



# A Theology of Racial Healing

## What does the Bible say about race?

While the word “race” is used in the biblical text, it does not refer to the concepts of race and racism we think of today. That is because these realities are relatively new social developments. Although people have had different skin colors throughout history, it was not until the 16th century that skin color was given social meaning and used to create a hierarchy that elevated White people and devalued people of color. With that having been said, the dynamics of cultural difference, prejudice, division and power differentials that characterize our society today were present across ethnic lines in the Bible.

## HOW SCRIPTURE ADDRESSES ETHNIC DIVISIONS CAN OFFER INSIGHT FOR HOW TO NAVIGATE RACISM.

### What did ethnic tensions look like in the Bible?

The Jews and Gentiles were different ethno-cultural and religious groups. They lived distinctly different lives, seen in their divergent values, practices, social networks, and religious customs. Socio-political tensions arose between the two groups because there was a history of the Jews being oppressed by the Gentiles. Because the Jews were set apart in the Old Testament to be the people through which God chose to reveal Himself to humanity, Jews felt a sense of superiority over the Gentiles as well.

Despite these obstacles, God united these two groups in him. The relationship between Jews and Gentiles can serve as a model for our understanding of God’s desire to bring together people across racial lines.

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### How are we to understand racism from a Biblical perspective?

God created all people in his image (Gen 1:27), giving each individual equal and inherent worth. Upon creation, people were in right relationship with God and one another. This reflected God’s intent and his triune nature, existing in unity and diversity. When sin entered the world, these relationships were broken, and God has been working to restore them ever since.

#### **To use biblical language, racism is a sin:**

- **Racism functions to separate us from God and one another.**
- **Racism is a lie that says people with White skin are more valuable than people who do not have White skin. It also spreads lies about people of color.**
- **Racism is an idol that upholds the belief that White ways of looking, thinking, doing, and being are superior. This can cause people to conform to White standards over and above the standards God calls us to in his Word.**





## What is the impact of racism?

### Racism...

- Dishonors the image of God in people when we consider them to be less human or less valuable on account of the skin color God gave them.
- Hinders the effectiveness of the body of Christ when we have diminished capacity to collaborate across racial lines.
- Diminishes the Christian witness when the Church reflects the brokenness seen in society at large instead of the healing power of Jesus.

## Where can God's reconciliation between groups be seen in the Bible?

Different terms used to refer to Christ's redemptive work in the area of race relations (e.g. racial reconciliation, racial healing, racial justice) emphasize various parts of the goal God calls us to in the Bible. RCCI seeks a holistic, biblical vision that we understand as an **"ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance, and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect God's original intention for all creation to flourish."** <sup>1</sup>


Racial differences today cause similar divisions to those between ethnic lines seen in Ancient Near Eastern Society. Christ's redemptive work calls us to love both God and our neighbors (Matt. 22:36-40, 1 John 4:20). Today, addressing racism and its impact is a crucial part of continuing Christ's reconciling work between people.

### ***Jesus' ministry reflects God's heart for the socially oppressed.***

- Jesus was a Middle Eastern, Jewish man.
- Jesus was an outsider. For example, he was born into a poor family (Lk. 2:22-24 cf. Lev. 12:8), fled as a refugee (Matt. 2:13-15), was from the stigmatized town of Nazareth (John 1:46), and lived under Roman occupation (Lk. 2:1).
- Jesus came to set the oppressed free (Lk. 4:18-19).
- Jesus crossed ethnic lines to minister to the Gentiles (e.g., Jn. 4:1-41) and taught about the Gentiles being welcomed into the family of God (e.g., Lk. 24:47, Mk. 11:17, Matt. 22:1-14,). This reflects God's heart for the "foreign" Gentiles throughout scripture (e.g. Jer. 22:3, Ezek. 47:21-23).
- Jesus surrounded himself and stood in solidarity with oppressed people, such as those who were poor (Mk. 12:41-44), differently abled (John 5:1-9), and women (Lk. 8:1-3, Mk. 15:40-41). Jesus' countercultural actions showed that these individuals were valued and included in God's family.

<sup>1</sup> Brenda Salter McNeil, [Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice](#) (IVP Books, 2016), 22.





**Today, people of color are socially oppressed and all people are diminished through the sin of racism. Following in Jesus' example means expressing love for and solidarity with the oppressed and working toward mutual liberation.**

*God's intention for the body of Christ:*

God desires that all people be a part of his family. He describes Jesus' followers as the body of Christ. Like a physical body, the Church is made up of different parts (1 Cor. 12:12). God desires for his Church to function as a unified (1 Cor. 12:13, Eph. 4:4, Gal. 3:28) and interdependent (1 Cor. 12:14-27, Eph. 4:11-16) whole. God has intentionally placed different gifts, perspectives, and experience within particular ethno-racial groups. By learning from one another and working together, we can expand our understanding of God and his creation. We can also access valuable resources to do his work.

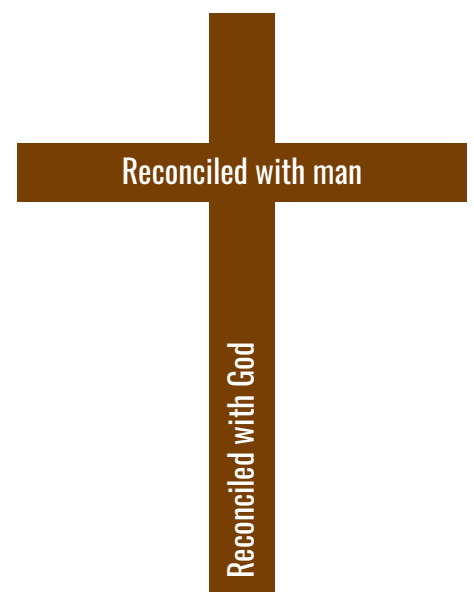
*Jesus' prayer for unity:*

In John 17:20-23, Jesus prays believers will be united by their shared faith in him. The unity Jesus is asking for is a unity in diversity, not conformity to a single culture. Jesus declares that this unity will help people know that he was sent by God and experience God's love (John 17:21b). In coming together across racial lines, the Church today can point people to Jesus and his healing power.

*Jesus' work on the cross:*

**JESUS' WORK ON THE CROSS NOT ONLY RECONCILED US WITH GOD, BUT TO ONE ANOTHER.**

As it is written in Eph. 2:11-21, Jesus created "one new humanity out of the two" (v. 15), thus making peace between Jews and Gentiles through the cross. In uniting them in Christ (Rom. 10:12, 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11), Jesus made healing possible between divided groups, including different racial groups today. Therefore the good news doesn't only include how God reconciled us to himself, but how he also brought reconciliation within humanity. ***Both dimensions of this good news must be preached to proclaim a complete gospel.***



**“For (Jesus) is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...” - Eph. 2:14**





### *Inviting all people into God's family:*

Jesus commissioned his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). We begin to see this lived out at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12), when Jesus’ followers shared the gospel with people of different ethnicities (e.g., Acts 8:4-8) and races (e.g., Acts 8:26-40), and when Christians become distinguished from the Jews through their inclusion of the Gentiles at Antioch (Acts 11:19-26). We will enjoy the fruit of the Great Commission when we worship with people of every tongue, tribe, and nation in God’s presence (Rev. 7:9). God desires that people of all races and nationalities be a part of his family. This was so important to him that, in the early Church, God even used persecution to bring Jesus’ followers outside of Jerusalem to share the gospel in Gentile-populated regions.

### *Accepting the Gentiles into God's family:*

We begin to see God bringing together different ethnic groups in Acts 10 through the story of Peter and Cornelius. In this passage, God shows Peter that, despite the Jews strong belief that Gentiles are unclean, he has accepted them into his family as evidenced by their receptivity to the gospel and baptism in the Holy Spirit. This story highlights that it is God’s word, not our socialization or culture, that determines who gets to be welcomed into God’s family.

### *Welcoming people as they are:*

Prior to the Council of Jerusalem, Gentile Christians were required to be circumcised and conform to key elements of Jewish culture to join the faith. In Acts 15:1-29 and Gal. 2:1-10, we see the process through which the apostles decided that believers are sanctified, as Jesus has “purified their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9) and are no longer required to conform to Jewish culture to be Christian. Today, there is no one “Christian culture.” Followers of Jesus can use their own cultural expression to express God’s image and glorify God. Each culture is valued and Jesus can bring healing, enrichment, and community across cultural lines.

### Conclusion:

Though the concepts of “race” and “racism” are not mentioned in the Bible, scripture tells the story of God reconciling all people to himself *and* one another. As Christians, we are called to continue Christ’s reconciling work (2 Cor. 5:18-21) and can find direction in the Bible for how to navigate and bring healing to the racial brokenness in our world.

**Interested in learning more about racial reconciliation?**

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Visit [www.egc.org/race](http://www.egc.org/race)

Created by Candace Ng & the RCCI Team, 2019.

