

EXCERPT



*Racial Justice for the Long Haul*  
*How White Christian Advocates Persevere (and Why)*

January 6, 2026 | \$29.99, 312 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1103-4

## Fostering Genuine and Lasting Commitment to Racial Justice

When I wrote to Naomi, an Asian American leader in a multiethnic church, asking whether she would like to meet to discuss my research, she wrote back with a list of questions. “Am I understanding correctly that the target audience for your research is White Christians and that you are interviewing BIPOC folks to gather information that can inform White Christians? What books are you drawing upon? What do you plan to do with the research?” I wrote back as honestly and thoroughly as I could. It didn’t surprise me that she would have questions about the research. After all, my introductory email told her that I’d heard her name from a White Christian man whom she’d called out directly for hurting people of color. Like anyone participating in this research, she had reasons to be hesitant.

Naomi did agree to meet, and she did not mince words. We sat in soft chairs with our feet resting on a coffee table, holding cups of tea as she recounted story after story of working among White Christians. As one of the only leaders of color in her denomination, she was often asked to join panels and committees focused on diversity. “Everyone likes the optics of it,” she said. “So I get asked to do everything.” For years she led events and conversations bringing together various churches to address racism. When people of color in other ministries needed to have a difficult conversation with White coworkers, they had asked Naomi to accompany them. When Christian organizations wanted to teach their White constituents about race, they had called her.

But as the years passed, she began wondering why these events seemed to circle around the same entry-level questions. She diagnosed the problem as a snag at the very core of White Christians’ theology: “Many White Christians do theology without any awareness or acknowledgment that there’s a specificity to it—that theology arises from specific bodies. They cannot, for the life of them, acknowledge that their theology is specifically for White bodies.”

To explain what she meant, she told a story. An unarmed Black man was fatally shot by police in her city. She arrived at a prayer meeting the following day emotionally weary. “I remember showing up at that meeting really upset.” Her voice replayed her tone of urgency as she recalled, “I was like, ‘What are we going to do?’” But listening to the White Christians at the meeting, she found them to be in a very different place. In a dreamy tone, she recounted the kinds of things they were saying. “I’ve never thought about this! I never knew. How could this happen?” She had arrived ready to mourn. To hold a prayer vigil. To set up a plan to confront racial bias among police officers and change systems. They were simply baffled. They weren’t sure there was even a problem to address. “I did so much work with race and faith, and it was all centering White people,” she told me. “I am tired of trying. Why should I beg people to listen? It’s a waste of my time.” Piece by piece, disappointing interactions chipped away her energy to work for racial justice with White Christians.

When I asked Naomi to describe White Christians she knew who were committed to racial justice, the first words out of her mouth were, “I don’t have any.” She paused and took a breath before choosing words carefully. “I know that sounds bad. And in some ways, I know they care and value this. But are they actively doing that work?” She raised an eyebrow and peered into my face, then answered her own rhetorical question. “Honestly, the most gracious thing I could say is, ‘I think they care.’ But for the most part, I’ve never heard any of them say anything that actually feels daring or risky. Ever. And my very existence is a risk every day. So—” She shrugged and trailed off.

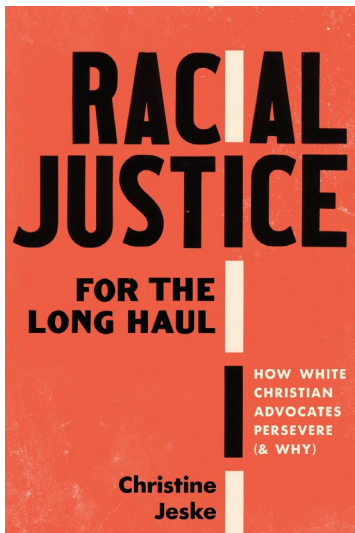


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Naomi's sharp critiques of White Christians reminded me of words written five decades earlier in one of the most famous letters of American history. On April 12, 1963, law officers in Birmingham, Alabama, arrested Martin Luther King Jr. for violating a ban on protests passed just two days earlier. The day of his arrest happened to fall on Good Friday, the day when Christians commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus. That same day, White clergy leaders published an [open letter](#) to King in the local newspaper. "We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized," the pastors and rabbis wrote. "But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely." Urging King and all of the city to withdraw from demonstrations, they wielded their own way of hoping as reason: "We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified."

From his jail cell, King began scrawling his [response](#), filling scraps of notepaper and margins of newspapers. He, too, had much to say about hope. His was not a justification for waiting quietly in the glow of hope. Instead, he openly wondered whether he had held the wrong sort of hope. "Maybe I was too optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action." A few pages later King repeated, "Maybe again, I have been too optimistic."

King singled out one group with whom he was particularly dismayed: *White Christians*. "I have been so greatly disappointed with the White church and its leadership," he wrote. "I say it as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen." With palpable emotion, he continues, "Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformists."

When I decided to study what it takes for White people to build long-term commitments to racial justice, I realized that if there was one group struggling to make that change, the choice was clear—not just any White people but *White Christians*. This group presented a real challenge, a test of what transformation requires and to what extent it's possible. And it was a group I knew well—one that had nurtured and sustained me, and to which I, however hesitantly, belonged.

—taken from chapter two, "Why White Christians?"



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