

## **Race and Racism in the U.S.**

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I began my study of the African American church as a graduate student at Penn State, writing and researching with Dr. Hart Nelson, one of the leading scholars in the 1960s-1980s in the study of the Black Church in America. As a professor at Elizabethtown College, I have been teaching Race and Ethnic Relations for 25 years. I also focused on racial/ethnic groups (now referred to as BIPOC for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) in Mennonite Church USA and wrote about my findings and my learnings in *Road Signs for the Journey* (Herald Press, 2007).

As one who has preached about racial justice and equity, I bear the scars from the saints who responded with some fierce resistance. After one sermon a white couple emailed me to say how condemned they felt, while after the sermon a brother from West Africa told me how comforted he was by the message. Those two responses capture where we are and where we have been, and for most of our history we have allowed the white resistance to dictate how and what we preach. But as a rapidly growing diverse fellowship of congregations, members of our white congregations have received too little information through educational and church institutions to understand that we really don't and can't understand the Black experience in America. And the Black experience and the "color line" perpetuated in this country is in fact a different experience than that of any other BIPOC group. My own belief is that if we are to overcome the systemic racism that runs through every social institution in this country, we must begin with the origins of our country within which our church exists.

The white couple continued for a full year to harbor anger toward me over that message, and eventually questioned me "How do you think that bi-racial family feels when you talk about race? Surely they must feel like they are sticking out like sore thumbs." I responded, "Actually, they are grateful and feel comfort and safer." How often we in the middle of our society, with untold and unrecognized privilege, assume we know what those on the margins are thinking and feeling. The reality is, we have no idea until we ask them—something this couple failed to do.

Everything I share in this set of resources comes from difficult conversations with persons of color, my students, fellow Mennonite pastors, and substantial reading. I believe more than ever that this is the work of the church in the last days.

My heroes are the Apostle Paul, William Wilberforce, and Jonathan Blanchard.

Paul, Jew of Jews and Pharisee of Pharisees, on the road to Damascus had more than a personal conversion experience with Jesus. No, this man who was on his way to kill more Gentiles and who as much as anyone was responsible for that wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile, had a conversion to a Gospel that was about the dismantling of that very wall of hostility. The one who led the headhunting trips against the Gentiles would now become the one who lead the missionary trips across the Roman Empire to claim those same Gentiles for the Gospel. Paul's conversion was not just personal, it was God's was of converting Paul from believing that God preferred the Jew, that he was justified in killing Gentiles, and that the Gentiles were outside God's salvation plans.

And in this conversion process Paul came to understand that what Jesus brought through his death on the cross was nothing less than the dismantling of boundaries between one ethnic group another, whereby one group used its superior position to alienate and oppress another. Imagine folks, a division that God had created in the Old Testament now had become irrelevant in the New Testament when the veil in the temple had been torn in two.

Because for Paul, the mystery of Christ as he describes it in Ephesians is all tied up in the reality that on the cross Christ had dismantled the dividing wall of hostility between all groups regardless of race and ethnicity. And that all had been set free from the law. Preventing Gentiles from entering the grace of Christ except on Jewish terms would also diminish the grace of Christ for the Jew who was in Christ. Says Paul, "We who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners know that a man is not justified by observing the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. To keep walls of division in place denied the mystery of Christ's reconciliation and grace for both Jew and Gentile.

William Wilberforce in England, a politician in Parliament, began to agitate for the abolishment of the slave trade saying this:

- "You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know."
- "If to be feelingly alive to the sufferings of my fellow-creatures is to be a fanatic, I am one of the most incurable fanatics ever permitted to be at large."
- "So enormous, so dreadful...did that trade's wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for abolition. Let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition."

Wilberforce unsuccessfully appealed to Thomas Jefferson to abolish the slave trade to America. Wilberforce's efforts would win sufficient support to stop the slave trade in England, but it would be some time before the church in North America would have enough courage to do the same.

Jonathan Blanchard taught at Andover Theological Seminary but left when the Seminary rejected the work of the American Anti-slavery society. Blanchard was then assigned a preaching assignment in southern Pennsylvania, and in 1837 found himself the victim of stoning by folks agitated with his teaching in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. After a somewhat indirect journey, Blanchard would end up as the founder of Wheaton College in 1860, a college based upon his ideals related to the abolition of slavery and radical social reform. He permitted African American students to attend the College and allowed them to live in his home. It would be nearly 100 years late before white Mennonites would begin to desegregate their churches.

Wilberforce and Blanchard lived at a time when evangelical Christians understood that to be a follower of Christ meant addressing the social ills of their day that included care and advocacy for the poor, oppressed and those whom white folks had defined to be less than human, thus

allowing for their enslavement. The problem was and remains, that once an ideology like racism is woven into the fabric of a society it doesn't just disappear with legislation.

My prayer and these efforts I have taken and continue to take are in the spirit of Paul, Wilberforce, and Blanchard—or should I say “by that same Spirit” that motivated them. For the Gospel is not the good news until the dividing wall of hostility and the “color line” are dismantled.

The study guides I have developed can be found at my website <https://achurchdismantled.com/race-and-racism> and the videos on You Tube at <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvf3e6v82SW1RNghli8u5rBfg1c5hG-vA>.

In addition, I have created ten “A Church Dismantled—A Kingdom Restored” audio podcast episodes that are related to the topic of race and racism. These are listed below with links to my podcast website, though all can also be found on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and most podcast carriers:

- Racism—Sins then and same sins now <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1109915/3922430>
- "Why I am not responsible!" The problem that evangelical white folks have with racism <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1109915/4328372>
- The dismantling of racism in the church—an interview with Reverend Hyacinth Stevens, Bronx NY <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1109915/5298676>
- The dismantling of racism in the church—an interview with Bishop Al Motley, Chester, PA <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1109915/5298934>
- If Gentile lives mattered, why not Black lives?...the social conscience of white evangelicals of an earlier time...and how the dismantling of the church and racism is the continued work of the Holy Spirit's intentions at Pentecost <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1109915/5497774>
- What if in God's love, mercy and justice are the same thing? What does that mean for someone like Derek Chauvin? <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1109915/8404954>
- Reflecting on my interviews with Mennonite church leaders Al Motley and Hyacinth Stevens: Why the church must once and for all exorcise the sin and demonic oppression of racism—or else lose its soul to that one clothed in sheep's wool <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1109915/5361694>
- Interview with Kevin Ressler: Advocate for racial justice <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1109915/8146728>
- Again we await a jury's decision, but God's verdict is already known <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1109915/8362856>
- Interview with Tobin Miller Shearer about LMC's history of systemic racism <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1109915/8640123>