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Book Analysis: Subversive Witness

In *Subversive Witness*, author Dominique Dubois Gilliard calls Christians to view their privilege not for their own benefit, but as something to be leveraged to further God's purposes on earth. He leads readers to better understand their privilege and its true sources, to repent of using it selfishly, and to follow Biblical examples of those who leveraged privilege and power for the kingdom of God. Gilliard seeks to "name, address, and deconstruct the spiritual strongholds arresting the church and distorting our witness," namely the misuse of privilege.¹ He does this by highlighting relevant themes of social justice, systemic sin, collective liberation, and different types of privilege in the narratives of Biblical characters and tracing how they stewarded privilege for kingdom impact.

The intended audience is believers who enjoy privilege of any kind. I believe the writing style is appropriate for the intended reader. Gilliard defines terms well and engages readers with familiar Bible stories, while provoking deeper thinking by teaching new implications the reader may not have previously considered. *Subversive Witness* provides a helpful perspective that pushes believers past the standard of simply denying individual blame to a higher calling of grappling with privilege as a discipleship process, understood through the lens of Scripture.

Gilliard's extrapolation of the nuances of privilege from the Biblical narratives is one of the book's great strengths. He effectively shines light on justice issues that are true to the cultural-historical context of the Bible stories and yet quite relevant to modern society. The fact that I was never taught about the themes of rape culture and trafficking in the Esther story or reparations in the Zacchaeus story, for example, is an example of privilege in my own Christian education. Gilliard used the Scriptural examples to their full potential to educate readers without projecting his own agenda onto the texts.

¹ Dominique Dubois Gilliard, *Subversive Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), xvii.

Another strength of the book is the robust exploration of what privilege is. Gilliard clearly identifies a wide variety of resources privilege may include, some that can be forsaken and some that can be leveraged, and gives numerous examples to illustrate. I appreciate his inclusion of the concept of intersectionality, where privileges, along with the resulting oppression, are “stackable,”² and his challenge to consider the privilege of gender, not just that of race or finances.

A third strength of *Subversive Witness* is its courageous calling of Christians to a more thorough response to privilege than is often discussed. Gilliard does not shy away from the complicated relationship between privilege and sin, saying, “having privilege is not sin, though sin has perverted our systems and structures in ways that engender sinful disparities.”³ He avoids simplifying complex issues for the sake of readers’ comfort, instead calling them to grapple with what holiness demands of the privileged and to the victories to be had in the spiritual realm by confronting complacency in this area.

While the book rightly shows that there are various ways to leverage privilege, it may have been helpful to have heard from Gilliard how readers can discern when to consider renouncing privilege completely, and when to steward it in different ways. The book offers few Biblical examples of renouncing privilege, although Scripture clearly endorses that as an option.

One strong takeaway is a proper understanding of the relationship between truth and reconciliation. Gilliard asserts that truth is a prerequisite for reconciliation. As a white believer, I often see the church trying to skip steps and build community without repentance. Ministry in the urban context requires true humility and having the courage to learn history through the eyes of those I serve, even if it makes me uncomfortable. Gilliard teaches that privilege usually comes at the expense of someone else, meaning that there is a connection between urban poverty and white privilege that must be addressed as part of racial righteousness.

An important concept highlighted in the Moses narrative is that racially marginalized ministers who do racial reconciliation work and embody the tensions of racism in their own skin will need ongoing

² Gilliard, *Subversive Witness*, 10.

³ Gilliard, *Subversive Witness*, 13.

soul care and trauma work. Moses struggled with the cognitive dissonance of a “double consciousness” that triggered trauma reactions.⁴ This often-overlooked insight could provide a pathway to empowering more indigenous urban leaders with the support they need to minister with longevity.

Another key takeaway is the idea that true kingdom transformation and spiritual breakthrough happen as privilege is intentionally and honestly addressed and leveraged. Gilliard makes it clear that when believers make the unexpected choice to not just enjoy privilege, but to leverage it, this spiritual victory breaks strongholds and invites God’s power. In looking at the challenges of urban poverty and urban ministry, this point cannot be overstated.

As I seek to apply this book to my life and ministry, I am drawn to Gilliard’s reflection questions for Christians with economic privilege who are choosing where to live.⁵ As our family is soon relocating, my husband and I have begun working through these questions that deal with values we want to hold, such as proximity to the least of these, diversity, and investing in under-resourced neighborhoods and schools. These questions run counter to white evangelical culture whose default is to buy the best house you can afford, with little thought to the testimony or impact this mentality offers those around me.

Another application point for me is to actively pursue the spiritual disciplines of remembrance, confession, lament and repentance Gilliard lays out as I seek to pursue racial righteousness. Psalm 139:23-24 is a helpful prayer to “illuminate our complicity” and I plan to begin using that in this way.

Lastly, as I interact with leaders in my denomination, I hope to advocate for a deeper look at how we as not just individuals, but as churches and networks of churches, can pursue the proper order of repentance first for the misuse of privilege, and then the fostering of a new perspective on the repurposing of resources in a way that better reflects God’s love and His call to sacrificial discipleship.

⁴ Gilliard, *Subversive Witness*, 62.

⁵ Gilliard, *Subversive Witness*, 15-16.

Bibliography

Gilliard, Dominique Dubois. *Subversive Witness*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021.