daniel J Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson, *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child’s Developing Mind* (Bantam, 2012) 62-63.

hippocampus. This part of the brain is responsible for emotional and behavioral responses. The amygdala is the part of the brain that activates a fight, flight or freeze response when you feel threatened.⁵⁶ Resmaa refers to this part of the brain as the “lizard brain.”⁵⁷ The fight, flight, or freeze response sends signals to release stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline. This part of the brain is connected to the vagus nerve, or soul nerve. The soul nerve connects the messages from the lizard brain to the rest of your body.

If you look at your hand as a model of a brain, and lift the fingers up, this is called “flipping your lid.” “Flipping your lid” occurs in times of stress, when the cerebral cortex is oversaturated with information, including words and feelings. As the lid, or cerebral cortex, gets flipped, the limbic system takes over. This survival response occurs for both real and imagined threats. After experiencing high levels of stress, our lizard brain can code that event, and things associated with it, as traumatic and requiring a reflexive response anytime we encounter it, or similar things in the future. Our bodies can also have trauma responses to things that are unfamiliar or overwhelming. Trauma can be passed through people, through genetics, family and culture.

For many white bodies in the United States, trauma can be traced back to the Middle Ages in Europe when brutalization and torture were a spectator sport. Many of the people that fled to colonize the United States had experienced or witnessed brutal trauma. They brought that trauma along with them as they colonized, oppressed, and

⁵⁶ Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education, *Dan Siegel - “Flipping Your Lid:” A Scientific Explanation*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0T_2NN0C68.

⁵⁷ Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Central Recovery Press, 2017).

murdered Indigenous and Black bodies. “It was only in the late seventeenth century that white Americans began in earnest to formalize a culture of white-body supremacy in order to soothe the dissonance that existed between more powerful and less powerful white bodies; to blow centuries of white-on-white trauma through millions of Black and red bodies; and to attempt to colonize the minds of people of all colors.”⁵⁸ The effects of this brutalization have been studied by Dr. Joy DeGruy. She coined the term, “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome” and describes it as, “a condition that exists as a consequence of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery. A form of slavery which was predicated on the belief that African Americans were inherently/genetically inferior to whites. This was then followed by institutionalized racism which continues to perpetuate injury.”⁵⁹

For hundreds of years, white bodies have been explicitly and implicitly taught that black bodies are a threat to white bodies. This has trained our brains to have an implicit fear response to many Black bodies. We have also been implicitly and explicitly taught that conversations involving race are unsafe for us, and this another place where our bodies may experience stress responses. These implicit messages result in both interpersonal harm and institutional harm against Black bodies and Bodies of Color.

In white bodies, trauma has been inherited through the brutality that we witnessed, experienced and inflicted through the Middle ages, into the Enlightenment, and through to colonialism. The trauma began to shift into culture, traits, and

⁵⁸ Menakem, 63.

⁵⁹ Joy DeGruy, “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome,” Dr. Joy DeGruy, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://www.joydegruy.com/post-traumatic-slave-syndrome>.

personalities and manifested into a spirit of domination and conquering. The centuries worth of trauma were never metabolized in healthy ways, so instead, the trauma was repressed and then “blown through everything that you see. The people, the land, the environment.”⁶⁰ This is evident in the origin story of the United States of America, and into today. White body supremacy has become a foundational, organizing principle of our country. Resmaa argues that abolishing white body supremacy requires more than thinking about it, or intellectualizing our way out of it. Because this trauma lives in the body, the work to metabolize and abolish it must happen in the body, first by learning to recognize what trauma and stress responses feel like in our own bodies.⁶¹ This practice is particularly difficult for white bodies because we compromised much of this awareness in order to maintain the structures, systems, relationships, and policies that privilege us at the expense of others. Then as we learn to recognize somatic trauma responses, we can learn to notice and accept them as they are happening, and move through them in healthy, or clean, ways. Eventually, this practice will rewire our vagus nerve responses, which deepens our capacity to remain grounded through things that may have previously triggered a stress response.⁶² Resmaa offers five anchors for moving through clean pain.

- Anchor 1: Soothe yourself to quiet your mind, calm your heart, and settle your body.
- Anchor 2: Simply notice the sensation, vibrations, and emotions in your body instead of reacting to them.

⁶⁰ “Resmaa Menakem on Why Healing Racism Begins With the Body,” Compassion Center, April 5, 2020, <https://compassioncenter.arizona.edu/podcast/resmaa-menakem>.

⁶¹ Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 4-25.

⁶² Menakem, 140 -149.

- Anchor 3: Accept the discomfort, and notice when it changes instead of trying to flee from it.
- Anchor 4: Stay present and in your body as you move through the unfolding experience, with all its ambiguity and uncertainty, and respond from the best parts of yourself.
- Anchor 5: Safely discharge any energy that remains. ⁶³

These anchors offer a process to begin healing in our own bodies and working to heal the collective body. Resmaa's book offers guidance for White Bodies, Black Bodies, Police Bodies, and Bodies of Culture to mend all of our hearts and bodies. The last section of the book is on collective healing, including a chapter on creating culture and whiteness without supremacy. These two chapters are particularly helpful for churches as they consider their unique call into this work. The church is familiar with the concept of being a collective body, in our theology and community practices. The church as a body is a common metaphor in the bible. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." (1 Corinthians 13:13). Resmaa Menakem's work can also help predominantly white congregations articulate how they, as a group of primarily white bodies, are called into this work.

The church has a unique call into this work because of our theological claim of the Incarnation. God becoming flesh reveals much about who God is and what God cares about. God became fleshy and human in Jesus. Jesus as the incarnation of God, the embodied God, reveals to us that God cares about bodies. The very human needs for food, breath, diapers, and soap are the very things God cares about. Another key piece

⁶³ Menakem, 168.

about Jesus is that he, through death and resurrection, decenters us so that we can center our neighbors. We are freed from worrying about whether or not we are saved, whether or not we are good enough, tried hard enough, or achieved enough. Justification is a free gift of salvation. There is nothing that we can or cannot do to earn more or less of God's love. This freedom allows us to decenter ourselves and reorient towards our neighbors. The Spirit, as advocate, healer, companion, and breathe can also inform how we think about our body responses. The Trinity, as interdependent and perichoretic, is an example of the relationship dynamics of a mutually flourishing community.

Who we believe God to be is important because it informs how we show up in this world and in our communities. If we believe in a God that incarnated and incarnates Godself, the work to re-embody or re-member ourselves through healing and experiencing clean pain is aligned with God's vision for God's people. This re-membering is intended to heal the disembodiment that comes when white bodies compromise our humanity for privilege and power and from the trauma harm that white bodies inflict on Black bodies, and Bodies of Culture, every day. To claim that God is a liberator and healer means that God is working in, through, and around communities to bring about the healing and restoration that will lead to abolishing white body supremacy and living into communities we all can thrive.

Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture

The second concept that can help us to recognize and name white supremacy is the list of characteristics, developed by Tema Okun, of White Supremacy Culture. Tema Okun used her experiences from facilitating and participating in antiracism workshops, her learnings from being in community with other leaders and thinkers, and her

frustrating experiences at a workshop to write up a list that describes the characteristics of white supremacy culture. The list names some of the norms and expectations for people living in a white supremacy culture. Tema Okun articulates fifteen of these characteristics: Perfectionism, Sense of Urgency, Defensiveness, Quantity Over Quality, Worship of the Written Word, Only One Right Way, Paternalism, Either/Or Thinking, Power Hoarding, Fear of Open Conflict, Individualism, I'm the Only One, Progress is Bigger, More, Objectivity, and Right to Comfort.⁶⁴ She offers examples of the characteristic and antidotes to the characteristic. This list is by no means exhaustive. It's a helpful as a guide or reference key to hold in our minds as we try to name the ways that white supremacy manifests itself within our communities and institutions. For the sake of examples and understanding, I'll expound on a few of the characteristics with a personal anecdote.

Perfectionism - As I continue to commit to antiracism and dismantling white supremacy, I hear myself striving to know and learn all the things, to have the perfect words, strategies, and beliefs. This desire for perfection becomes a barrier to acting and speaking up in the moment. This characteristic is also closely related to how I understand "only one right way." I can sense in myself that there is a desire to do antiracism in the "one right way," as if there was only one right way, and as if I could achieve it.

Sense of Urgency - The "sense of urgency" is evident in my desire to respond to everything immediately. Over the summer, after George Floyd was murdered, I made commitments to read more books, pay more micro-reparations, and do more antiracism.

⁶⁴ Tema Okun, "WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE: Characteristics," Showing Up for Racial Justice - SURJ, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture-characteristics.html>.

All of these commitments are good things, and in this urgent desire to solve racism, I set myself up for unsustainable commitments.

Either/or thinking - The “either/or thinking” is evident in the way that I classify people as good (antiracist) or bad (racist), determining that solely from how they talk about things and what language they use. This snap-judgement creates a barrier for engaging in dialogue and it’s completely unfair. There is much more nuance to if someone is an antiracist or racist, sometimes changing from moment to moment. And it’s audacious of me to believe that I can classify someone as good or bad, when I also believe that all people are both good and bad.

Fear of open conflict - The “fear of open conflict” manifests itself in my apprehension to respond or engage when someone has said or done something that is racist. I find myself avoiding calling someone out (or in) for the sake of comfort and avoiding conflict.

Objectivity - Contrary to what I want to believe, I still sense in myself this desire for there to be such a thing as objective. This recently became evident in the Women and the Bible class I took recently. Many of the interpretive perspectives that we studied, including Feminist, Womanist, and *Mujerista*, had hermeneutical lenses that prioritized experience. I sensed tension in myself that opposed this subjective interpretation, continuing to believe that there’s a purely objective, scientific way to understand scripture, as if it weren’t influenced by the experiences of the writers, translators, and readers.

Right to Comfort - This characteristic is similar to “fear of open conflict.” In myself, it shows up as desiring comfort over change. I am more able to hear and learn

from teachers who look like me, or speak in a tone that I interpret as friendly or kind as compared to teachers with a more emotive tone, something I may interpret as angry or aggressive, which would cause me discomfort.

These are just a few examples from my own experience and awareness. These learned behaviors and beliefs are part of what make up a culture. Many of these characteristics are directly opposed to the theological commitments of the Lutheran tradition.

CHAPTER 4

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF DISMANTLING WHITE SUPREMACY

Lutheran Theology as Antidotes to White Supremacy Culture

When we look at the theological commitments of the Lutheran tradition and the characteristics of white supremacy culture, there exists a dissonance between what we claim to believe in and how we actually live our lives. The gifts of wisdom from the Lutheran Theological Tradition can inform and ground our work to dismantle white supremacy, and it is possible for these theological claims to serve as antidotes to the characteristics of white supremacy culture. What follows is a table and summary of the characteristics of White Supremacy Culture and a corresponding theological commitment that could act as an antidote to that characteristic.

Table 1. White Supremacy Culture Characteristics and Theological Antidotes

	Characteristic of White Supremacy	Theological Claim - Potential Antidote
1.	Perfectionism	<i>Simul justus et peccator</i>
2.	Sense of Urgency	Sabbath
3.	Defensiveness	Kenosis
4.	Quantity over Quality	Perichoresis
5.	Worship of the Written Word	Hermeneutic of Suspicion
6.	Only One Right Way	Rooted and Open
7.	Paternalism	Co-Creators and Perichoresis
8.	Either/Or Thinking	Paradox - law and gospel, simul
9.	Power Hoarding	Priesthood of all believers
10.	Fear of Open Conflict	Theology of the Cross (calling a thing what it is)

11.	Individualism	Incarnation and Communion
12.	I am the Only One	Theology of abundance
13.	Progress is Bigger More	Death and New Life
14.	Objectivity	Epistemology of the Cross
15.	Right to Comfort	Theology of the Cross

The White Supremacy characteristic of Perfectionism could be combated with the claim of *simul justus et peccator*. To believe that we are simultaneously saint and sinner means that perfection is impossible. The desire to seek a perfect way of responding or acting can often lead us to do nothing at all. We will never attain a perfect way of doing or being antiracist. That knowledge can be free us up to act or speak.

The second characteristic is Sense of Urgency. This characteristic can be combated with the claim of Sabbath. When we claim to believe that who God is, and how God acts includes a period of rest, we can remember that we too can make room to rest and trust that there is enough time, resources, etc. Additionally, the commitment to an interdependent community means that urgency is impossible because relationships and change move at the speed of trust.⁶⁵ Deep, lasting transformation will require a long, sustained effort that's able to be adaptive and responsive, but not urgent. The theological claim of *kenosis* is self-emptying that Jesus models. In Philippians 2:5-8 it's written:

“Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,
⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,

⁶⁵ I believe the claim that “relationships move at the speed of trust” can be attributed to adrienne maree brown. Adrienne M Brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 2017.

being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.

This *kenosis*, or self-emptying, can inform our humility as we engage with others, and it can combat the tendency to feel defensive.

The model of relationality of the Triune God can be a theological claim that combats Quantity over quality. The Triune God, as a perichoretic being, is a model of a mutually flourishing, and interdependent relationship between multiple beings. This claim about who God is, in God's essence, reveals how important relationships are to God. When interdependent and mutual relationships are the priority, it is difficult to priority quantity over quality because relationships require time, energy, and resources and the quality becomes more of a priority than the quantity.

A hermeneutic of suspicion can offer an insight into combatting worship of the written word. We've learned to be suspicious of the written word in the field of biblical interpretation by interpreting it within the social-historical context. This skill can help deepen our understanding of communicating beyond, behind, and around the written word.

The claim that there is Only One Right Way can be combated by the idea of Rooted and Open. Rooted and Open, as developed by the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities, is the idea that our own theological commitments can root us so that we can be open to many other insights, beliefs, experiences, and ideas.⁶⁶ The

⁶⁶ Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities, "Rooted and Open," *ELCA*, January 4, 2018, 1–8.

characteristically Lutheran commitment to paradox can also combat the urge to believe that this is “only one right way.”⁶⁷

Paternalism is the belief or action that limits someone else’s participation or autonomy, often by those with more power or assumed authority. Thinking of the relationship between God and creation as co-creators reveals the mutuality and shared power that is at the core of God’s being. This belief, along with the previously mentioned claims of perichoresis and *kenosis* can combat the characteristic of Paternalism.

The Lutheran Theological Tradition is riddled with paradox. This is evident in the previously discussed concepts of *simul Justus et peccator* and *theologia crucis*, as well as the concept of the “hidden God,” or *deus absconditus*. “Lutherans believe that the Christian must look for God under the opposite of what human reason would expect, God’s strength under weakness, God’s wisdom under folly, God’s victory under the cross.”⁶⁸

The next characteristic of white supremacy culture is “power hoarding.” Luther’s claim of a Priesthood of All Believers came about in contrast to the medieval Church’s claim that there was a priestly class of people. The Priesthood of All Believers is the claim that all people who believe in Christ share in Christ's status, there is no person in between Christ and the Christian that mediates, or goes between them. This idea that power is shared can be an antidote to power hoarding.

⁶⁷ Mark U. Edwards Jr, “Characteristically Lutheran Leanings?,” *Dialog* 41, no. 1 (2002): 50–62, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6385.00099>.

⁶⁸ Jr, 53.

The fear of open conflict can be combatted by the call to “call a thing what it is,” as Luther claims those that seek a theology of the cross should. Calling a thing what it is implies that conflict be unavoidable. If people in community have a practice of calling a thing what it is, rather than vaguely alluding to something or outright avoiding it, a more comfortable relationship with conflict may arise. This could combat the fear of open conflict.

The model of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the sacrament of Communion are all examples of theological claims that combat individualism. The mutuality of the trinity, the finite bearing the infinite, and the shared meal across a cloud of witnesses are all things that reveal a commitment to the collective. Individualism, though it permeates the consciousness of the predominant culture in the United States, is contrary to the heart of the Christian message.

A theology of abundance, the idea that there is more than enough, can inform how one believes themselves to be within a larger community. If we are able to believe in a theology of abundance, we may also be able to believe that there are an abundant number of people are also committed to what we are committed to. The belief of abundance could combat the belief that “I am the only one.”

The urge to think that progress is “bigger, more” is directly opposed to the foundational claim of a God that dies. Maybe progress is less, through death. We also claim to believe in a God of resurrection, and could trust that through death comes new life.

The last two characteristics of white supremacy culture, objectivity and right to comfort, can both be combatted through the theology and epistemology of the cross. The

claim that objectivity is possible is contradicted by an epistemology of the cross, or a way of knowing that comes through suffering.⁶⁹ Acknowledging and emphasizing experience muddle any attempt at objectivity. The Theology of the Cross can also combat one's belief that they have a right to comfort.

These theological commitments from the Lutheran tradition can function as antidotes to white supremacy culture. They can also ground and compel us into and through the difficult, disorienting work of dismantling white supremacy.

⁶⁹ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross* (SUNY Press, 1997).

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION:

White Supremacy is an embodied belief and culture that must be eradicated in order for us to live into the diverse, mutually flourishing kin-doms that God has called us into. The history of white supremacy and racist theology includes ideas of mission, hierarchy, and compromise. White people and predominantly white institutions are vocationally called to do the specific work of dismantling white supremacy. The Lutheran theological tradition has commitments and practices that can ground and compel people into and through this work.

Two ways of understanding white supremacy culture, are *White Body Supremacy* by Resmaa Menakem and *Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture* by Tema Okun. These two ways of understanding white supremacy can help us to recognize, heal, and dismantle white supremacy, and eventually belong to new, recreated, or resurrected ways of whiteness without supremacy and full belonging in a diverse mutually flourishing kin-dom.

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