Reflections on *Might from the Margins: The Gospel's Power to Turn the Tables on Injustice*

Dennis R. Edwards, associate professor of New Testament
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois

Books about justice are proliferating, with many devoted to the topic of racial justice. I wrote *Might from the Margins: The Gospel's Power to Turn the Tables on Injustice* before a Minneapolis police officer murdered George Floyd in 2020. Some who read my book said it arrived at an opportune time in our nation's reckoning with its embedded racism.[1] What follows in this essay is a discussion of my rationale for writing *Might from the Margins,* which includes brief treatments of some of the book's themes. I conclude with a detailed reflection on my final chapter, "The Power of Love."

Why Some People Explore Books on Racial Justice

Perhaps because so many people carry cameras with them all the time, we have been able to witness scenes of racial injustice, including episodes of police brutality and public lynching. Consequently, increasing numbers of white people—many of them Christians—have demonstrated renewed interest in race matters, with many requesting titles of books for information concerning racism. Countless social media platforms have displayed titles or pictures of books that people should read if they want to understand racial dynamics in America, particularly with regard to evangelicalism's complicated history. It is impossible to know everything that motivates interest in any topic, but some people have communicated

[1] See Dennis R. Edwards, *Might from the Margins: The Gospel's Power to Turn the Tables on Injustice* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2020).

that their examination of racial issues stems from some version of the following three perspectives.

The first reason people request books on racial justice is that they desire to be equipped to help combat evil. Many people—including some of my friends and former parishioners—have committed to exploring issues related to racism, white supremacy, and anti-racist strategies with hopes of helping to eradicate racism. Many of these people are Christians motivated by their faith in Jesus, which leads to passionate concern for their fellow human beings. This passion turn provokes curiosity about how to engage in the work of justice. Whenever I have the opportunity (or is it the challenge?) to address issues related to race, the most frequent question I get from white Christians is some version of, "What should I do?" Since knowledge is power, these inquirers seek to arm themselves with information in their fight for racial justice.

A second reason some people explore literature related to racial justice is to refute the concerns of the overwhelming majority of minoritized and marginalized people. Members within this second group tend to rank the sources of their information according to how proximate the author is to whiteness. Whiteness is not so much about skin tone as it is about power. "Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white."[2] Anyone can be consumed by whiteness—even non-white people. No group of people is monolithic, and for many alienated people the pressure to assimilate and conform to the thinking and practices of the dominant culture is relentless and unbearable. Therefore, outliers among marginalized groups emerge, parroting white people who resist the reality of racism. For example, conservative activist and author Candace Owens provides a perspective different from the majority of African Americans, as does pastor Voddie T. Baucham, Jr., whose book *Fault Lines* simultaneously draws praise from racism deniers and vitriol from serious scholars of race.[3] Many white evangelicals have flocked to Owens and Baucham, as well as to a few others, and appear justified in dismissing the concerns of the vast majority of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color.

A third reason some people are drawn to literature related to justice is

[2] Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, rev. ed. (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society, 2002), 17.

[3] See Voddie T. Baucham, *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, DC: Salem, 2021).

to gain information—like that first group of people—but not necessarily to be involved in anti-racist activities. These inquirers are tentative, unsure if racism is as serious a problem as some contend. Members within this third group are cautious of any author or speaker who seems too pro-Black, or too angry. I have sometimes been dismissed for coming off as angry even though most who know me consider me to be even-keeled. Many ethnic minorities expertly *code switch*, so many of our white friends have little clue how angry we might be.

I address anger in *Might from the Margins* because anger is not the sin when it comes to injustice; rather, the sin is failing to be angry over injustice, and exercising the privilege of ignoring the problems of people in pain. Israel's eighth century BCE prophets had addressed those who "are at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1) when injustice abounds.

My Rationale for Writing *Might from the Margins*

My years of church involvement, pastoral experience, and academic work in biblical studies, especially given my proximity to American evangelicalism, all contributed to my motivation to write *Might from the Margins*, but I highlight these three factors:

1. The need to provide a biblical treatment of racial injustice.
2. My prior work in 1 Peter revealed how marginalized, diaspora people demonstrate the character of Christ, often to a greater degree than people of higher status.
3. My desire to encourage minoritized and marginalized people.

Racial justice is a biblical notion, not just a sociological one. Most of my family attended a charismatic, storefront church in Queens, New York, that was a major part of my development. I'll not take the space to discuss the Jesus-only, non-Trinitarian doctrinal stance of the church or some of its other idiosyncrasies. Suffice to say that it was not a stereotypical evangelical church and not even a church within a prominent African American denomination, such as African Methodist Episcopal, Progressive Baptist, or Church of God in Christ. The non-mainstream nature of my church background led me on a quest to find an ecclesial home. Before I found that home in the Evangelical Covenant Church, I spent about twenty years around and within the Mennonite Church (USA), and before that, the Evangelical Free Church of America. In the settings that viewed themselves as conservative, racism was understood to be sin,

but only to the extent that it meant personal prejudice or bigotry. Making judgments based on appearances is clearly wrong (e.g., James 2:1-5) and easily denounced, at least in contemporary times. Therefore, according to those conservative Christians, the cure for racism is to get people "saved" so they would presumably learn to love. Love, however, was not something that these Christians could connect to unjust structures or institutions. Love was simply interpersonal, thus, some white people have queried, "If my family didn't own slaves, why should slavery's enduring legacy be an issue for me to address?" These same people might claim to love people of a different racial or ethnic background but pay little attention to the forces that prevent those minoritized people from buying a house, securing a loan, driving safely, attending the best schools, or getting good health care. For some who claim allegiance to Jesus Christ, love does not connect to justice. In fact, it is the people in the dominate culture who tend to define what constitutes love and therefore position themselves to never be accused of failing to love. One example is a white couple who visited one of the churches I served. The couple had been missionaries in an African country for many years, but the wife proceeded to tell me a racially offensive joke. I am sure she would describe herself as loving Black people, but she did not seem to see the bigger picture. Despite the good deeds she may have helped perform in Africa, her perception of dark-skinned people was sinful. People with worldly power get to define the terms and set the boundaries which serve to secure their privileged place in the world. Injured parties have little voice in what constitutes love or justice. But as I write in the book, victims of injustice are in the best position to define it, and likewise know what it means to feel loved.[4]

Racism is about power, not just bigotry. As experts have noted, religion, science, history, and other disciplines conspired to dehumanize and devalue non-white Europeans. To address racism, we need to look not only at obvious examples of hatred, such as perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan and other hate groups, but also at policies, institutions, and societal systems that perpetuate injustice. As the biblical story of Israel's enslavement in Egypt illustrates, exploitative power, not emotions, is responsible for injustice. Even so, to some Christians, tackling society's power problem is a secular task, or something not addressed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. While sociologists might shed light on injustices such as racism, they do not address spiritual matters—according to some Christians.

[4] Edwards, *Might from the Margins*, 59-73.

Therefore, I attempt to show throughout *Might from the Margins* that the topic of power is indeed a biblical issue, and sociologists are not the only ones concerned about power, privilege, sex, race, ethnicity, physical and mental abilities, and a host of other topics. One biblical passage that helps to frame my book's argument is 1 Corinthians 1:26-29:

> Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (NRSV)

This passage makes clear that the Corinthian Christians included people on the margins (and that is reiterated in 1 Corinthians 11:17-22). God always delights in using people who are likely to be overlooked, such as David the shepherd, or a curious Samaritan woman, or another Samaritan on the ancient Jericho Road. God's prerogative for the marginalized is a theme that runs throughout Scripture.

Marginalized people are our exemplars. I have been spending time studying the book of 1 Peter, having written a commentary on that letter in the Story of God Bible Commentary series.[5] Also, in *Gospel Haymanot,* I argue that 1 Peter honors both enslaved people (1 Pet. 2:18-25) who were not Roman citizens, and women (1 Pet. 3:1-6) who were marginalized even if they were citizens. Peter not only instructs both enslaved people and women—he also commends them for being like Jesus.[6] Those who have suffered societal injustices—not just bad vibes from people but actual oppression—are raised as exemplars because they hold tenaciously to their faith in Jesus and show themselves to be like the Lord. Consequently, the upside-down nature of God's reign requires that we look to the least to understand greatness and to discover what God desires. We are to be like children, according to Jesus (e.g., Mark 9:36-37; 10:15).

[5] Dennis R. Edwards, *1 Peter*, Story of God Bible Commentary 17 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).

[6] See Dennis R. Edwards, "Worthy of the Gospel: Aliens, Slaves, and Women as Our Teachers," in *Gospel Haymanot: A Constructive Theology and Critical Reflection on African and Diasporic Christianity,* ed. Vince L. Bantu (Chicago: Urban Ministries, 2020), 84-107.

Children, dependent and inconvenient, were and are still overlooked and minimized by many adults. But the little ones are our teachers.

The letter called 1 Peter not only addresses enslaved people and women, but also marks the entire community as alien, stranger, diasporic (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11). Such a status reveals vulnerability. Willie J. Jennings, in his Acts commentary, poignantly describes what diasporic status involves:

> Diaspora means scattering and fragmentation, exile and loss. It means being displaced and in search of a place that could be made home. … Danger and threat surround diaspora life. Diaspora life is crowded with self-questioning and questions for God concerning the anger, hatred, and violence visited upon a people. We must never confuse voluntary migration with diaspora, because diaspora is a geographic and social world not chosen and a psychic state inescapable. The peoples who inhabit diaspora live with animus and violence filling the air they breathe. They live always on the verge of being classified enemy, always in evaluation of their productivity to the empire, always having an acceptance on loan, ready to be taken away at the first sign of sedition. They live with fear as an ever-present partner in their lives, the fear of being turned into a them, a dangerous other, those people among us.[7]

It is from that peripheral, outsider status that the Christian community develops a sense of solidarity, learns how to negotiate secular authorities, and discovers that their witness for Christ can be powerful and effective (e.g., 1 Pet. 2:12; 3:15). In the book I reflected on my own diasporic status, as well as that of other African Americans. I recall how *Christianity Today* and other evangelical publications contained advertisements for readers to discover their family crest—an exercise for people of European descent, which has long been evangelicalism's target audience. It was as if those publications didn't want business from people of color or didn't think we mattered. Yet the faith and fortitude of some of my forebears and that of many other African Americans puts to shame oppressive, self-centered, greedy, and otherwise narrow expressions of Christianity. The civil rights movement is but one example of how godly people on the margins prayerfully confronted injustice and pushed forward legislation that provided voting rights and would even enable me to attend

[7] Willie J. Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 6, emphasis original.

better schools, as New York City made its own efforts to increase the level of integration.

Another writer that I rely upon in *Might from the Margins* is the poet, mystic, and theologian Howard Thurman, whose *Jesus and the Disinherited* is a classic.[8] Sadly, I did not come across it until after seminary. Thurman raises questions about whether Christianity provides any benefit for people "whose backs are against the wall," especially when propagators of injustice profess to be Christian. Thurman proceeds to answer his questions and, in the process, helps Black and other marginalized people to understand the life of Jesus and depend upon the Lord and his example, rather than turn toward the dominant culture for solutions. *Might from the Margins* attempts to celebrate the unsung heroes who loved and served Jesus in the face of the vitriol, discrimination, and outright hatred—often doled out by people claiming to be Christian. Indeed, white America often venerates many slaveowners as heroes of the faith, but God would have us look elsewhere and find our examples of Christlikeness among the enslaved.

White people are not always the central characters. In the book, I recount my experience of watching the blockbuster movie Black Panther for the first time.[9] One scene that I focus on is where CIA Agent Ross begins to speak to M'Baku of the Jabari Tribe while several residents of Wakanda, including royalty, are right next to him.[10] The audacity of Agent Ross becomes immediately clear when M'Baku, followed by the rest of the Jabari Tribe, begin to bark, drowning out the agent so that he must shut his mouth. I was ready to stand and cheer in the theater as my mind went to the many ways white people presume themselves to be the center of the universe, even when they make up the minority. One need only consider South Africa's history and the legacy of apartheid. Contemporary Christians, by and large, denounce the apartheid regime, but many evangelicals championed it and vilified efforts to undermine or otherwise thwart the regime. A *New York Times* article of August 21, 1985, by Robert Pear, explains how the Reverend Jerry Falwell Sr. had been calling Bishop Desmond Tutu a phony and that American Chris-

[8] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon, 1996). Thurman initially published the book in 1949, so there are various editions available after more than 70 years.

[9] Edwards, *Might from the Margins*, 21

[10] *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler, (United States: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018).

tians should buy South African gold coins (krugerrands).[11] The article reflected what I had been hearing in college when staff workers in the prominent Campus Crusade for Christ ministry on my campus told me that apartheid should not be dismantled because the country would turn Marxist. White people have long acted as if they know what is best for everyone else, even when they are not affected directly by the situation. White Christians are accustomed to being the center of attention in the USA, so most of our literature is written for them, even books about racial injustice. Being at the center means elevating white people's interests and concerns so that they remain the main characters, while we people of color are supporting players, treated as if our job is to improve white people's perspectives.

Consider how when many white evangelical churches desire to become racially diverse, they look to hire non-white associate staff people. Somehow, those staff people are to help the church without changing anything about the institution. In their supporting roles, non-white staff might contribute to a picture of diversity, but the power of authentic diversity is absent. In *Might from the Margins*, I convey some stories from my own years of pastoral ministry, including a time when I was an associate pastor of a predominately white church. Many of the attendees were progressive enough to receive my leadership, at least in principle, but some influential people in the church found it too difficult to have an African American pastor who was not interested in being *bleached* (which is how an African American friend referred to assimilating into whiteness). It became clear that my task was to help us *look* better without pushing us to *become* better regarding racial diversity and inclusion. Even when white people are chastised or offered advice for correcting their views or behaviors, they are still at center-stage because the message is geared to them. Books written by people of color often have white people as the target audience. The same happens with movies.

In 2019 there was some hubbub over the movie *Green Book*, which told the story of an Italian American driver for an African American entertainer traveling throughout the segregated south in the 1960s. *The Negro Motorist Green Book* was an actual publication listing places safe for African Americans to eat and sleep while traveling. One complaint directed toward the movie is that it is the story of a white person's redemp-

[11] Robert Pear, "Falwell Denounces Tutu as a 'Phony'," *New York Times*, August 21, 1985.

tion through the agency of a Black person who is the one facing injustice. Director Spike Lee lamented the "magical Negro" trope in movies, where the white hero benefits from a Black person with special skills or mystical abilities, as in *The Legend of Bagger Vance* or *The Green Mile*. It is rare to find books or movies that describe and celebrate African American ingenuity and intellect without white people as the beneficiaries. The movie *Black Panther* is not without its flaws but does counter the tendency to center white people. I respect that some Black people want white people to be their main audience, as in the book and HBO program *Dear White People*. Certainly, since white people wield societal power, it makes sense that one path toward positive change is to win over the most powerful people in a society. That is indeed *one* path.

My path toward change, however, at least in *Might from the Margins,* includes building solidarity among marginalized people. Some white people might feel threatened at the notion of various minority groups joining together, but such solidarity reveals the strength that alienated people do not always realize is present. Members of minoritized groups can be made to feel that they are insignificant, but when we connect with others in a similar situation, we discover renewed hope for change. Such was the case when the Asian American Christian Collaborative was formed.[12] I was moved to tears seeing Asian Americans from different ethnic groups carrying "Black Lives Matter" posters and demonstrating against police brutality. In turn, many of us denounced the anti-Asian violence that swelled in the wake of former President Trump's characterization of the Covid-19 virus as the "China virus." Supplying white people with information, anecdotes, and persuasive testimony meets a concern, as I noted in the introduction above, but with *Might from the Margins* I hope to help motivate alienated people to grow in our solidarity, working for justice alongside each other, like the phalanx suggested by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians.

In Philippians 1:27, Paul writes, "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel." *Might from the Margins* elaborates on a few details about Philippi, a colony of Rome and "leading city" according to Acts 16:12. Considering Philippi's history and their understanding of Rome's military might, Paul's language

[12] See https://www.asianamericanchristiancollaborative.com.

of "standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side" conjures images of the phalanx where soldiers created a virtually impenetrable shield-wall to advance against their enemies. Paul uses the image of a phalanx, not only to note that the Philippians faced opposition but to encourage their solidarity. His admonition to strive side-by-side in one spirit continues into Philippians 2:1-5, where he passionately pleads for unity:

> If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (NRSV)

Certainly, we strive for all Christians to be united, and *Might from the Margins* affirms that, but it is often necessary for minoritized people to practice unity apart from white people's supervision. It is important to understand that alienated people sometimes need to recognize—or remember—that the power we have from God does not depend upon what the dominant culture does to or for us. Some of us have been conditioned to think we need white people's permission or approval to exercise our spiritual gifts, raise our voices, or otherwise express our expertise—even in theological circles. Striving for unity in Christ is one goal God placed on my heart many years ago. I was bussed outside my neighborhood for school, often the only or one of few Black people in various contexts, and wondered why churches were frequently racially segregated; mirroring, rather than challenging, secular society. Those experiences contributed to shaping my theological perspectives regarding unity. On the way to becoming one united people, those who have been alienated by the dominant culture need to come together so as not to glean all our understanding of other minorities from white people. We need to support each other.

Sometimes, when white organizations hire people of color, they are not aware of how difficult it might be for that newly hired person to navigate within the organization. We might be the only person from our racial or ethnic group and potentially face pressures including a feeling of responsibility for representing the entirety of our group. Solidarity among people of color leads to collaboration and not fragmentation. Of course, unity is not a strategy, it is an outgrowth of love.

Love Is Always the Answer

Whenever people of color address issues of race—especially in Christian contexts—the anxiety level rises for white people and a degree of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) sets in for people of color. As for the anxiety, it is clear that not many white people want to be accused of being racists. For example, you might have seen a video from the PBS show Frontline that went viral. They did a story called "Poverty, Politics, and Profit" and the viral clip from that story was a white woman's response to an interviewer's questions.[13] The woman, who lived in a comfortable community in Texas, was pointing out the reasons she opposes affordable housing in her neighborhood. She touted every stereotype about poor and otherwise marginalized people, all the while making disclaimers such as, "I know this sounds terrible, but…" and also, "I'm not a racist, but…" She was even asked if the poor kids of a single mother deserved the same educational opportunities as her kids and she said "no," because since she doesn't expect to have the luxurious lifestyle of a billionaire, impoverished people shouldn't expect to have her lifestyle. What came through in that short clip is how easy it is to participate in racism without even seeing it or wanting to acknowledge the power of it. That woman demonstrated the privilege of being able to distance herself from the problem of homelessness, caricature families in desperate need, and absolve herself of any culpability.

As for PTSD, often marginalized people, the ones best able to discern injustice and speak prophetically to it, are asked to address the same problems that have persisted for generations, yet not allow that work to take a toll on us. Over the decades I have spoken in churches, at camps, within clergy meetings, and in classrooms, but I have also had some people minimize me and dismiss my discussion of racism. Recalling those gatherings sometimes triggers physical reactions, including a desire to withdraw, close my mouth, and disappear. But regardless of the discomfort we all face in sorting through issues of racial injustice, we must always recognize and rely upon the power of love. Love, however, is not about holding hands and singing Kumbaya! The songs and sitcoms of my childhood in the 1970s reduced love to sappy sentimentality, but love is more powerful than that. Love must always be

[13] *PBS Frontline,* "Poverty, Politics, and Profit," written and produced by Rick Young, featuring correspondent Laura Sullivan interview of Nicole Humphrey, posted October 13, 2020, https://youtu.be/8iei3HtdBbQ.

what Jesus-followers pursue. We are to love God and love our neighbors, as well as love fellow members of God's household. Love encompasses dignity and justice.

Chanequa Walker-Barnes, in her book *I Bring the Voices of My People,* acknowledges, "When people of color internalize the view that whiteness is superior to all other races (including their own), we call this internalized oppression."[14] Sadly, Christianity contributed to racial self-hatred. One example is how the so-called Curse of Ham (Gen. 9:20-27) persisted throughout the centuries to justify the enslavement of Africans in the New World. The contemporary slogan and hashtag "Black lives matter" is fuel for our self-love. It is an anti-brutality slogan that reminds us of our inherent worth as human beings. In my era, we needed to hear and echo James Brown: "Say it loud—I'm black and I'm proud!" We needed to say "Black is beautiful" to ourselves and to each other. Another reason I wrote *Might from the Margins* is so that African American people would not need to reject Christianity because of the way it has been used against us. And if we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, we need to love ourselves. Love not only affirms the dignity of marginalized people, it is also honest.

In 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, the apostle Paul writes, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." When Paul says that love rejoices in the truth, he is saying that love should be honest. Truth encompasses our understanding of Jesus Christ and accuracy regarding any situation under scrutiny. Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses meals, marriage, the resurrection, spiritual gifts, and so much more, and claims that love doesn't merely tolerate the truth, it rejoices in it.

Miroslav Volf writes of the moral obligation to remember truthfully in the quest for justice and movement toward unity: "So the obligation to truthfulness in remembering is at its root an obligation to do justice, even in such a seemingly simple act as the 'naming' of what one person has done to another."[15] Naming seems simple, but it is hard for many,

[14] Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation*, Prophetic Christianity (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 71

[15] Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 54.

especially when it puts a spotlight on negative parts of the nation's history. But love requires honesty that can lead to dismantling injustice and creating equitable systems.

Conclusion

Might from the Margins was nearly a memoir of sorts, because I share many of my own experiences. But I share aspects of my life openly while also examining the Scriptures. In so doing, I hope to challenge, stimulate, encourage, motivate—and perhaps even comfort—anyone who has been minoritized, minimized, alienated, discriminated against, and otherwise victimized by injustice. We have might, not because we take up worldly weapons but because God fights for us. As Mary, the mother of Jesus put it:

> He has shown strength with his arm;
> he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
> and lifted up the lowly;
> He has filled the hungry with good things,
> and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53, NRSV)

I'm often asked what my hopes might be for Christians within the dominate culture. While that topic was not the focus of *Might from the Margins*, my first answer is always *humility*. Humility does not start with denials, excuses, or blame-shifting but assumes a listening posture in order to discern truth, which makes us free. I am happily part of the Evangelical Covenant Church because many white denominational leaders humbly listen to the concerns of minoritized sisters and brothers. When we listen, we learn, and as we learn, we grow. People who are growing together in faith, hope, and love can be part of Christ's transformative work in this world.