



# Why Is It So Difficult to Talk about Racism?

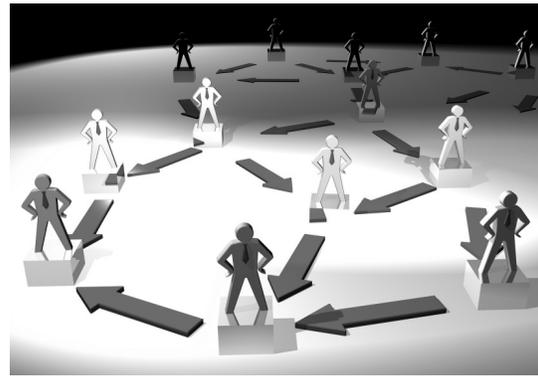
*There are many reasons why it is difficult to talk about race and racism. There are also many reasons we must and should have this conversation.*

## Introduction

This is a complicated question that opens up an important and overdue conversation. No doubt there are many facets to any adequate answer to this question. Some of those important facets range from the apparently simple fact that many of us have little practice in talking about race to the complex reality that to talk about race in the U.S. inevitably requires discussion about racism and dealing with painful as well as difficult feelings about historical and current realities. Somewhere in the middle of this continuum is also the reality of inadequate and often competing definitions of race and racism that trip us up, and a genuine lack of awareness about how the idea of race and the practices of racism arose and continue in the United States. This simple question opens to us a fascinating but not so simple journey that will involve exploring our individual identities that are interwoven with our cultural, political, and historical stories.

## Talking about race is hard when we live separate lives and rarely talk together.

The United States is regarded by many as one of the most racialized countries of the world. That is, we pay atten-



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A more helpful definition of racism will focus our attention on “interlocking systems of *advantage* (as well as disadvantage) based on race.”

tion to racial difference and categories. Any review of the census forms over the years would prove that. Interestingly, despite the increasing racial diversity in the U.S., our daily lives are often quite segregated. For example, if adults of the majority Euro-American or white culture charted our interactions across the course of a day or even a week, we would likely find that many if not most of our interactions of any depth are with those of the same race and likely the same socioeconomic class. If we talk about race, we have to take the initiative to talk

## RACISM STUDY PACK

This study is part of the Thoughtful Christian Racism Study Pack. The list below is the suggested order of the study pack, although you may study it in any order your group chooses.

- Why Is it So Difficult to Talk About Racism?
- Racism 101
- The Bible and Racism
- A History of Racism in the United States
- White Privilege
- Is Affirmative Action Still Needed?
- Do Segregated Churches Imply Racism?

about it beyond our own racial groups. Especially for those who identify with the racial majority, this demographic and social segregation will mean we have little practice in reflecting on our own racial identities because it may seem an unimportant difference, and we have few opportunities in the course of our daily lives to hear about the experiences of those whose racial identity and experience differ from our own.

## **Conversations about race often include stories that are hard to hear.**

This lack of practice in talking about race and racism can be convenient for white Americans because talking about race risks opening a Pandora's box of realities we wish were only historical. Such conversations may well include discovering that unwittingly but no less surely we are complicit in practices that reproduce the painful practices of racism. For others of us, such conversations include deciding once again to risk recounting painful moments and risking feeling misunderstood. It takes trust and courage for everyone to open ourselves to sharing truths that are difficult to say or to hear that, despite good intentions, others of us have contributed to experiences of oppression.

It is certainly important to celebrate the increasing racial diversity in the highest levels of government and to some extent in professions, but we are not a post-racial society, as some have wanted to claim. It is important to have conversations that help all of us pay attention to engrained patterns of discrimination in important segments of our daily lives in order to discern what those patterns in areas such as housing, employment, education, and business may suggest.

## **Conversations about race are important to help us discover the effects of our assumptions.**

A 2002 report of a study conducted by Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Chicago to measure racism in employment (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2002) helps to illustrate the way racial privilege may make it difficult to see what those who don't have such privileges experience.<sup>1</sup> The researchers in this study set out to explore whether and how racial difference might still operate in employment practices across a large range of positions from managerial to service positions. They created identical résumés for these

various types of positions and inserted either typical African American names or typical Euro-American names. These résumés were then sent in response to employers across all types of business including governmental agencies that are held to a higher standard of diversification.

The results were remarkable. Despite identical qualifications, Euro-American résumés received responses 50 percent more often. When the result was this dramatic, the investigators then improved the qualifications of the persons in the résumés to see if the results changed. That only increased the number of responses to the résumés of Euro-American candidates. Interestingly, before the study, the investigators discussed their research with personnel officers, who assured them that the results would show that they were giving preferential treatment to the applications of nonwhite applicants.

Given the self-understanding of the personnel officers, these results help to disclose that despite the celebrated gains that the United States is making in opportunities for "persons of color," the patterns of discrimination that affect the daily lives of those who are not white are still in place. Even when these employers intend to comply with Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity (AAEEO) guidelines and want to diversify, we see that preferential treatment seems still to be in place for white Americans.

## **Our operative definitions of racism can make a big difference in our conversations.**

Since these personnel officers thought they were especially attentive to opportunities for nonwhite applicants, it seems clear that something more complicated may be at work in the dilemma this study disclosed. One likely possibility lies in the definitions of racism that currently operate in this country, especially among Euro-Americans. Definitions matter because they shape the way we interpret situations and how we take action.

Two common ways of defining racism have been proven to be inadequate. One such definition limits our attention to intentional practices of discrimination, such as acts done by a Klansman. Certainly such actively racist actions are discriminatory, but if we define racism only by such active practices it would appear to be a much more confined problem than persons of color describe.

Another common definition of racism suggests it is a system of *disadvantage* based on race. When we define racism in this way, our attention is focused on those who are the victims but not on what gives rise to their oppression. We can see that it exists in employment, for example, but this definition doesn't invite us to explore how our own behavior may contribute to the problem as well as what structural factors contribute to the continuation of racism. The employment study shared above helps to illustrate how this definition would not help those with racial privileges recognize their complicity in racism.

A more helpful definition of racism will focus our attention on "interlocking systems of *advantage* (as well as disadvantage) based on race."<sup>2</sup> This shift in focus includes a ground shift in our perspective on racism that helps us to pay attention to what creates the disadvantage of persons of color and what helps keep that disadvantage in place.

This definition helps to explain the phenomenon of unwitting preferential treatment (aversive racism) that the employment study disclosed. The personnel officers did not intend to give any advantage or privilege to persons like themselves, but somehow the résumés of persons whose name suggested the applicant had a background more closely resembling their own rose to the top. Nor would those who were hired ever imagine that they received their job opportunities through such an advantage. They are confident they "earned" their job offer and likely will assume those around them did as well. Those who were not hired despite being qualified will lose that opportunity and likely grow more discouraged about their opportunities and the fairness of the context in which they also are trying to succeed.

## Racial privilege is reproduced through the fabric of our daily lives.

Talking about race and racism is difficult because most of us are socialized gradually and unwittingly into our racial identity. Children do not decide one day to become racists. However, we do learn how to understand our racial identity and the fact of racial difference before we are very far into our elementary school years. We learn to see the world of racial difference through the eyes of parents, family, our congregation, and our school friends; the institutional effects of the textbooks we use that may or may not share the narrative of persons who look like us; and the cultural/symbolic messages of media and



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advertising that may or may not portray our lives and experiences positively. Unless we learn to recognize the interlocking effects of privilege at these various levels, we will not recognize how easily some of us enjoy privileges because of our racial identity that are not equally available to all our neighbors. We will learn either that there is some reason we do not receive these opportunities or, if we receive such advantages, we will come to believe that somehow we earned them.

Except for those children who grow up in actively racist homes, racism shapes our self-understanding in this unwitting way. But of course lessons learned tacitly are often the strongest. White children who simply grow up with the privileges that their racial identity affords in this country will not easily imagine that their privileges affect the lack of opportunities for a classmate whose options are more limited. In the U.S., the possibility of unlearning racism is made more difficult because from early in our history we have nurtured a national image as a land of opportunity where everyone starts from a level playing field and those who work hard enough will succeed. This national "myth of meritocracy" makes it even easier for whites to imagine that our success is evidence of our own hard work and not also shaped by the privileges that accrue to us through experiences like the employment experiment described earlier. In a country where individualism is so emphasized, it is quite easy to assume we alone are responsible for our success.

Of course, this myth of meritocracy also cuts the other way. Imagine how parents of children in other racial groups try to explain the absence of opportunities while also trying to help their children hold onto the idea that

they should hope for success in their endeavors. Instead of internalizing privilege as they are socialized, these children are at risk for internalizing the stigma that may accompany their racial group. While their white classmates do not need to reflect on what it means to be white, a child of color is forced to learn to navigate the inequities that we glimpse in the results of the recent employment study. Talking about race from these two vastly different experiences is fraught with frustration.

### **Talking about race needs to include truth telling about a history that is hard to review.**

How did we get into this situation? The American colonies did not invent racism, but colonial governments did put their own stamp on an emerging economic strategy of the European empires that were establishing settlements here. In his book *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, Ronald Takaki describes how racism evolved in a short period of time so that the African indentured workers, who first arrived in 1619 along with white indentured workers, no longer had their freedom and were defined as property by 1670.<sup>3</sup> From that time forward various rationalizations were developed and codified as law to strengthen a racial hierarchy that quickly came to include other racial minorities such as Native Americans. In 1790, Congress limited naturalized citizenship to whites and this law stayed in effect until 1952.

The reality of racial difference is arguably the most painful part of this country's story to date. Certainly the complicity of many Christians and Christian denominations in deepening racial oppression or in overlooking it is also something Euro-Americans have to reckon with. This history is part of the hazard of opening any discussion about race. Depending on the definition of racism they embrace, Euro-Americans either dread the guilt and shame that accompanies association with this story of violence, exploitation, and commodification, or we want to protest that this is the story of our ancestors and not our story. Some have suggested that the sin of racism is best described as a lie. As such, racism is the lie that we who enjoy racial privileges bear no accountability for the practices that create and sustain racial oppression. Lies cannot continue when we begin to speak truthfully with each other.

### **Speaking truthfully creates room for the freedom of grace.**

Talking about race in the United States cannot begin as if this painful history had not happened. Yet, for many Americans this history is not well known. Those who identify with racial groups that suffered oppression may know the history for their group but be weaker on the story of other oppressed racial groups. Any conversation needs to acknowledge hard realities such as slavery, lynchings, the forced migration and genocide of Native Americans, and the internment of Japanese Americans.

Talking about racism is hard because we do not get to choose what parts of the story to leave out or keep in. We cannot begin to talk as if this oppressive history has no consequence. Rather, those consequences mean that we come to conversations about race cautiously, already burdened, and on guard. We may find it difficult to imagine that our experience will be understood. European Americans likely come braced for judgment and shame. Persons who identify with historically oppressed groups likely come expecting that once again the gravity of their story will be minimized—if understood at all.

While acknowledging this difficult history is part of changing the present, it is important also to name persons in that history who chose to be allies in the struggle to resist racism. Christians in particular can learn from the stories of abolitionists and other persons of faith who hid escaping slaves on their way north. Similarly, persons of faith can read about those white Christians and Jews who risked their own lives in the civil rights movement to stand with African American brothers and sisters who claimed their rights. Contemporary stories of congregations who have chosen to resist the segregation of racism and intentionally become biracial or multiracial communities also offer important resources for those who want to deconstruct the practices of racism that continue to divide persons and communities of faith.<sup>4</sup>

Scripture's remarkable promise that we are made in the image of God invites us to wonder at the sheer diversity of God's imaginative love.

Perhaps the way forward in our conversations about race lies in recognizing that we Christians have resources for coming to terms with this difficult story, and we have resources for taking the story forward differently. Our

Scriptures assert the remarkable claim that all people are made in the image of God. We see in the diversity around us evidence of God's imaginative love.

Diversity is not the problem we have to solve; it is the context in which God invites us to live with love. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has wisely counseled that our challenge is to see God in the face of one who does not look like us.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps we might also dare to imagine that it is when we come to appreciate the amazing diversity of the human family that we begin to understand the wonder of God's creativity.

## **Our vocation of neighbor love is a valuable resource in breaking the bondage of racism.**

Of course, this promise of creation in God's image also points to a deep ethical claim in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament that we are created for life in relation—not as antagonists or strangers—but as neighbors called to care for one another. We are invited to see in each other, regardless of racial and other differences, one whom God also loves.

The demonstration of our love for God is in fact seen especially through our love for the neighbor whose well-being is tied to our own. As Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us, God's intention is that we regard everyone God creates as a "somebody," and when anyone is treated as a "nobody" the "somebodiness" of all is diminished.<sup>6</sup>

We may speak truthfully about race in the assurance that God's forgiving and healing love is sufficient to create new possibilities.

This commitment to assuring the well-being of our neighbors strengthens the priority for making a commit-

ment to participate in intentional conversations about race and racism. The good news that sustains us is stronger than the difficult truth about the sin of racism we are called to speak and hear with one another. We can dare to confess the brokenness in our stories because God's love is sufficient to heal, restore, and create the new possibilities that talking about race and racism with each other will create.

## **About the Writer**

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## **Endnotes**

1. Mariane Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, "Are Emily and Brendan More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination," Chicago and Boston: University of Chicago Business School and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2002.
2. David Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
3. Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, rev. ed. (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1993), 58.
4. See resources such as: Charles Foster and Theodore Brelsford, *We Are the Church Together: Cultural Diversity in Congregational Life* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996); Fumitaka Matsuoka, *The Color of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1998); Lois Stalvey, *The Education of a WASP* (1970; repr., Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); and Becky Thompson, *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
5. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2003), 121.
6. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" (1963), in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. J. Washington (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 289–302.