

EXCERPT



Plundered *The Tangled Roots of Racial and Environmental Injustice*

October 8, 2024 | 208 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0774-7

David W. Swanson is the pastor of New Community Covenant Church, a multicultural congregation in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood. He helps lead New Community Outreach, a nonprofit that collaborates with the community to reduce sources of trauma, and he speaks around the country on the topics of racial justice and reconciliation. He is the author of *Rediscipling the White Church*, and he has written articles for *Christianity Today*, *the Englewood Review of Books*, and *the Covenant Companion*.

Racial and Environmental Justice Must Be Taken Together

Fourteen years ago a small group of diverse people started a church in Chicago's Bronzeville community. Our location in a historically African American neighborhood as a multiracial congregation means I've spent a lot of time thinking, praying, and preaching about God's concern for racial justice. The community we've grown to be a part of, as will become clear in the pages to come, has shaped me far more than I could have imagined in those early years. I am a white man who didn't grow up in Chicago, but the stories and histories of our congregation's neighborhood have worked their way into my imagination. Emmett Till's funeral was held in this neighborhood. Ida B. Wells lived here. Frederick Douglass organized here. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. preached here. Gwendolyn Brooks wrote poetry here. How I understand racial equality has been thoroughly shaped by the Black freedom struggle that has been stewarded by generations of our neighbors and their churches.

My vocation as an urban pastor involved in justice and reconciliation ministries still occasionally surprises me. After high school in Southern California, I moved to the Blue Ridge mountains of North Carolina for college where I studied outdoor education and environmental studies. I envisioned a life spent outdoors, maybe as a camp director or park ranger. I'd always experienced God's presence in nature, whether backpacking in the Grand Canyon, rock climbing at Joshua Tree, or exploring Venezuela's rainforests where my missionary family spent most of my childhood. During college I struggled through my botany, biology, and geology classes. More enjoyable were the hours spent learning to maneuver a canoe down a tricky section of the Catawba River or leading a group on a backpacking trip through the Linville Gorge Wilderness Area. I spent three months with a camp ministry in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and thought I had discovered a lifelong vocation: teaching people to enjoy and care for God's magnificent creation.

How God redirected me from a life outdoors to pastoral ministry in the third-largest city in the country is something that still astonishes me. My wife, Maggie, and I still joke about how different our life together has been than what either of us could have imagined when we were married in a chapel nestled in the Appalachian hills. Over the years, as our church has learned to worship together and serve with our neighbors, I've occasionally wondered about the connection between my concern for creation and my call to the ministry of racial justice and reconciliation. To be honest, the differences between the two often seemed incompatible to my uncreative mind.

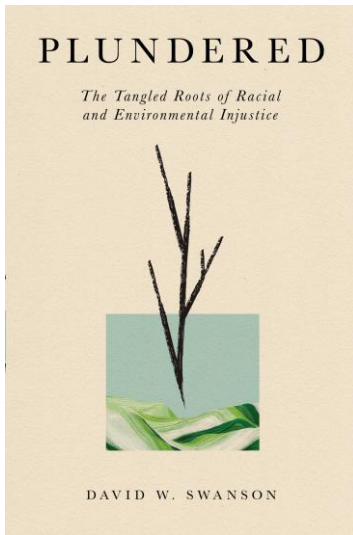
Despite my lack of imagination, I couldn't shake the sense that I was missing an important relationship between the Christian obligations to live justly with our neighbors and to care for creation. That hunch led to many conversations with the women and men in our church community who shared their experiences of God's creation and society's injustices from their distinct cultural vantage points. I kept my eyes open for authors, theologians, activists, and artists who held care for the environment together with the quest for racial justice.



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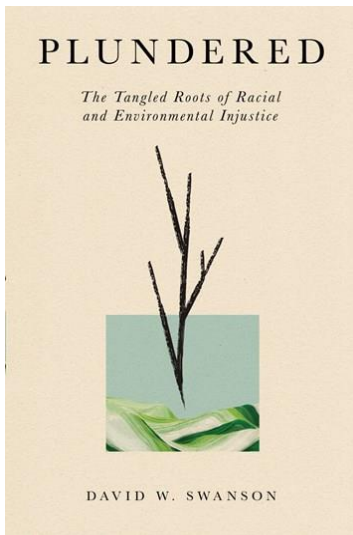
Something in me resonated deeply when I stumbled onto a conversation with the cultural critic bell hooks and the agrarian author Wendell Berry, who observed that we “are under obligation to take care of everything and you can’t be selective if you are going to take care of everything” (bell hooks, *Belonging* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 186). I began noticing that some Christian communities, especially Indigenous Christians, had long appreciated the connective threads running through creation care and neighbor love. In short, I slowly—too slowly!—came to grasp that racial and environmental justice, to be rightly understood, must be taken together. (Taken from Part One: Tangled Roots)



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Q & A



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“David Swanson shows us how racism and other evils, including the degradation of the Earth, are deeply interrelated. No one ethnic, racial, or national group has all the answers, but everyone can contribute to the Earth’s healing.”

-Brenda Salter McNeil, author of *Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice*

New from the Author of *Redisciplining the White Church*

What is the main theme in *Plundered*?

David Swanson: Both racial and environmental injustice share the common roots of greed and theft, leading to systems of exploitation and extraction. By returning to our God-given vocations as communities of caretakers, Christians can live in harmony with their specific places in ways which nurture environmental and racial justice. I’m not aware of many books which connect these two injustices and show how faithfulness to our God-given vocation can bring God’s shalom to both.

How long has this idea been stirring inside you?

David: I’ve been thinking about this book for about ten years. I was inspired to think about how the social construction of race disrupted humanity’s relationship to the creation. This led to thinking about how racial and environmental injustice share common origins. More personally, I wanted to write a book that called our congregation toward a beautiful vision of God’s reconciliation for all things.

Who did you have in mind as you were writing *Plundered*?

David: The audience I had in mind while writing was our congregation: racially diverse, committed to the gospel and justice, wanting to see change in the world. I wrote to people who understand the reality of racial and environmental injustice but who don’t see their connection. I wrote to people who might be discouraged or cynical about the problems we face. They are thoughtful and want to grow in their faith and how their faith applies to our world’s aches.

What messages do you hope to convey to readers?

David:

- God’s creation is a gift to be received and given.
- God created humans to be priestly caretakers- blessing the creation with God’s love and pointing the creation back to its Creator.
- Animated by the sins of greed and theft, exploitation and extraction have come to re-order our world in the forms of systemic racism and environmental degradation.
- Jesus, as Creator and re-Creator, invites us back to our original vocation and makes possible that our presence is once again a source of harmony.
- Local communities of Christians, rooted in the particularities of their places, are the way to undermine racial and environmental injustice with God’s shalom.



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