

Book Analysis - Subversive Witness

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In his introduction, Dominique DuBois Gilliard states that his desire is for *Subversive Witness* to “name, address, and deconstruct the spiritual strongholds arresting the church and distorting our [Christian] witness. It aims to illuminate that God’s Word is truly a lamp for our feet and a light on our path.”¹ He does this first by introducing the concept of privilege, and the power it holds on those in the United States. Gilliard then uses seven Biblical figures over six chapters as case studies for different kinds of privilege, as well as the way that privilege can be leveraged for the good of those who are suffering under it. Lastly, he goes into repentance; its necessity, its Biblical bases, and what fruit it should bear.

Gilliard states that this book is written to the “discontent brothers and sisters who yearn to see and pursue the coming of the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.”² He expands on that, saying it is for “those who have walked away from God, as well as those considering walking away, and...believers who are well adjusted to the unjust status quo.”³ In other words, Gilliard is casting a broad net, but with some specifics. He is looking for those who are acquainted with Christianity, as well as being passingly familiar with the ways privilege shapes the lives of those in the United States. In reading through the book, it seems as though his words are aimed at those who desire to live a Holy life, those whose thoughts and actions are shaped by the Bible, or at least those who desire for that to be true. It is not necessarily written in such a way that those who are not actively interested in following God, and following him into potentially uncomfortable places, would be engaged. But for those who are in that place, it is an engaging read, both easily accessible and challenging.

1 Gilliard, xvii

2 Gilliard, xvii

3 Gilliard, xvii

In general, *Subversive Privilege* is easily accessible. It is clearly organized both in terms of the kinds of privilege that exist and the effects on culture and society, as well as what Scripture calls the believer to do with that knowledge. Gilliard explains both how to resist as well as leverage every kind of privilege that he brings up, using solid Biblical examples. Another place where Gilliard shines is in explanation of charged issues and ideas. Terms that have been weaponized in the current conversation around racism and politics in the United States are clearly defined in ways that are disarming to those who might come into the book with a skewed perception of them. For example, Gilliard describes “intersectionality” simply as being “overlapping oppression” that is “stackable” in the same way he previously explained privilege is.⁴ Lastly, not only are the ways privilege is and has been used to oppress others, compared with the Bible, the ways it is discussed or not discussed is compared with other places in the world, such as Rwanda, and Germany. This forces the reader to acknowledge that what Gilliard calls them to is not an unreachable ideal. One very small critique comes on page 47, with Gilliard’s use of the term “anti-semitism.” For at least a decade the preferred spelling for the term has been antisemitism, something that was officially picked up by the Associated Press in early 2021.⁵ However this is a very minor critique.

Overall, the book is incredibly useful to its intended audience. It is convicting in a spiritual sense, with a goal towards changing hearts and minds, as well as a practical sense, changing actions. After more theoretical sections, Gilliard usually gives actionable steps towards correcting ways in which people have been allowed to flourish unchecked. One example of this is the housing questionnaire on page 15.

⁴ Gilliard, 10

⁵ “Memo on Spelling of Antisemitism,” April 2015, https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/memo-on-spelling-of-antisemitism_final-1.pdf.

One takeaway from *Subversive Privilege* comes from the chapter on Moses, where Gilliard makes it clear that resistance to privilege must come with the goal of and heart towards furthering the kingdom. Without “learn[ing] to hone [our] righteous indignation by channeling it for constructive change,” our resistance will often be ineffective, possibly even counterproductive.⁶ We must always come from a kingdom mindset. Similarly, in the chapter on Jesus, we are called to love sacrificially, in the way that Jesus did, the way that other people previously discussed in the book did. It is that love that “compelled them to faithfulness,” and it is that love that will keep us faithful, even when we are uncomfortable, or experiencing adverse reactions.⁷ Lastly, throughout the book, Gilliard makes it clear that realizing we have privilege should not paralyze us, but should move us towards seeing how we can use that privilege on behalf of those who do not have it.

In terms of ministry, the biggest area of significance is for discipleship. Gilliard makes it clear that a “lack of biblical discipleship...breeds idolatry” that supports white supremacy, and thus “we will have to learn to...talk frankly about privilege and the oppression it sustains, and learn how to strategically leverage privilege” as part of normal discipleship.⁸ Another is to make sure all theory comes with action. Gilliard makes sure that every theory comes with a step that can be taken, allowing the reader to move from thinking about privilege to concrete change. Lastly, there must be space in the church to “tend...to our souls and our racial trauma,” and to that of our brothers and sisters.⁹ If we do not make space for this, “we burn out, lead out of our...decentered selves, and draw from an empty well. We as leaders cannot disciple others in this area if we have no space to authentically process our experiences ourselves.

6 Gilliard, 66

7 Gilliard, 98

8 Gilliard, 152, 93

9 Gilliard, 63