



LOVING THE NEIGHBOR WHO DOESN'T LOOK LIKE YOU

LEADER'S GUIDE FOR MULTI-RACIAL
DISCUSSION GROUPS



AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY

CONTENTS

Getting Started

Best Practices for Leading a Racial Healing Discussion Group

The Nine Ground Rules

Introductory Session: Prayer

Opening the Discussion Sessions

Discussion Session 1

Bible Spotlight

Courageous Conversation

Call to Action

Discussion Session 2

Bible Spotlight

Courageous Conversation

Call to Action

Discussion Session 3

Bible Spotlight

Courageous Conversation

Call to Action

Discussion Session 4

Bible Spotlight

Courageous Conversation

Call to Action

Closing Session: Service

Resources



GETTING STARTED

This is a guide for churches that want to start multi-racial Bible study groups around the subject of racial healing. Many terms have been used to describe the work of mending relationships among people of different cultural backgrounds (racial reconciliation, racial unity, etc.). We've decided to call this *racial healing* as a way to underscore the pain that racial divisions have caused and the promise of God's power to bring about true healing.

This is important work. Unity among believers is close to the heart of Jesus (John 17:21), and your role in leading frank and loving discussions is crucial. Bathe this work in **prayer**.

Also, select your **teammates** and **format**. What people will join in these discussions? Note that the key element of this Bible study material is to bring people of different races together to apply Scripture to their diverse life-experiences. That means, if your church consists mostly of people of one race, you probably need to reach out to another church with people of another race. If you have a multi-racial church or small group, you're already a step ahead.

Here are some formats you might consider:

Existing small-group or class. If you already have people of different races participating, great! Just use this discussion guide in your regular meetings.

New group. If your existing group is not racially mixed, you'll want to create a new group that is. That may mean reaching out to others in your church or in your community—or in another church or community.

Two-church partnership. Many churches have people of the same race. And so it might be necessary for one church to partner with another (or a small group in one church to partner with a small group in another) to make this experience work most effectively.

Multi-church or community event. This discussion guide could be used as part of a larger race-relations event that might feature a guest speaker, a panel, or a video presentation. This guide could be adapted to break-out sessions for small groups of audience members.

One further note: In any partnership or community event, you'll need to **share leadership**. In advance, gather leaders of the different churches involved—specifically those who are leading this study—to consider the format, place and time, promotion, and ground rules, and to pray together.



BEST PRACTICES FOR LEADING A RACIAL RECONCILIATION GROUP

You are creating a situation in which some folks will say things that bother others. People will strongly disagree. Long-held, deeply rooted opinions will be painfully challenged.

All in the name of Christ.

You want this to happen. You want people to say what they're feeling, not to cover it up. If everyone nods and smiles and mutters, "It's all good," it's not really good at all. This is an opportunity for Christian people to hear the honest experiences of other Christian people.

We are one in Christ, but what does that mean? Does our oneness require us to pretend we agree with others when we don't? Not at all. It means we commit ourselves to speak the truth in love (see Ephesians 4:25). We are brothers and sisters in Christ, which would suggest that we are deeply connected but not immune from family squabbles.

A ministry called Threaded, which focuses on shepherding racial healing among Christians, describes three essential steps to the process:

1. Respect
2. Listen
3. Wrestle

It won't work without all three elements. As a leader, you're called to guard the respect in the room. Make sure people are listening to one another and not just talking past others, or over them. But don't let them downplay the conflict, either. There are major problems in our world, in our communities, and in our churches. You're creating a safe space to wrestle with those issues that we can't ignore any longer.

Here are some specific tips for managing this conversation.

Think of yourself as a guide, not a teacher. You're not delivering information. You're not broadcasting your own opinion. You are drawing the thoughts and feelings of the group out into the open.

Set the ground rules early and often. Speaking the truth in love. Not hiding feelings. Looking forward more than backward. Grace. Humility rather than self-defense. Picture Jesus in the room—he had a few tough talks of his own, but he was always full of grace and truth.



Plan your own response to ground-rule violations. How will you lovingly defuse a situation that crosses the line? When someone keeps interrupting, or even shouting down someone else, how will you respond? Pray and plan ahead of time.

Steer clear of politics. In today's contentious world, it's hard *not* to get political. But that's a sure way to create division rather than understanding. And the fact is, we trust God, not government, for the ultimate answers. But avoiding politics may be difficult. We're dealing with spiritual issues that have practical implications in society—and that may lead to political debate. Just keep coming back to our spiritual unity as followers of Christ. At the heart of every issue, we must identify as Christians first, rather than adherents of any particular party.

Learn to love an active silence. Best case, the leader doesn't have to talk much; the group takes the discussion and runs with it. But that doesn't always happen. There are awkward silences, often early in a session. But you can learn to read these silences. Look at people's eyes. Are they thinking about what to say, or are they just dozing off? If it's an *active* silence, let the gears turn a little, and maybe draw it out by asking, "What are you thinking?" If there's a group member you know well, maybe you could tease out a thought-in-process from that person. But if it's a dead silence, move on to the next question.

Seed the conversation with your own honesty (or just be ready to). Be ready to share your own thoughts, experiences, or admissions—if you need to. Fill those dead silences with your own life. Note that the group will only be as vulnerable as you are. Don't present yourself as perfect, someone who has already figured everything out, but as a person in need of grace.

Master the "Yes And . . ." response. You want to honor everybody in the group by listening to what they say. But every so often, people will go off on a tangent or say something hurtful to others. While healthy disagreement is valuable, there are times when certain people can do damage to the group process. Here's where your leadership is crucial. Basically, you must reboot the conversation. The "Yes And . . ." response will help you do that respectfully but firmly. Interrupt the offending person if necessary by *affirming them*. "Yes, I hear what you're saying there, and that gives us a lot to think about, **and** it actually brings me back to what Kim said earlier . . ." Honor the person, but steer the conversation back to a safe place.

Move toward life-change. Each lesson ends with a "call to action," but the whole meeting should be driving in that direction. Sometimes people get lost in ideas. You need to keep asking, "How will we put that idea into practice?" (And honestly, if your group gets excited about a specific way of enacting your ideas, you can make *that* your "call to action.")



Keep an eye on the clock. Some people won't care if the sessions run overtime, but others will. Poor time management is an easy way to get people to stop coming to the group. They have committed to you a certain amount of time. If you say it ends at nine, end at nine. And it doesn't help to ask, "Does anyone mind if we go an extra fifteen minutes?" What are they going to say? No one wants to be a spoilsport. NOTE: You could invite people to stay after the official end of the meeting if they want to talk further, but that must be an entirely optional thing.

Make this available to group members.

THE NINE GROUND RULES

We affirm that we are one in Christ Jesus, despite different opinions or cultural backgrounds. Because of Jesus, we are brothers and sisters.

We aim to speak the truth in love, authoring our own stories. We will refrain from using "us" and "them" and share from our own perspectives. We will not hide facts and feelings that need to be spoken, but will treat our listeners with respect and love.

We understand that, in the course of these conversations, we may offend others with our words or take offense at what others say. Recognizing our own imperfections, we offer grace to others and ask for grace from them.

We will not think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. Instead we put the interests of others ahead of our own. We set aside defensiveness and pride, as we seek better ways to serve and honor our Lord.

We will enter a process of learning and teaching—but more learning than teaching. We will teach others about our experiences, but we will make an extra effort to learn about theirs.

We commit to engagement in this process rather than isolation. No stewing in silence. We will take the risks necessary to share truth and receive it.

We renounce an attitude of judgment and accusation. We accept that we may arrive at different understandings of portions of Scripture. We renounce our political idols. We are more interested in following Christ than in proving a point.

We will try to move the discussion forward, not backward. While we need to review past problems, we don't want to dwell there. We long to make plans together for a better future.

We understand that we're not just wrestling against human forces but against spiritual powers, and so we commit ourselves to prayer, seeking the power of God to work mightily in this situation.



INTRODUCTORY SESSION: PRAYER

We strongly recommend that you devote the first session of your racial healing group to *prayer*.

Of course you're eager to jump into discussion, but don't. Prayer is a spiritual glue that unites people of different backgrounds. We may have our disagreements, but we come together as children of God seeking the divine will. And we know our Lord loves unity (John 17:21-23).

We also recognize that there are powerful forces in our world that tear people apart, forces that promote pride and hatred and racism. We need to rely on God's power to fight those forces. We need to do that *together*.

People pray in different ways. Be careful not to impose your assumptions about prayer on others, but welcome the richness of diverse interactions with God.

Use Scripture along with your prayers. Listen to God's voice even as you lift your voices to God.

Here are some prayer prompts and Scriptures, grouped around particular themes. But don't be bound by these. Let the Spirit move through the room as you enjoy the unity of your common devotion to Christ.

UNITY IN SALVATION

It is through faith that all of you are God's children in union with Christ Jesus. You were baptized into union with Christ, and now you are clothed, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself. So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus.

GALATIANS 3:26-28 (GNT)

Pray for God's redemptive work in the lives of those bound by a racist mindset or behaviors. Ask God to affirm and support those who are working toward healing and unity.

Pray that, as Christians walk in a spirit of unity and love, the world would be drawn to the Lord.

Ask God to reveal himself to immigrants and those of other faiths who often feel discriminated against in America.

Continue to pray for the salvation of people within your sphere of influence.



STRENGTH FOR THE CHURCH

The LORD says, “Here is my servant, whom I strengthen—the one I have chosen, with whom I am pleased. I have filled him with my Spirit, and he will bring justice to every nation.

ISAIAH 42:1 (GNT)

Pray for an awakening within the body of Christ so that Christians everywhere would acknowledge the destruction caused by individual and systemic racism.

Ask God to humble Christians of all races and to help us remember that, because he shows no partiality, neither should we.

Pray that God would give us wisdom to remove social barriers within the body of Christ.

Praise God for the pastors who are personally working toward sincere racial healing and leading their congregations to do the same.

Ask God to bring more pastors to the table so that the church will lead the way in these efforts in a loving and gentle way.

LIGHT IN OUR COMMUNITIES

If we say that we are in the light, yet hate others, we are in the darkness to this very hour. If we love others, we live in the light, and so there is nothing in us that will cause someone else to sin. But if we hate others, we are in the darkness; we walk in it and do not know where we are going, because the darkness has made us blind.

1 JOHN 2:9-11 (GNT)

Pray for the communities across the country that have experienced traumatic events related to race.

Pray for neighbors, co-workers and schoolmates who have been traumatized by racism personally or indirectly. Ask God to help them forgive. Pray for them to see grace and healing at work in their lives and in the world.

Pray that all of us would recognize our own implicit biases. Especially pray for schoolteachers, employers, law enforcement personnel, and other influencers in our community, and ask that their hearts be protected from prejudice.



Pray for neighbors, co-workers, and schoolmates who are unaware of racial trauma or hostile toward diversity. Ask God to soften their hearts to understand.

TRANSFORMATION

Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the LORD your God

LEVITICUS 25:17 (NIV)

Pray for wisdom and favor regarding criminal justice reform, drug courts, diversion programs and other forms of alternative sentencing. Pray also about other policy changes that need to occur to address systemic racism.

Pray for law enforcement all over America, including community policing collaboratives and other strategies to combat crime and promote racial unity.

Praise God for interchurch efforts that promote racial unity. Pray that these would continue to glorify God.

Pray for those leading efforts to promote racial healing in an effective, organized and sincere way, in the various cities of our nation.

Opening the Bible study session

The first 15 minutes of any meeting are crucial. This is when participants establish a comfort level with one another and with the leaders. As you conduct this series of Bible discussions on the theme of racial healing, we invite you to pay attention to *beginnings*.

If you devoted the first session to prayer, the people may already have met one another. You might use the first 15 minutes of the following sessions to build on that—formally or informally.

Informally, you might allow the normal conversations that occur when people gather—if this is happening. However, if you're connecting people from two different churches (and two or more different races), you might find that the casual conversation occurs along existing social connections. People talk with people they already know.

So you might want to spark conversations among people who don't know each other. Some people are naturally good at making this happen, but it's still helpful to plan it.

You could go around the circle and have each person respond to certain questions:

What do you do for a living?

How did you get into that line of work?

Tell us about your family.

How did you get connected to your church?

What's your favorite food—to make or to eat?

What's your favorite holiday?

Or any number of "fun" questions about everyday life.



You could also create diverse groups of 2-4 people and give them those questions to ask one another.

It's tempting to jump into the topic and ask the group their opinions on race relations, but we recommend that you save that discussion until after the Bible study. Let Scripture lead the way into those tough topics.

Meanwhile, those opening minutes are an important time for people to start feeling comfortable with one another. You don't need to do goofy icebreakers, but do what you can to get people talking.

NOTE: In the Bible discussion guide below, bold type denotes *questions* to be asked of the group. Plain type denotes material the leader should share with the group to set up a Scripture or further the discussion. Sentences in parentheses are *possible answers to questions*, or material the leader *might* share if the discussion doesn't get there on its own. Italic type is for *instructions to the leader*.

This is, however, a guide and not a script. The leader should use his or her judgment in managing the discussion.

In the "Courageous Conversation" guide, there are probably more questions than you need. Considering the time available, mark the 3 or 4 questions you consider most important for your group and use those.

Exercise broad freedom and creativity in adapting the "call to action" suggestions. Think about what's needed in your community and your churches, and consider what activities your group would most likely respond to.

DISCUSSION SESSION 1

BIBLE SPOTLIGHT

Ask everyone to turn to Luke 10:25 in their Bibles (or on their phones or tablets).

This is a very familiar story, but it's full of surprises. It surprised the people who first heard it, and it can keep surprising us. If you think you know what it means, pry open your minds and read it with fresh eyes. Especially as we consider the issue of racial healing, this may have some new insights for us.

Ask someone to read verses 25-29.



What was the legal expert trying to do? Why was he asking these questions?

How do you think that legal expert would answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

Note that he asked this question to “justify himself.” What do you think that means?

Do you think there are people today who question and even twist Scripture to justify their own biases?

In response, as we’ll soon see, Jesus told a story. Why do you think he chose to respond with a story rather than, say, a lecture?

Ask someone to read verses 30-35.

What race was the man who was beaten?

(Jesus didn’t say. We might assume he was Jewish—like the priest and Levite—and maybe the hearers would assume that. But it’s also possible that it doesn’t matter. He was a man in need, and only one passerby helped.)

Why do you think the priest and Levite did not stop to help? They were professional religious folks. Wouldn’t you expect them to do the right thing?

(We might guess that they had important matters to get to in Jerusalem. Also, if the man was dead, it would have made them ceremonially unclean, unable to do their jobs. Maybe they didn’t want to take that chance.)

Do you think there are religious people today, like the priest and Levite, who seem bent on maintaining certain traditions? Maybe they focus on orderly worship, but they fail to love the people around them—why would someone do that?

Let’s talk about the Samaritan. What do you know about Samaria and the people who lived there? How did they get along with the Jews?

(Another Gospel puts it plainly: “Jews do not associate with Samaritans”—John 4:9. Jews considered Samaritans religiously and racially impure. Many devout Jews avoided passing through Samaritan territory, even if it was the most direct route.)

Why do you think Jesus used a Samaritan as the hero of this story, when he was speaking to Jewish leaders?

In the story, what did the Samaritan do for the man in need?

Do you consider this ordinary kindness or extraordinary?



Ask someone to read verses 36-37.

How do you think the legal expert felt about the way Jesus answered his question—especially with the Samaritan as the good guy?

Did this really answer the question? After studying this story, how would you answer the question: “Who is my neighbor?”

How can we, in the 21st century, “go and do likewise”?

We’re here to talk about racial healing. How does this story help us? How does it apply in a racially divided culture?

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION

When was the first time you became aware of your race?

What did that experience teach you about race?

Do you think we live in a racist society?

Why do you say that?

How would you define racism?

Are race relations better than they used to be?

Why do you say that?

Do you think there is racism against whites in our society?

What makes you say that?

When we talk about race relations, one underlying issue is power. As you look at our society, does it seem that people of different races share power equally, or is there an imbalance?

Where do you see this?

What does the Bible say about power and how we should deal with it?

How do you think God feels about the way things are (regarding racism in society)?

What can we in this room do to improve race relations in society?

What can Christians in general do about it?

What message from the Bible does our society need to hear about race relations?

How can we communicate that message?



CALL TO ACTION

Here's an idea for you, and an assignment. Before we meet again, talk with two people who have a different racial background from your own, and ask them this question:

What can we do to help people of different races understand and respect each other more?

DISCUSSION SESSION 2

BIBLE SPOTLIGHT

Ask everyone to turn to Galatians 3:26 in their Bibles (or on their phones or tablets).

Some scholars say that the book of Galatians is a rough draft of Romans. One main theme of the apostle Paul in these epistles is the relation of faith in Christ to the Jewish law. Jesus brings us salvation and freedom—and Paul is always interested in what that looks like. So we find these surprising verses in the middle of this letter.

Ask someone to read verses 26-28.

What's the main point of these verses?

How do you think the Galatians would have responded to this part when they first heard it?

There are three pairs of people-groups mentioned here. What are they?

(Jew-Gentile, male-female, slave-free.)

Why do you think Paul mentioned these?

Do you think our unity in Christ erases all distinctions between those categories? If not, what does it erase?

Don't miss the references to baptism and clothing in verse 27. The early church had a tradition where, after being baptized, people would be clothed in white robes. The idea is that we are all cleansed by Christ and clothed in him. In fact, this might be why Paul chose those categories. Apart from other differences, men and women dress differently. In that time, so did Jews and Gentiles. Slaves and masters would also wear different clothes. But Christ clothes believers in his righteousness, no matter what group they belong to—and the baptismal ceremony was a beautiful picture of that.

Do you think this passage gives us any guidance on how different races should be treated by the church?



Ask everyone to turn to James 2:1.

**We see specific teaching about discrimination in another epistle.
It's not racial discrimination, but economic.**

Ask someone to read verses 1-4.

Let's be honest. Suppose Beyoncé showed up at your church. Or Warren Buffett. Somebody rich and famous. How would they be treated? (Leader, feel free to substitute a rich/famous person that the group would like.)

You know what would happen! “Come on in! Here’s the best seat in the whole church. Can I get you anything?” Hopefully we would treat any visitor like that, but do we? Some scruffy person ambles in, and we put them in the back somewhere, right?

James nails us. This is an “Ouch” Scripture. As painful as it is, we have to admit that things haven’t changed much in 2,000 years. Have they?

This passage isn’t about race, but it is about discrimination. Can we learn anything here about racial discrimination?

Do you think we could apply these ideas to any of the people-groups mentioned in Galatians 3:28? Is discrimination wrong in all those cases?

Ask someone to read verses 8-9.

What does verse 9 say about treating people according to how they look?

These verses make it clear that discrimination is serious business. If you’re trying hard to live God’s way, discrimination is not the way to do it.

Have you ever experienced discrimination in any of the categories we’ve been talking about—race, religion, gender, economics, social status? How did you deal with it? How did you feel?

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION

Have you ever been treated unfairly because of your race?

When? How?

How did you feel about that?



Have you ever participated in the unfair treatment of someone else because of their race?

When? How?

How did you feel about this?

Some people nowadays say they're "colorblind" with regard to race; they don't even see the differences but treat everyone the same. Is this a good thing or not?

Why do you say that?

How do your relationships with people of your own race differ from your relationships with those of other races?

Is this good, bad, or in between?

How could you improve your relationships with those of other races?

How could those people improve their relationships with you?

If you could sit down with a friend or neighbor or colleague of another race and say one difficult thing that needs to be said—and they promise in advance not to get mad—what would you say?

What message from the Bible do our neighbors need to hear about race relations?

What message from the Bible do we need to hear about race relations?

CALL TO ACTION

The big issue of race relations often comes down to decisions made in the hearts of individuals. The Bible challenges us to love, even in difficult situations. So here's an assignment that might be easier or harder than you expect. Go to a person you know, preferably of another race, and say something like this: "I'd like to pray for you regularly over the next few months. Is there anything particular you'd like me to pray about?"

Avoid any hint of spiritual superiority. (You're not praying for them because you're holy and they're not.) Everyone needs prayer. And if they ask how they can pray for you, be ready to say something about your own life.



DISCUSSION SESSION 3

BIBLE SPOTLIGHT

Ask the group to turn to Ruth 1:16.

There's a lot about race relations in the Bible—not about black and white, but Jew and Gentile. In the Old Testament, the Jews were set apart as God's chosen people, separate from other races. But even there we find lots of exceptions. The Israelites were explicitly commanded to treat foreigners fairly. And here in the beautiful book of Ruth, we find a relationship forged across racial lines.

Ask somebody to read verses 16-17.

This is Ruth talking. She was a Gentile, though she had married into a Jewish family.

Do you know who she was talking to? (Naomi, her mother-in-law.)

Why do you think she makes this commitment?

It's hard to say what motivated Ruth. Naomi is described as a bitter woman, so it probably wasn't personal magnetism. Ruth's sister-in-law walked away from this relationship, and Naomi begged Ruth to do the same. It's reasonable to think that the clincher is in the center of Ruth's statement, "Your God will be my God."

Ruth had found a faith-connection with Naomi, and she didn't want to give it up.

In today's world, how can faith bridge our racial divides?

Ask the group to turn to Acts 13:1.

In the New Testament, we find strong moves to challenge the Jew-Gentile split. While the church in Jerusalem was debating racial issues, the church on the coast in Antioch was taking action, sending missionaries into the Gentile world.

With some tricky names here, it's best for you, the leader, to read Acts 13:1-3.

What do you notice in these verses?

Stuff is happening. People are getting involved. The Spirit is moving. This appears to be the first organized missionary enterprise of the church into the Gentile world.

But notice the names of the key people in this movement. It's likely that Simon was a black man—that was his nickname, anyway. Lucius was from Cyrene, in North Africa. Barnabas was well-known to the apostles but from the island of Cyprus.



Do you think the diversity of this group had any effect on the actions they took?

Ask the group to turn to Ephesians 2:13.

As you probably know, Saul, whom we just met in that passage, later became known as Paul. He was especially eager to tackle the Jew-Gentile division, and he wrote powerfully about it.

Ask someone to read verses 13-18.

According to these verses, what has Jesus done about this racial division?

Clearly there's a theological issue here. Gentiles are welcomed into the promises God made to Abraham. The Jew-Gentile division isn't exactly the same as the racial tension we experience today, but . . .

Is there a way in which Jesus does the same thing about our racial division? Does he break down the dividing wall? Does he preach peace?

We've read the commitment of Ruth, a Gentile making a faith-connection with a Jew. We've seen how a diverse group of leaders worked together to send God's good news beyond borders. We've seen how Jesus has shattered divisions and made two groups into one . . .

What would it look like in our world for people of different races to find unity in Christ?

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION

As you look at our world today, do you see anyone—individuals or groups—effectively breaking down racial prejudice in our society?

Who? How?

How do you think churches are doing in this matter?

How is *your* church doing?

There's a common quotation that says Sunday morning is the most segregated time of the week. Is this true? If so, why do you think it is?

Is this a problem?



In general, when it comes to racial conflict in our society, do you think Christians are part of the problem or part of the solution?

What can we do about that?

Churches do many things. Among all the other agenda items for the church, how important is the task of racial healing? Should it be the top priority? In the Top 5? Top 20? Why do you say this?

What do outsiders—unchurched people—think about the church in its dealings with racial issues? What sort of reputation do churches have?

What message from the Bible do churches in general need to hear about race relations?

What message from the Bible does your church (our church) need to hear about race relations?

How can we communicate that message?

CALL TO ACTION

We often quote the verse where Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). We usually think of that in connection with prayer, and that’s very true. Jesus is with us when we gather to pray. But this is also a picture of the church—two or three, or two or three hundred, gathering in his name. And he is there with us, teaching us, helping us, strengthening us to do his work in the world.

So the challenge for this lesson is to reach out to other people in your church, people who aren’t here. Talk about what we’re doing here. Pray together about the racial situation in our society. And listen for their ideas—and God’s ideas—of what can be done about it.



DISCUSSION SESSION 4

BIBLE SPOTLIGHT

Ask the group to turn to Acts 2:1.

You might already know this story—the birth of the church at Pentecost, the Spirit coming in power. But let’s look at it today through a lens of culture and language, and maybe even race.

Ask someone to read verses 1-8.

In your own words, what happened here?

Who were the people in the audience, listening to the disciples?

It’s important to note that they were Jews. Christianity had not yet spread to the Gentiles. But Jews had been moving out of Israel for centuries, and settling in areas all over the world. On high holy days like Pentecost, Jerusalem would be filled with religious pilgrims. Glance at the following verses to see all the places they came from (and be glad I’m not asking you to read all those place names).

Why were these people “amazed”?

The disciples were speaking in the people’s native languages. Now there is some question about this. Since they were all Jews, it’s possible that they understood Hebrew or Aramaic, and it’s likely that they understood Greek—since just about everyone did. But this might be talking about the local languages of the places these Jews had settled in.

People understand tongues-speaking in various ways today, and we don’t need to settle that here, but it’s clear that people from many different cultures heard God’s message in a very personal way.

So, in Acts 2, we get sort of a “baby picture” of the church, and it includes people from nearly every nation they knew about back then.

Why do you think God decided to start things out in this multi-cultural way?

Ask the group to turn to Revelation 7:9.

You may think of Revelation as a book of hard-to-understand symbols and dramatic conflicts—and you’d be right. But before it gets too intense, we get invited to some heavenly worship services. Here’s one in chapter 7.



Ask someone to read verses 9-10.

What do you notice here?

How is this “multitude” described?

What are they doing?

How does this compare with the gathering in Acts 2?

It’s fascinating to have these two snapshots—the church’s “baby picture” in Acts 2 and this picture of eternal praises in Revelation 7. In both of these descriptions we find people present from all over the place. Many different cultures are represented.

How does that affect your vision of what the church could be in our time?

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION

As you imagine the world ten years from now, how do you think things will be regarding race relations?

Why do you say that?

Think especially about this region. Ten years from now, do you think that people of different races will be getting along better or worse?

Why do you say that?

Looking ahead ten years, do you think your church (our church) will be more multi-cultural than it is now? Do you think churches of different races will meet and work together more regularly?

Why do you say that?

For this to be so, what needs to happen in people’s hearts?

To what extent do emotions like vengeance, guilt, or fear keep us from following the guidance of the Spirit?

How can we change these negative emotions to positive expressions of love, joy, and peace?

If Christians could make a substantial improvement in race relations, what effect would that have on our society? What do you think would change?

What would you like others (especially those of another race) to do in order to improve their relationship with you?

What could you do to improve those relationships?



What should we be praying for, as together we seek an outcome that truly pleases God?

The Bible, in several places, describes an ideal of unity within diversity—the coming together at Pentecost, the many-gifted body of Christ, the multi-racial character of the book of Acts, the continual breaking down of the Jew-Gentile walls, and the heavenly vision in Revelation where people from every race, tribe, nation and language join together to worship God. What advice does the Bible give us on how this ideal could become reality?

CALL TO ACTION

In the Bible, God gives us a beautiful vision of the future, but our current reality is often very ugly. We can do things—like loving, listening—to improve matters, but we know we need God’s power to accomplish this miracle. The cause of racism is fueled by the power of sin and rebellion against God. Only God can win this victory.

So let’s commit ourselves to prayer, individually and collectively. Can we have a series of prayer meetings with this group, and also your friends and neighbors, in the coming months?

CLOSING SESSION: SERVICE

Gather the group one more time to work together on a service project in the community.

This will build fellowship among the people in the group, but it will also be a powerful testimony within the community, as they see a diverse group of Jesus-followers working together to show the Lord’s love.

If you’re looking for a service opportunity . . .

Pastors are usually aware of the ministries in their area that need help. Start there. Perhaps some of your group members already volunteer at local ministries or nonprofit organizations, and they might enjoy bringing this group along with them for a special project.

You might also consult the officials in your town, a public works department, or even the local police and ask how you can help. That might also be a great way to develop redemptive relationships outside this group and the churches you represent.

Here are some nationwide websites that allow you to type in your zip code and find service opportunities close to you.

www.volunteermatch.com

www.ymca.net

www.unitedway.com



RESOURCES

There are many books, articles, and websites that deal with racial issues from a Christian perspective. In just about any resource, you might find some things you disagree with. So we're not vouching for everything in the following books, but we appreciate these authors and find that their works advance the discussion in healthy ways.

America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America, by Jim Wallis (Brazos Press)

Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart, by Christena Cleveland (InterVarsity Press)

Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America, by Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith (Oxford University Press)

Do All Lives Matter? The Issues We Can No Longer Ignore and the Solutions We All Long For, by Wayne Gordon and John M. Perkins (Baker Books)

Dream With Me: Race, Love, and the Struggle We Must Win, by John M. Perkins (Baker Books)

From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race, by J. Daniel Hays (InterVarsity Press)

Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just, by Timothy Keller (Dutton)

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption, by Bryan Stevenson (Spiegel & Grau)

Let Justice Roll Down, by John M. Perkins and Shane Claiborne (Baker Books)

The Myth of Equality: Uncovering the Roots of Injustice and Privilege, by Ken Wytsma (IVP Books)

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, by Michelle Alexander (The New Press)

The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity, by Soong-Chan Rah (InterVarsity Press)

Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity, by Edward Gilbreath (InterVarsity Press)

Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice, by Brenda Salter McNeil (InterVarsity Press)

Under Our Skin: Getting Real about Race. Getting Free from the Fears and Frustrations that Divide Us, by Benjamin Watson with Ken Petersen (Tyndale House)

White Awake: An Honest Look at What It Means to Be White, by Daniel Hill (InterVarsity Press)

