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The Myth Of Equality: Uncovering The Roots Of Injustice And Privilege



Synopsis

Is privilege real or imagined? It's clear that issues of race and equality have come to the forefront in our nation's consciousness. Every week yet another incident involving racial tension splashes across headlines and dominates our news feeds. But it's not easy to unpack the origins of these tensions, and perhaps we wonder whether any of these issues really has anything to do with us. Ken Wytsma, founder of the Justice Conference, understands these questions. He has gone through his own journey of understanding the underpinnings of inequality and privilege. In this timely, insightful book Wytsma unpacks what we need to know to be grounded in conversations about today's race-related issues. And he helps us come to a deeper understanding of both the origins of these issues and the reconciling role we are called to play as ministers of the gospel. Inequality and privilege are real. *The Myth of Equality* opens our eyes to realities we may have never realized were present in our society and world. And we will be changed for the better as a result.

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Customer Reviews

Publishers Weekly (Starred Review) Wytsma (*Pursuing Justice*), lead pastor of Antioch Church in Bend, Ore., and president of Kilns College, has a gift for persuasive argument, well displayed in his deployment of history, biblical theology, and current affairs to demonstrate the subtle and unsubtle ways that white dominance shapes American culture and conversations about race. He does so from the perspective of a passionately committed evangelical Christian calling prophetically for

justice for those who have been consistently disadvantaged by a system and culture built on what

“a white normative standard” that shapes perceptions and judgments. Wytsma makes his points without accusation, the better to address an audience of white readers who may be unaccustomed to looking beneath the surface of attitudes about race or unaware of the history of Jim Crow laws and other forces that drove racial segregation. He is especially good at giving a quick tour of the post-Reconstruction history of race. Slavery was formally ended, but disenfranchisement, “Black Codes” in the South, redlining in housing, and other forms of social control perpetuated inequality. This book should be a wake-up call to Christian communities nationwide.

The Myth of Equality is written so skillfully that it’s easy to miss how much it accomplishes. The first part brings to light, with unflinching honesty, how deeply racism and white privilege are embedded within the founding documents and practices of the United States. The second part masterfully shows that this inequality violates the call of the gospel to justice and unity. And the third part offers some wise suggestions to those of us who are white Christians about how we can ‘lay down’ our white privilege. I have no doubt that some readers will be angered by the claim that they participate in and benefit from structures of racism and white privilege, well supported though that claim is. I predict that there will be more who are convinced and inspired by the patient, passionate, and nondefensive way in which Wytsma makes his case. It’s a book that someone had to write.” (Nicholas Wolterstorff, Noah Porter Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology, Yale University, senior research fellow, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia, honorary professor, Australian Catholic University)

“White progressives, evangelical and not, seem to enjoy feeling bad about racial injustice and wagging self-righteous fingers at others, but they often exacerbate the injustices of racism by hardening the lines of defense. Far too often the only solutions proposed are more laws, tightening existing laws, and social engineering through public education. What we need are not resolutions but solutions—solutions emerging from real people in real settings, with leaders who have discovered the long, painful path that leads from white privilege and white invisibility to social integration, racial reconciliation, and churches abounding in fellowship across racial lines and celebrating the glories of ethnicities. Ken Wytsma is the kind of leader who offers real solutions toward social integration and racial reconciliation, and he comes from that kind of community and church. The Myth of Equality is a genuine contribution for those of us looking for ways forward.” (Scot McKnight, Julius R. Mantey Professor of New Testament, Northern Seminary)

“White privilege is a subject that few dare to tackle. I applaud Ken for venturing into this rough terrain. Ken’s historical approach to white privilege drives the conversation deeper and challenges readers to

move beyond a political perspective, toward a kingdom view. His personal journey keeps it grounded in reality. A much needed book for our times." (Leroy Barber, The Voices Project)"With great sensitivity, wisdom, and boldness, Ken takes on the tough, often-taboo topics of privilege and race. He makes a cogent, powerful, and compelling argument for why addressing race and understanding privilege allows us to more fully live out the gospel. He boils down complicated concepts to relatable points through his interweaving of scholars' writings, activists' thinking, historical realities, and personal stories. His humility and posture of learning from others, particularly people of color, make this book an authentic, effective tool for followers of Christ taking seriously the call to pursue justice. This book is needed, timely, and will help reshape the conversation around race in America." (Jenny Yang, vice president of advocacy and policy, World Relief)"Ken Wytsma goes where few dare to tread. He asks hard questions about race, justice, and equality and presents proven and practical solutions. Above all, Ken personifies these solutions; he is seeking to live justice, not just do it. The message in *The Myth of Equality* is urgent; it's a must-read." (Stephan Bauman, former president and CEO of World Relief, author of *Break Open the Sky*)"These are challenging times in our larger culture and within the church. In the midst of these tensions, I'm grateful for voices like Ken Wytsma who are seeking to help the church not only to engage the various challenges but to do it from a posture of humility and deep self-reflection. In *The Myth of Equality*, Wytsma broaches an incredibly sensitive but pertinent conversation about equality, privilege, race, injustice, and reconciliation. But herein lies the challenge: many of us love the idea of reconciliation until we learn that it inevitably involves the messy and arduous work of listening to others' stories, truth telling, confessing, repenting, dismantling, healing, and peacemaking. *The Myth of Equality* is an important and timely book that helps us dig deeper on the journey of justice and reconciliation." (Eugene Cho, pastor and humanitarian, author of *OVERRATED*)"The *Myth of Equality* is a book for our times. Tumultuous times do not create problems, they reveal them. Political disruption, racial division, and extreme polarization mandate that the church looks itself in the mirror. We must recognize that to whom much is given, much is expected. Privilege is not just a modern progressive agenda, it is an ancient, biblically recognized reality. Ken Wytsma has done the church a favor that can help us recapture the blessed virtue of giving. Leaders seriously interested in helping Christians navigate these important issues would be well served to engage this book." (Tyler Johnson, lead pastor, Redemption Arizona)"One of the greatest obstacles to the journey toward racial justice and reconciliation within the US church is the refusal of white Christians to confront the realities of white supremacy and white privilege. Here, Ken Wytsma comes alongside white Christians to help them tackle this issue, not from the perspective of a

distant expert, but as one who continues to wrestle with how privilege and racism impact his own discipleship journey. Rooted in Scripture, history, and personal experience, *The Myth of Equality* is a valuable primer for anyone struggling to understand racism and privilege." (Chanequa Walker-Barnes, associate professor of practical theology, McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, author of *Too Heavy a Yoke*) "The American church stands at an important crossroads. Will we embrace God's plan for the church as revealed in Revelation 7:9, or will the church disintegrate into the chaos, confusion, and cacophony akin to the story of the Tower of Babel as we build dividing walls of hostility? In order to move into God's heart for the church, truth-telling must occur. Without truth, we simply rebuild the Tower of Babel rather than become the people of God. In this book, Ken Wytsma embraces the courage needed to speak the truth in love. Wytsma speaks the truth even at the risk of putting himself in peril. That kind of truth-telling is much needed in our turbulent world. Thank you, Ken, for the courage expressed in this book. May you who engage this book also find the similar courage to take these truths and be transformed by them." (Soong-Chan Rah, Milton B. Engebretson Professor of Church Growth and Evangelism, North Park Theological Seminary, author of *The Next Evangelicalism* and *Prophetic Lament*) "Stretching back to the earliest arrivals of Europeans on our coasts, the United States has been built on a long history of racial and ethnic injustice, and white Christians have been strikingly reticent about this history. Ken Wytsma's *The Myth of Equality* gently and gracefully initiates a conversation with white Christians about the racial brokenness of our land. This is a timely book that speaks bluntly about our past and in so doing orients us for the long, slow journey toward healing these wounds." (C. Christopher Smith, founding editor of *The Englewood Review of Books*, author of *Reading For the Common Good*) "Ken Wytsma is a white evangelical man from a conservative white evangelical world, and he is doing his homework on race. I've witnessed Ken's journey toward deeper understanding of the construct of race, its impact on individuals and communities of color, and what redemption requires. I've witnessed the wrestling and the transformation as aha moments have moved him into deeper love, more solid commitment, and earnest work toward the healing of our world. Through *The Myth of Equality*, Wytsma offers a peek at his homework. But this is no cheat sheet. It's a journal of discoveries shared with humility, grace, and unrelenting commitment to truth." (Lisa Sharon Harper, chief church engagement officer, Sojourners, author of *The Very Good Gospel*) "This book is truly amazing! Ken tackles the essentials of a major issue of our times with humility, honesty, intellect, and vulnerability. The result is a terrible beauty, a true invitation to come to terms with our own capacity for harm and good—leading us toward change and the hope of a generation reconciled. If you are perplexed about racial tension in this country, read this book. If you are

worried about your complicity because of the color of your skin, read this book. If you feel ill equipped to speak about this issue, read this book. If you aren't sure what your faith requires of you in this space, read this book. Honestly, read this book. It's important." (Danielle Strickland, social justice secretary, The Salvation Army, USW)"This is an important and courageous book. At this moment of national tension around racial questions, Ken Wytsma stakes out unique territory, building the bridges necessary for many white evangelicals to grasp the core of the issue and become faithful brothers and sisters to Christians of color. I am thankful for his hard work and fearless dedication to justice." (Alexia Salvatierra, coauthor of Faith-Rooted Organizing)"It is impossible to deny that Christ is moving his church today toward racial reconciliation. It is likewise impossible to deny that many white Christians like me are not as comfortable with that movement as we say we are. In *The Myth of Equality*, Ken engages a visceral topic with clarity, compassion, and inspiring conviction. He prompts us to engage the deep and bitter roots of racial bias and privilege in American faith. A must-read resource for those beginning to feel that 'the way things are' is not okay. A readable, well-reasoned push toward Christ's justice." (Paul J. Pastor, author of *The Face of the Deep*)"We must know our past to understand our present. Racial injustice in America's history has constructed massive systemic challenges we face today. To move forward well, we need a variety of voices—especially minority voices. The conversation is further strengthened by white voices willing to own the privilege this history affords rather than ignore or deny it. In the pages that follow, Wytsma, a respected Christian leader in the justice conversation, gives a strong introduction to our country's brutal history with race, confronting the 'myth of equality' in America, joining a multiethnic chorus of voices grappling honestly and prophetically with how to best move forward." (Joshua Ryan Butler, pastor at Imago Dei Community, Portland, OR, author of *The Skeletons in God's Closet* and *The Pursuing God*)

Ken Wytsma is a leader, communicator, and social entrepreneur. He is the author of *Pursuing Justice*, *The Grand Paradox*, and *Create vs. Copy*. He is also the president of Kilns College, a graduate-only Christian liberal arts college, where he teaches courses on philosophy and justice. Ken is a lead pastor of Antioch Church in Bend, Oregon, which he helped start in 2006. In 2010, along with the creative communities of World Relief and Kilns College, he founded The Justice Conference—an annual international conference that has introduced over thirty thousand men and women across six continents to conversations and organizations related to biblical justice. He has also written articles appearing in *RELEVANT Magazine*, *Church Leaders*, *Huffington Post*, *Worship Leader Magazine*, *OUTREACH Magazine*, and more. Ken lives in Bend, Oregon, with his

wife, Tamara, and their four daughters.

For 20-plus years I (white) have team-taught (person of color) "Reconciliation in a Racialized Society," using many books, including *Racism without Racists* (Eduardo Bonilla-Silva), *Uprooting Racism* (Paul Kivel), *One Church Many Tribes* (Richard Twiss), *Transcending Racial Barriers* (Michael O. Emerson and George Yancey), and *Reconciling All Things* (Emanuel Katangole and Chris Rice). Ken Wytsma offers us Christians a book which does a wonderful job "telling it like it is." The 11 chapters are placed into three sections: The Story of Race, Equality and the Kingdom of God, and The Challenge of Privilege. If you are looking to better understand racism and the interdependence of racism and fractured faith (orthodoxy, orthopraxy and orthopathy), this is an excellent read. I offer one suggestion to make in the second edition. Native American Indians need greater space. Chapters three and four ("Stolen Labor" and "How Our Cities Got Their Shape") tell the story of black-white America. Complementary chapters entitled "Stolen Ground" and "How Reservations Got Their Location" detailing Native-white America would be a significant addition to an excellent book. This book is an excellent choice for any Sunday School class (high school through "seniors"), book club, and college-level course (where explicitly Christian perspectives are permitted and even welcome).

Recently a friend and mentor, who is a person of color, posted on social media of a recent invitation he had to explain white privilege. To white people. My friend is a justice advocate, an activist, and well-known Christian leader. He declined the invitation to write about something he doesn't have. He decided instead to spend his creative energy supporting leaders of color instead of educating us white folk. But Ken Wytsma, on the other hand, is uniquely gifted and qualified to describe white privilege. He is a pastor in Bend, Oregon, president of Kilns College (where he lectures in philosophy), an author of several quality Christian books, a father of four, and founder of the Justice Conference. He is also pretty darn pasty white. He was asked by Helen Lee at IVP to write a book on White Privilege that would help bridge the gap between those on the forefront of race relations and us white evangelicals who are only beginning to awaken to our racist history (3). In response to both her request and a couple of recent examples of racial bias (in the media, and against folks he knew personally), he wrote *The Myth of Equality: Uncovering the Roots of Injustice and Privilege*. Wytsma probes the reality of privilege and race, theology and justice and the responsibility of the privileged. In Part 1, Wytsma reviews the history of race and racial attitudes in America. He describes immigration policies which favored white Europeans, the history of racism in European

thought, slavery and Jim Crow, law enforcement practices (e.g. how the War on Drugs disproportionately attacked communities of color), and how urban development has reinforced modern segregation. He offers a pretty solid analysis of America's racial story—how we got here and how people of color still are affected by ongoing systemic injustice. Part 2 brings this American story into conversation with our theology and the values of the Kingdom of God. Wytsma challenges the church's silence about race and the status quo and calls us to more prophetic engagement (94). He describes how justice is integral to the gospel of Jesus and his cross, and he challenges our transactional and individualized view on faith and spirituality (and the ways privilege plays into it). In Part 3, Wytsma discusses how white Christians can become more aware of their implicit racial biases, make space for diversity in sharing power and laying down our privilege. This involves intentionally listening and making space for the other, lamenting our troubled history, confessing, and beginning the hard work of dismantling privilege. This is the fourth book I've read from Wytsma and thus far, I think this is, without a doubt, his best book. He discusses the issues of race without making himself the 'expert' and without offering pat answers to tough questions. Wytsma gives space for the complexity of race and privilege: Everyone wants to think they have a good understanding of race. We often treat it like a yes-or-no category. Are you a racist? No. Therefore, are you good with race? Yes. The problem is, it's not a yes-or-no category but something with a hundred layers of nuance. . . . As a white man writing a book on privilege, I've had to admit from the beginning that my understanding and knowledge of racism end when conversation turns to the firsthand experiences of people of color. (132-33). Growing up, I wasn't aware of how I benefited from privilege and all the ways that communities of color were affected by institutionalized racial bias and ongoing systemic injustice. I'm still learning, mostly because I have friendships with people of color that have opened my eyes to some things I may not have otherwise seen. But I have other friends and family which are unaware of the dynamics of privilege and race (either through willful ignorance or because their social circles are almost entirely white). Privilege is at play in American race relations. Opportunities that have been afforded us white guys have not historically, and are not, even now, extended to people of color. We can't dismantle privilege if we aren't able to name how it has penetrated our culture and the church. Wytsma does a wonderful job confronting our troubled history and faulty theological assumptions. This is a short book (only about two hundred pages) so therefore unable to say everything that needs to be said about race and privilege. Wytsma addresses dynamics between whites and blacks most directly, and touches on the Native American/ colonial experience (with a nod toward the late Richard Twiss). He deals with how white privilege affects other minorities more tangentially (i.e. the experiences Latinos and

Asians are not in sharp focus here). This isn't a criticism so much as naming the limits of what Wytsma is able to accomplish through this book. I'd also note that this book is more conceptual than practical, aimed at enlarging our understanding of racial dynamics more than providing a road map of what to do about it. Everybody I know values diversity and multi-culturalism until it costs something. We love when minorities come to our (mostly white) church, but often we demand minorities change and conform to our way before they really belong. Dismantling Privilege involves real partnership, listening and sharing of power. It means listening to and sharing in the burdens of those who have suffered discrimination and shame. It means to change. I recommend Wytsma's book for anyone interested in moving beyond how the dynamics of racism affects us, to effecting real change. All royalties from this book go to The Voices Project , an organization working to empower voices of color. I give this book Five stars

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Race, Injustice, Privilege and related ideas are common discussions in the political world. And that is part of the problem with discussing them inside the Christian church. Quite often our understanding of issues that have any relationship to politics are based more on our political bias and background than our Christianity. It is not that our Christianity is unimportant to our politics, but our politics matters to what we think is important within Christianity. Ken Wytsma has a very clear purpose in writing. He is a White pastor writing primarily to White Christians about race and inequality. He is doing that because he thinks that at least some readers will listen to him in ways that they have not been listening to minority Christians talk about race and inequality. Section one is mostly a summary of history and illustrations of why inequality exists. It is a very good summary of a numbers of issues, from government involvement in housing segregation and inequality to the role of the criminal justice system in creating and perpetuating inequality to migration patterns since the civil war. Inequality is a vast and complex matter. Wytsma is summarizing the work of others here. In a short section he can't give the depth that books like Warmth of Other Suns or Slavery by Another Name or New Jim Crow or the host of other in books that have the space to look deeply at different aspects of history, race, inequality and injustice. As a summary, this section is one of the better looks at the variety of ways that inequality has come to be in place in just a few pages. Section two brings theology into the conversation. That conversation then necessarily looks at what the kingdom of God understands justice to look like. Wytsma asserts that the gospel is

concerned with justice and any attempt to separate justice from the gospel changes the gospel away from its inherent focus on relationship (between God and us and between communities of humans) into individualism. Wytsma traces the theological shift from Christianity as a communal understanding to the individualism of revivalism and personal relationships with Jesus. He is not denying the importance of an actual relationship with God. He is denying that the gospel is simply a relationship with God. The gospel is more than individual 'me and God' and that more has to be concerned with a Kingdom understanding of what Justice is all about. Justice within the Kingdom then moves to the third section where the understanding of privilege is explored. Wytsma talks about Implicit Racial Bias, differences in racial experience and practical ideas for how we move toward taking inequality seriously and how to reduce it. Theologically and socially, I very much appreciate the Myth of Equality. It is brief and has a lot of good content. I agree with the how Wytsma diagnoses the theological problem and with the importance that he places on the problem. I think issues of race are one of the two or three most important issues confronting the church. But that brings me to the main problem with the Myth of Equality. I am not sure that it will change the minds of many that do not already see race and inequality as a problem. When I glance at any of the Facebook comments on any Christianity Today article that mentions race, it is just a matter of time before someone says something like, 'Christianity Today has gone liberal' or 'this is just a marxist analysis that has nothing to do with Christianity.' Even a number of people that I know that are convinced of the reality of problems of racial bias and discrimination both inside and outside the church will view Wytsma's embrace of the importance of justice as central to the gospel as theologically suspect. And I think many in the church talk about the problems of individualism, but view the problem as one of identity politics that other people have, but do not see how the individualism impacts their own faith. In the end I really do recommend the Myth of Equality. I have already purchased a copy for someone and I think I will probably end up buying a couple more copies for friends. But simple knowledge is not enough. Racial isolation, bias and lack of perspective matter here. If we are biased against seeing discrimination and racism within ourselves or our society we will likely not see it. Books like this are only helpful if there is at least some opening to seeing racism within ourselves and how that then is expressed in society at large.

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