

The Choice Is Ours: Confronting Our Brokenness and Reconstructing Our Racial Identity

We have come to the end of another Black History Month. In this month where we have been confronted by the [oppressive history of Christianity and the Church against our Black siblings](#), examined the [Church's historical practice of aligning ourselves with the powerful elite of society contributing to the embodiment of white supremacy culture in Christianity](#), and faced [white Christianity's historical neglect to work for social justice through systemic change as Jesus' disciples](#). So, now that we have begun to confront these dynamics this month, where do we go from here? What's the next step(s)? For our answer, let's turn to someone else who was confronted with their own embodiment of racist and discriminatory culture as we have done for 2000 years. That's right, we're going to turn once again to Jesus.

Jesus and the Canaanite Woman: Confronting Embodied Prejudice

In Matthew's Gospel, we are offered the story of Jesus engaging with a Canaanite woman who asks Jesus to heal her daughter of a demon ([15:21-28](#)). Jesus and his disciples display the usual response of Jewish persons to persons of Canaanite ethnicity: Jesus ignores her and his disciples tell him to send her away. According to Dock Hollingsworth in his article in *Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 3* (2011), this response is because in Jesus's time "racial stereotypes and bigotry inform all encounters between Israelites and Canaanites" as they have a "relationship of mutual disdain." In response to his disciples, Jesus draws the racial line in the sand, letting the woman know he has only come for the Israelites. Yet, the Canaanite woman does not give up. Finally, Jesus responds by dehumanizing the woman and calling her a dog. Hollingsworth comments that "referring to Canaanites as dogs was a familiar and favorite insult of the Israelites. Calling a woman a female dog had the same tone as if it were shouted today in a high-school hallway" (*Feasting: Year A Volume 3*, 2011). Jesus embodies the prejudice and discrimination of the culture of his time by calling the Canaanite woman a bitch.

If Jesus went on walking and the story ended here, we would be left with a lot more questions about Jesus than we probably already have to this point, but this is not the end of the story. The Canaanite woman is not deterred and her perseverance opens Jesus' eyes to his prejudiced and bigoted words and actions. Jesus is confronted with the discrimination and bigotry that his culture teaches and he has enacted. After all, Jesus is not only God, but also human and therefore a product of the culture in which he is raised. In this moment Jesus is confronted with a choice: ignore the revelation and continue in his prejudiced ways or change. Jesus chooses to change. So, in the face of what the Canaanite woman revealed to be within him, through love and mercy, Jesus acts to overcome and break down the prejudice and bigotry that he has embodied. He also shows love to the Canaanite woman by affirming her personhood and healing her daughter.

Confronting Our Allegiance to Power and Racism

In this moment in history, we find ourselves in Jesus's shoes, with a choice before us. As leaders and participants of white Christianity and the white Church, we have been confronted with our embodiment of white supremacy and history of our discriminatory and oppressive relationship with our Black siblings as we have sided with the power elite of society. As one

[white mainline Protestant midwestern church illustrated](#), the incidents and dynamics of the last couple of years have been a wake-up call to the white Church and white society. Our Black siblings have been forced to play the part of the Canaanite woman, meeting our prejudice and ignorance with challenging revelation. As we have ignored these revelations in the past or chosen to reply by blaming the victim or with simple charity, we have continued to enact what white supremacy culture has embedded within us while ignoring the prophetic voices of our Black siblings who continue to challenge us. And so, once again we find ourselves confronted by the truth with a choice to make: ignore our revelation and continue in our oppressive and discriminatory ways, or change.

It is time that we as leaders and participants of white Christianity and the white Church confront the brokenness of our allegiance to power and racism, and repent so we can break down the prejudice and bigotry that lies within us, using the love and mercy offered to us by God. It is time for us to choose to change just as Jesus did. This will involve confessing and taking accountability for how white supremacy culture has become embedded within white Christian culture and has guided our engagement with our Black siblings. Anneliese Singh PhD LPC, author of *The Racial Healing Handbook* (2019) calls this deep work “developing a positive racial identity.”

Having a “positive racial identity” is different than having an identity within the white supremacy culture we operate within now. White supremacy culture has taught us to divide and judge on a scale of superiority/inferiority, leading us to ignore or outright oppose the justice work of our Black siblings. According to Singh, operating with a positive racial identity means we are committed to the journey of learning the privileges and/or disadvantages afforded to us as a racial being and how our racial identity affects our experience of others and our world. This journey leads us to become secure in our racial identity in a non-judgmental way. This is not possible without us confronting the history of the racial group to which we belong. As white disciples of Jesus, this means “realizing that being white in itself isn’t a bad thing or a thing to feel guilty about” (Singh, *The Racial Healing Handbook*; p. 20. Kindle edition). It is not our God-given whiteness that we must repent of, but how we have used our whiteness to divide and hurt others and ourselves.

Developing A Positive Racial Identity

Living with a positive racial identity not only helps us love ourselves better, but love others better as well. Working to understand how racism works in the world and the white privilege we have is included in developing a positive racial identity. If we do this deep work, we are better able to “connect with people of diverse racial backgrounds,” and use our “privilege to take action interrupting and challenging racism” as opposed to living into it (Singh, *The Racial Healing Handbook*; p. 20. Kindle edition). Doing the deep work of confronting our embodied white supremacy culture leads us to not only greater personal wholeness and well-being, but also greater social wholeness as well. We are led to perceive, understand, and engage the prejudicial systems of our world such as white supremacy culture and we are transformed from prejudicial participants to live-affirming liberators of ourselves and others. We are able to go beyond simple charity and meet the challenge proposed by Ibram X. Kendi in his book *How to*

Be An Anti-Racist (2019) to “focus our human and fiscal resources on changing power and policy to actually make society, and not just our feelings, better” (p. 209. Kindle edition).

Where Do We Go From Here? Closer or Further Away from God

So, fellow white Church and white Christianity leaders and participants, where do we go from here? We make a choice. We can choose to settle in where we are, aligned with the powerful elite and invested in the white supremacy culture that is embedded within us, or we can choose to work for change, beginning with deconstructing our white supremacy culture and building a positive racial identity that leads us to greater personal and societal wholeness and connection. This is not a trivial choice, as theologian and activist Barbara Holmes reminds us, “Life is a journey: even when we try to remain in an unchanged condition, we are moving in one direction or another—closer or further away from God” (*Joy Unspeakable*, p. 5. Kindle edition). Let’s choose the way that leads us closer to God. Let’s follow Jesus in deconstructing cultural prejudice and racism, and developing transformative positive racial identities within ourselves, our Church and Christian faith, and within our world.

We may have come to the end of Black History Month, but our journey of faithful racial reconciliation and justice with our Black siblings has just begun.

Your sibling in this journey,

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