

Assignment Title: Reading Report

Subversive Witness / Report by Dominique Dubois Gilliard

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Overview

Subversive Witness is a good read. It is informative, easy to read, and intriguing. The writing is formal. The author, Dominique Gilliard, uses a clear and straightforward format and language to convey his points. The content, genre, and tone are appropriate for his target audience. In this book, he reckons with power and privilege. He conveys his point through historical information, the Scripture, biblical characters, stories of close friends, and contemporary issues. “The book explores institutional and individual power. It connects power to status, access, and endowment.”¹ His introduction immediately states his purpose. He hopes the book will revive the faith of those who have walked away from God and those considering walking away and transforms the witness of believers who are well-adjusted to the unjust status quo. The book “seeks to name, address, and deconstruct the spiritual strongholds arresting the church and distorting our witness. It aims to illuminate that God’s Word is truly a lamp for our feet and a light on our path.”² *Subversive Witness* aims to help readers understand that how we choose to wield power matters because it bears witness to our principles, priorities, and values. It seeks to inspire readers to reimagine how they think about, see, and exercise power, particularly the power of the people, but most specifically, the power of God’s people, who the Holy Spirit empowers. Overall, the book explores the correlation between power and privilege and homes in on how privilege should be understood and leveraged by followers of Jesus.³

Analysis

Who is the target audience? The author writes that the book is to animate the stagnant faith of discontent sisters and brothers who yearn to see and pursue the coming of the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. He also targets those who have walked away from the faith and those

¹ Dominique Dubois Gilliard, *Subversive Witness. Scripture’s Call to Leverage Privilege* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), xxiv.

² *Ibid.*, xvii.

³ *Ibid.*, xxiv-xxv.

in the process. The writing style and content are appropriate for the intended audience. Overall, it provides helpful information his intended audience can use to leverage privilege. I believe the book has some strengths, but it also has its weaknesses.

Although I have some critique, one of the strengths of this book is that Dominique uses Scriptural information to convey his point. He spoke about the disciples who were actively making disciples but oblivious to the injustice happening along the margins of their community or the discrimination in their midst. The Hellenistic widows were overlooked and marginalized in the food distribution program. While because the Hebraic widows were privileged and had advocates at the table of power, cultural, linguistic, and relational advantages, they received superior treatment. After the complaint was raised, the disciples intervened, made an assessment, and then resolved the problem.⁴

One of the other strengths is that the author uses contemporary people we know or can identify with to bring his points closer home. For example, when he discusses proximity changes things. He mentioned that Bryan Stevenson, a Harvard Law school graduate, noticed how unjust the criminal justice system was targeting and inequitably sentencing BIPOC in the United States. Stevenson had many lucrative options but committed to providing legal representation to the least of these—those without legal representation and awaiting execution. He dealt with cases no one else wanted to handle or who most lawyers have forsaken. His wife also joins him in assisting disenfranchised people.⁵ Also, Ann Atwater—a local black civil rights activist, was very instrumental in the radical transformation of the Exalted Grand Cyclops of the Ku Klux Klan in Durham, North Carolina. On the final day of a ten-day charette, Ellis took the microphone, pulled out his KKK membership card, and said before the crowd, “If schools are

⁴ Ibid., xix.

⁵ Ibid., 92, 94-95.

going to get better by me tearing this card up, I will do so.” He then returned to the Klansmen and told them he could no longer be their leader.⁶

Additionally, Dominique not only speaks about the issues at hand, but also provides suggestions for how to do it. He said we could abandon and leverage privilege to proclaim the good news by following Jesus’ example to go through rather than going around Samaria. That is, going into the slums, barrios, defamed places, and spaces as co-laborers, intentionally breaching socialized lines of clean and unclean, us and them, citizen and undocumented, free and prisoner. In the last chapter, he provides actions you can take, like, enduring incarceration for resisting exploitation and affirming your dignity, speaking truth to power, and proclaiming good news to the poor.⁷

On the other hand, one of the issues or weaknesses of this book is that I think that in some of his Scriptural examples, he is trying to make the Scripture fit into his discussion/topic. For example, where he states, “as Moses’ life hung in the balance, Pharoah’s daughter found herself confounded by the power of proximity and its ability to transform her vision.”⁸ Also, “Esther, having become satiated by imperial bread, needed Mordecai’s rejection of it to awaken her to the blindness privilege fosters.”⁹ I believe these and some of the other examples he provided were misleading. The entire plot of these stories was divinely appointed and directed and not what he’s trying to make it to be.

Conceptual

⁶ Ibid., 132-133.

⁷ Ibid., 176.

⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁹ Ibid. 53.

Three thoughts about leadership development and the church that come to mind from reading this book are that you should be present and actively involved to be an effective leader. Bryan Stevenson and his wife show what it means to be present and active. In addition to some of the things I mentioned previously, one of the things that Bryan Stevenson does is teach in a maximum security prison. This program is the only one in Illinois that offers incarcerated individuals an opportunity to earn a master's degree. He and his wife also use one unit of their house for transitional housing for returning citizens. Additionally, they are focusing on a business that will employ returning citizens.¹⁰

Secondly, leadership development involves challenges and hurdles and entering into unpopular areas. It requires one to be faithful to what they know is right despite the risk/cost. I like where the author quoted Stevenson in saying that many of us have been taught that if there's a bad part of town, you don't put your business there. But he suggests that we do the opposite. We need to engage and invest and position ourselves in the places where there is despair.¹¹ He tells us how Jonathan Brooks (Pastah J) was able to bring a reasonably priced Whole Foods Market into Englewood, one of the most stigmatized neighborhoods on the south side of Chicago. Englewood was previously a food desert.¹²

Thirdly, it requires us to lead by example, stand up, and look out for our people. To speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all destitute. To speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy (Proverbs 31:8-9[New International Version]). Kaitlin Perez, a friend of Dominique, intentionally sought ways to use her resources and social capital to look out for others. She also stood up for them by securing legal representation and posting a bond for someone using her social network and financial resources.

¹⁰ Ibid., 94-95.

¹¹ Ibid., 115-116.

¹² Ibid., 79-80.

She also raised funds for three black businesses to stay alive during COVID-19. Kaitlin also had her travel cost to a funeral unexpectedly covered by her family. She then used the money she had to pay for this expense to help neighbors and friends. ¹³

Application

The takeaways identified above can also impact my current and future ministry. I could mirror most of the examples provided. So, like Bryan Stevenson, I can make myself present in my community by identifying where there is a need for prison ministry, making the required arrangement with the prison chaplain, and organizing a team to get involved. Also, I could research the most underserved community closest to me. Find out what is needed and fill that need. Additionally, I could adopt Kaitlin's approach and use my expected/unexpected excess funds to assist others.

Bibliography

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

¹³ Ibid., 144-147.

