

Dear White Christian: What Every White Christian Needs to Know About How Black Christians See, Think, & Experience Racism in America.

Aaron J. Layton

PRA663A – Leadership in Cross-Cultural Contexts: Foundations
Martin Edward Lee, December 30, 2019

Aaron Layton vividly describes attending Sunday morning worship on August 9, 2014, a week after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown (18 years of age) by police officer Darren Wilson (28 years of age) in the predominately black city of Ferguson, Missouri. He describes feeling ‘powerless’ in a church surrounded by all whites. He describes: “As I watched the events unfold on television, I felt as if physical violence could be done to me, my son, my wife, or my daughter at any time and nothing would be done about it because we were black.”¹

Layton argues that “there is a divide that still exists today between white and black Christians in America.”² He recalls, “Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, ‘It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning.’”³ Layton makes the distinction between “racism from the past (historic racism)” and racism today. Modern racism, argues Layton, is more subtle. He observes, “It affects government, law, education, housing, income, resources employment, incarceration, and more.”⁴ He describes racism today as “structural” or “systemic.” Citing David Wellman (in *Portraits of White Racism*), he argues, “In the context of the United States, this system clearly operates to the advantage of Whites and to the disadvantage of people of color.”⁵

Layton observes another feature separating white and black Christians which he describes as “emotional distance” or “emotional isolation”. He notes that white Christian friends simply do not know the racism their black friends put up with daily in the workplace, church and school “because most black

¹ Layton, Aaron, J., “Dear White Christian: What Every White Christian Needs to Know About How Black Christians See, Think, Experience Racism in America,” (Committee on Discipleship Ministries, Lawrenceville, Georgia, 2017.), 16.

² Ibid., 18.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵ Ibid., 20.

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Christians have learned to assimilate well.”⁶ Black Christians are hesitant to share their experience of

racism with their white friends out of fear, “that they will try to explain away the experience as anything other than racism.”⁷

Layton’s description of emotional isolation is helpful and relatable. He describes it as a “form of mental and emotional alienation, from my white brothers and sisters.”⁸ He felt the pain and anguish of the death of Michael Brown but was “isolated from [his] white brothers and sisters because not many of them, if any, knew the regular pain, disappointment, discouragement, resentment, and anger [he] regularly worked through as a black man in a white world – as a black man in their white world.”⁹

Layton goes on to describe all the measures he takes to assure white people that they safe around him: “I often talk with a certain inflection and tone in my voice when I speak to white people in order not to communicate that I am uneducated, criminal, or a thug. I also have to be very aware of my facial expressions, posture, and demeanor in order not to bring fear to whites or make them think I am an ‘angry black man.’”¹⁰ Layton’s experiences are familiar: I, too, have developed a way of behaving to ensure those around me feel safe and not threatened in my presence – even if I am the one who is under threat at the time.

Ultimately, Layton envisions the issues of emotional isolation will be repaired based on how white Christian leaders respond to the black experience of racism.¹¹ He notes, “If the pastor supports and promotes conversations on racism, those conversations will move forward.”¹² Facilitating healthy conversation, and having the pastor encourage those conversations, is always helpful. But, from my

⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 93.

¹² Ibid.

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exposure to systems theory and practice, I believe too many systemic problems are shifted onto the

position of the pastor. Burden-shifting systemic problems (one of many) onto the pastor only

encourages scapegoating behaviors. Shifting anxiety onto the only true scapegoat (Jesus Christ) would

provide better restitution (1 Peter 5:7); or implementing an organizational systems solution. In general,

though, I appreciated Layton's tone: he was less accusatory than some of the other authors I read, he

sought a solution, and he believed Christians could help provide a solution.