

## **Why White Churches Are Hard for Black People**

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We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask!

— Paul Laurence Dunbar, premier nineteenth century black poet

In 1896, Dunbar etched those words to explain the struggle of black people in a white world. In 2015, those same words summarize the struggle of black people in white churches. The reasons why are below. Praise God, these reasons aren't true for every white church or for every black person. But I pray these words lead to graceful and authentic conversation, to prayer, to action, and to joy in our Lord.

### **White churches are hard for black people because...**

Many white brothers and sisters don't work against, much less acknowledge, racism, whether subtle or blatant. Meanwhile, the world readily admits that white supremacy resounds today and that subtle racism skulks in ways more difficult to discern. Some white folk in the church act as if, according to one writer, "any mention of 'racism' is a racial slur directed at them." Responding to this perceived slur, some whites speak only to defend themselves instead of listening to die to themselves; conversation then becomes a tool for imposition—not understanding. Others go mute because of their discomfort or because they don't know what they don't know. But the church is to bear one another's burdens (1 Cor. 12:26). Where are the loving brothers and sisters who want to pick up some weight? In Galatians 2, Peter's racial prejudices acted against the gospel—not an implication of the gospel but the actual gospel. White churches are hard for black people because...

Lots of white people have privileges blacks don't. Whites have the privilege to ignore issues that haunt and hurt black people, issues which black people cannot ignore. Yet because the privileged don't have to think about these issues, many of them don't—and living with whites who are blinded to their privilege is discouraging. On any given Sunday, blacks attend churches where the majority of the members and the leadership are woefully undisciplined on issues that

shape black experiences, black fears, and black families. These issues affect our spiritual state. But the white majority treats these painful truths—if they acknowledge them at all—as black people’s feelings, not everyone’s facts. Ultimately, these the majority dismisses these truths, and blacks’ feelings go invalidated.

### **White churches are hard for black people because...**

It feels like the majority doesn’t want to hear what it feels like to be black. All it takes it to be told once by a white brother or sister to just “get over” the issues of race to feel like those in the majority are opposed to understanding you, to loving you. That’s all it takes to feel lesser than, and to not feel as if there’s a superiority complex effused by the majority.

For example, when white members of the majority culture accuse black churches of carnal “emotionalism” in their praise—that rings of a superiority complex. It seemingly presumes that theologically rich songs birthed by the Word only have one cultural expression. Perhaps God claps to the B3 Hammond and sways to the Steinway just the same.

Yet too often it feels as if many whites refuse to imagine what it feels like to be the minority or to love the minority. White church’s church planting strategies sometimes reflect this refusal. While it is wonderful that many white churches seek to put young black men in leadership, many forgo sending that young black man back into a black church context. Beware of the temptation young black brothers have to leave the black church—where they must pay their dues—for a white church that will rush them to prominence. It sometimes feels as if some white churches consider black churches and black church practices to be unsound—or at least as not as biblically faithful—as a matter of course; I feel this way when white evangelical leaders make offhand comments about the apparent lack of Reformed theology in black churches. But countless black churches have believed and honored a Big God for a long, long time now. And countless black churches need their young men to stay within them.

But some white people hold the institution of the black church in contempt. They accuse its supporters of “dividing the body of Christ!” They don’t realize that when blacks speak of the black church, we’re not just talking about a sociological but a supernatural phenomenon—a bunch of black folk faithfully worshipping God. Some white folk, who decry the black church’s existence, don’t realize that their grandpas, who wouldn’t let blacks worship with their white folk, created the black church.

### **White churches are hard for black people because...**

They think they have a safe space for blacks, but some don’t. There’s no space for blacks to be righteously angry about issues that affect us, lest we arouse the ever-feared “angry black person” stereotype. Along with our own sin, we’re constantly battling stereotypes in white churches; and that battle makes it hard to hope for all things (1 Cor. 13:7). Blacks don’t want space simply to be righteously angry; we’d just like some space simply to be ourselves. But black churches are the only space where many blacks find it safe to be Christian and black. Sometimes blacks forgo that space for good reasons. Yet many whites think it unfathomable to visit an all-black church, much less join one. I remember suggesting a church to a white sister who was moving to a new city. She interrupted and me and said, “Wait—this church isn’t, like, a black church, right?”

### **White churches are hard for black people because...**

Many people do not understand the black experience to be both corporate and individual. Black people share many common experiences, and these experiences build a unique solidarity among us. This is why a racial injustice in Florida can shake black people in Washington State. But often folks think that means that every black person feels the same way about every issue, which isn't the case. As a black individual, it's exhausting to feel as if you're constantly representing all black people.

Yet many white people assume they know what it means to be black, and that everyone shares their concept. Anyone who doesn't match their definition of black is not "really" black. Enslaved in that narrow definition, many black brothers and sisters live in fear and shame; they're not free to be who God made them. And so we "code-switch"—we adjust our culture [our 'code'] to fit the majority's. I code switch often when I shake your hand instead of dapping you up. Code-switching all the time exhausts the switcher to the point of acculturating them altogether.

### **White churches are hard for black people because...**

Sometimes blacks feel like projects instead of peers. Some white churches do not think of blacks as those who can minister to others; we're only to be ministered to by others. In other words, we feel like objects of ministry, not those encouraged to initiate it. But it was not without reason that the Good Samaritan was the colored character of the story. Yet blacks seem to only get opportunities to minister or educate if it's about race or our experience.

And when white people ask us about our experience, they sometimes sound more interested in their own enlightenment—not the lightening of our burdens. Their well-meaning questions only begin with them: "I would like to know. . . . Tell me more about . . ." They seem more interested in anthropology than applying their theology, like when a white sister asked to touch my mother's hair. If conversations are only pursued to an educational end, it feels like the friendship has an agenda. Faux friendship is no friendship. When did you last warmly greet someone of a different ethnicity who was visiting your church simply to know them—not to know about them, but to know them?

### **White churches are hard for black people because...**

"Gospel-unity" ain't always gospel unity. Some whites assume that befriending someone who is culturally the same yet physically different is necessarily gospel-unity. Sometimes that's true—depending on the circumstances. Other times, there's a selection bias for the sake of tokenism, not Calvary. Thus goes the defense, "I have a black friend!"

### **White churches are hard for black people because...**

Blacks are often only seen as "other." Black people still fight to be embraced as people who bear the same image of God as our white brothers and sisters. Some whites speak of their churches becoming "multi-ethnic" once "other" ethnicities come. But acting as if your church has no ethnicity or is ethnically neutral makes blacks feel that your church isn't for them. Vanilla is a flavor of ice cream like the others.

Many people try to fix this by being colorblind, which they equate to racial reconciliation. They think they're ministering by not seeing brother so-and-so "as their black friend," but only "as their friend." But that ignores realities that are both God-ordained and good. You can read more about colorblindness [here](#).

### **White churches are hard for black people because...**

The hall of faith seems white washed. The theological, historical narrative passed on in white churches and white seminaries often only speaks of white theologians and heroes of the faith. Can we please remember that Augustine was from Africa and spoke of a pervasive depravity long before Calvin? Can we please stop saying Adoniram Judson was the first American missionary when George Lisle, a slave born in Virginia, went out 30 years before him? Can we please hear of the faithful black preachers in history and hear them quoted in sermons, too? Can we please not say the American church hasn't been persecuted when the black church has known extreme persecution—Charleston and arson being the most recent exhibitions? White churches are hard for black people because...

Black sisters are seen as second-class. Perhaps no one is passed over more than black sisters in white churches. They're rarely asked out on dates, if ever. Brothers have told them, "I'm just not attracted to black women." As a result, they have felt ugly. White churches are hard for black people because...

All-white leadership doesn't advocate for blacks in some white churches. All-white leadership might react to racial problems, comforting blacks with words. But blacks want a proactive advocate—one who will condemn and challenge preferential treatment and privileged silence. One who will joyfully speak about diversity like Revelation 5 does. Instead, many blacks do not physically or representationally see themselves in leadership. But in the name of "keeping the main thing the main thing," many white pastors forgo any reference in a prayer or sermon that might minister specifically to blacks. We're not asking for a special shout out every Sunday. But preacher, do you really believe the gospel applies to everyone? Your church may not be as gospel-centered as you think.

### **White churches are hard for black people because...**

It's easy to be black and lonely in a white church. Some whites assume black people in white churches aren't lonely if there are other black people with whom they hang out. But even if there's a ton of black people, one can still feel very lonely. As one sister said, "Our hair is different, our color is different; we are —all in all—different. And when making that comment to other white women, it feels like that feeling is quickly dismissed; and again, we feel alone." White churches are hard for black people because...

When some white people call for "dying to yourself," they in effect mean, "assimilate or leave." Undoubtedly some reading this article will retort, "But Paul gave up his Hebrew-ness for the sake of the gospel! We are called to lay ourselves down at the church door so that Christ may be all in all!" I'm not making allowance for total assimilation, as blacks too often die more to themselves than whites in white churches, but I heartily agree with that. I've shed much ink on that here, here, and here. But it's a lot easier to exhort people to that Pauline gospel sacrifice when yours is the majority culture. Are we really going to disregard why some things in white churches are hard for blacks? That refusal may be the biggest reason some white churches aren't getting easier for black people. That refusal may be why Dunbar said, "long the mile" that we have yet to go. Long the mile, brothers and sisters, but our God will see us through to glory.

Whether black or white, we are Christians—which means we should not give up on one another because God in Christ has never given up on us. Perhaps you're wondering what to do now having read this article. On this long mile, here's a few places to start: Pray regularly for your eyes to open wider on these issues. Pray regularly for those of other ethnicities. Pray regularly to be sensitive for opportunities to love those unlike you. One of those opportunities just might be sending them this article and saying, "Hey—could we talk about this piece?"