ONE NATION UNDER GOD

Healing Racial Divides in America

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C O N C O R D I A  P U B L I S H I N G  H O U S E  •  S A I N T  L O U I S
SERIES INTRODUCTION

Racial division has always been a reality in our country. At times, it has erupted into protests, violence, arson, and looting. Distrust and suspicions arise on both sides.

What we forget is that we are all creatures of God, equally children of Adam and Eve. We forget that our first parents were created in the image of God; that image is an important unifying force that defines our shared human identity. We forget that God loves the beautiful diversity of His human creation as much as He loves the vast array of plants and animals He has created. And we forget that His Son, Jesus Christ, has redeemed each and every one of us.

This study pulls back the covers over the racial issues that divide us so that we can better understand one another and search the Scriptures for a hopeful path forward.
SESSION 1: STUDENT

SIN DISTORTS OUR IDENTITY

You will not find your true identity in the words that are expressed in today’s culture. You will find at best a distorted view of identity. Our true identity is found only in God, revealed through the new life in Christ.

—Keith Haney

MEMORY VERSE

“We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

OBJECTIVES

In this session, we will

• define the complex racial division that separates black and white America;
• give participants insight into the way black Americans experience life; and
• discuss how the experiences of black Americans have built envy and resentment within them and made the racial division grow deeper.

The racial divide between black America and white America is frustratingly complex and deeply emotional. Each side approaches cultural events from a vastly different perspective and experience, and our differences often divide us.

The purpose of this session is to help us begin to recognize what is dividing us, better understand the issues that are involved on both sides, and search Scripture for a new perspective that only God can give.

INTRODUCTION

I found myself watching a segment of the Bill O’Reilly show one night after another black man was shot by the police, this time in Charlotte. A civil rights attorney was his guest. As they discussed the events of the shooting, Mr. O’Reilly commented that we have to trust the information from the police. This comment really struck me. In one simple phrase, he exposed the heart of the problem between blacks and whites in America. There is a white America and a black America, with a huge racial divide between the two.

White America starts with the viewpoint that all cops are honest, telling us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. There certainly may be one or two bad cops out there, but by and large we can trust the police. That is white America’s reality, its starting point. Everyone should
believe the police; no one has a reason not to. That makes sense if most of your encounters with police have been fair and reasonable. That is your reality.

But what if your experiences with the police had not turned out so positively? What if you know someone whose experience ended with horrifying results? As a black male, I was taught to be cautious, even afraid of the police. So when a law enforcement officer pulls me over (very rarely has that happened), my heart races and I am on edge not knowing how this whole thing will turn out. I am convinced both parties feel this uneasiness, and it is a recipe for disaster. Two people, both on edge, both afraid of each other. One has a deadly weapon, one is defenseless.

As we begin this Bible Study on healing racial divides in America, I would like to share my observations about this issue in a conversation centered on God’s Word. It is my prayer that we end up with a deeper understanding of how to begin to solve this critical issue dividing our country. Today, our starting point is identity.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

**Q1.** Discuss where you find your identity.

**Q2.** Identify some of the characteristics you have heard to describe black people.

**Q3.** What are the characteristics you have heard used to describe white people?

**Q4.** Discuss how group characterizations fail to accurately describe the identity of individuals.
INSIGHTS FROM THE AUTHOR

It dawned on me recently how much I hate the lure of Ancestry.com’s new DNA test. The ad seems so appealing: take this test, and you can trace your history and find out about your past. I have almost bought it several times, but one thing stops me: the question Do I want to know? How far back can it trace my past? I love the idea of learning about my ancestors from these DNA tests. The results could take me back to the countries they lived in and help me learn the rich history of my people. They could show me the pride and the dignity of their lives and the value of their culture in Africa.

There is a show called Who Do You Think You Are? I have watched it only a few times because I find it too painful. On the show, celebrities get to trace their ancestry using Ancestry.com. Often, these adventures lead to some happy endings. These very satisfied celebrities learn amazing things about their family history that make them proud.

My fear is that my ancestral lines will stop at the slave ships, with a people stolen from their homes and families, with no key to unlock the rich cultural heritage they enjoyed before slavery, the positions of honor my ancestors held in their tribes and nations. Is slavery the only heritage I have? Is my past distorted with the bloodlines of a slave owner? Yes, the institution of slavery was abolished more than 150 years ago, but it still casts a shadow over black America that clouds our sense of identity.

I am not trying to dredge up this ugly past to make white Americans feel guilty or deepen the bitterness black America feels toward the whites, but to help all of us understand why many black people feel we have lost our identity. The connection to our roots has been erased, and that loss of identity still haunts me. I know what I don’t want to be, but how can I find my identity? An identity that I can be proud of claiming as my own?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Q1. Some people identify themselves as Irish, English, or German. Others identify themselves by their vocation or profession. How would you identify yourself?

Q2. How would you identify yourself if you found out you were adopted and had no idea who your parents and ancestors were? Or if you lost your vocation or profession?
HOW THE LOSS OF IDENTITY AFFECTS THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Loss of identity has manifested itself in a breakdown in the foundation of some black families. It is not the only factor: joblessness, failing schools in urban areas, economic hardship, and an institutional system that has not figured out the most effective way to care for the poor and disenfranchised are all factors. But this loss of identity could be an underlying factor. Take a look at these statistics before commenting:

- Black preschoolers are far more likely to be suspended than white children, according to an NPR report. Black children make up 18 percent of the preschool population but represent almost half of all out-of-school suspensions. (www.usnews.com/news/blogs/at-the-edge/2015/05/06/institutional-racism-is-our-way-of-life).

- Black children in K–12 are three times more likely to be suspended than white children. Black students make up almost 40 percent of all school expulsions, and more than two-thirds of students referred to police from schools are either black or Hispanic, says the Department of Education (www.usnews.com/news/blogs/at-the-edge/2015/05/06/institutional-racism-is-our-way-of-life).

- The disparities exist in our neighborhoods and communities as well. Take income: in 2014, the median household income for whites was $71,300, compared to $43,300 for blacks. For college-educated whites, the median household income was $106,600, significantly higher than the $82,300 for households headed by college-educated blacks, the report found (money.cnn.com/2016/06/27/news/economy/racial-wealth-gap-blacks-whites).

- A black man is three times more likely to be searched at a traffic stop and six times more likely to go to jail than a white person. Blacks make up nearly 40 percent of arrests for violent crimes (www.naaccp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet).

- The Sentencing Project found blacks aren’t pulled over (and subsequently jailed) more frequently because they’re more prone to criminal behavior; they’re pulled over much more frequently because there is an “implicit racial association of black Americans with dangerous or aggressive behavior” (www.usnews.com/news/blogs/at-the-edge/2015/05/06/institutional-racism-is-our-way-of-life).

Some people will look at these stats and point to the breakdown of the black family. I have heard some blame the lack of a strong male role model in the home. While it is true in some cases, many in the black community who had a strong father still have a feeling of hopelessness. Joblessness, poverty, and poor education systems are all part of the breakdown of the institution.

I give you this information not because I expect white America alone to fix it, but to help you understand the struggles in the black community. To us, these kinds of numbers—these disparities—prove there has been a breakdown in the institutions. And what you have is a people whom the American dream has left behind.
It is obvious from these statistics that some deep-seated problems are connected to the tensions running through the veins of our nation. On one side of the racial divide, white Americans see progress; on the other side, black Americans often feel frustrated by the lack of progress. So, when those two opposing ideologies and views of America collide, you get Ferguson, Missouri. You get rioting in Baltimore, because the people who feel oppressed also feel no one is paying attention.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

**Q1.** As you look at this stark picture of two different Americas, what comes as a surprise to you?

**Q2.** Discuss how this insight helps you better understand the situations you are seeing in the news.

I am not condoning the looting and burning in these protests by any means. I believe there are better ways to handle it. But white Americans need to realize the perception among black Americans is that the institution is stacked against them. So, if the institution is against you, any emotions and feelings you have that may be racist are justified because you are the oppressed racial group. Again, do I agree with that? No. Do I understand the frustration? Yes. Have I figured out all the answers? No. What I hope to accomplish in this Bible Study is to give you the biblical blueprint to begin the healing process. I make no promises to solve all the issues, but we are called to be salt and light in the world. The world needs us to be salt and light!

Read Matthew 5:13–16.

**Q3.** In the context of the racial division in our country, how can the thoughtful words and kind deeds of a large Christian community help provide some light and healing?
BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT

The apostle Paul begins this section of 2 Corinthians by explaining to the believers that we need to live our life with a higher sense of vocation. We don’t live our life for ourselves, but as a faith response to the love of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Paul points out that our job is to proclaim the reconciliation between God and humanity Christ accomplished by His death and resurrection. And we, through faith, are the recipients of this divine reconciliation. Believers now have the privilege to be heralds to minister God’s message throughout the world.

But it goes even deeper. Christ’s redemption has transformed the way we look at other people. Paul says, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh” (2 Corinthians 5:16). Paul is not referring to their flesh—their outward appearance—skin color, ethnicity, or any of the features that make us different from one another. He is talking about our flesh; that is, our sinful human nature. In other words, in Christ, we no longer look at others through the lenses of our sinful perspective; rather, we see our neighbor as God sees him or her.

Regardless of the color of his or her skin, every person we behold is precious to God and dearly loved for Jesus’ sake. Is this a way Christ heals the racial division? We will examine that question in this lesson.

THE TEXT

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died. (2 Corinthians 5:14)

The phrase “the love of Christ” has two possible meanings. It could mean either (1) Christ’s love for us or (2) our love for Christ. However, looking at it in connection with the last portion of the verse would lead us to believe that what Paul has in mind is Christ’s love for us. “Died for all” refers to the redemptive work of Christ. The death of Christ redeemed a lost world, all the children of Adam and Eve throughout the world. “All” in this lost world includes every black or white person separated by our racial division. Jesus reaches out to both sides of the division by redeeming every one of us—and that is the heart of the healing He wants to work. See John 3:16, Christ’s death for all the world.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

But how does the demonstration of God’s love two thousand years ago on the cross impact our racial division today? Read Romans 6:1–14.

Our Baptism has united us with Jesus Christ. In Him, we have died to sin and now “walk in newness of life” (v. 4). As Paul says, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions” (v. 12). In the context of this study, we especially include the sin of judging...
people by the color of their skin and acting out of our preconceived notions based on that judgment.

To heal this divide in America, we who have been united with Christ must stop evaluating people according to their flesh. We need to recognize how we have made assumptions based on the color of people’s skin. And no matter whether we are white or black, we all have preconceived notions about one another; notions we hold deep inside, perhaps without even realizing it. But we need to recognize the sinful origins of those notions and repent of them. Only through confession, repentance, and God’s free forgiveness or absolution will we be able to follow Paul’s apostolic expectation. We will stop regarding people according the notions of our sinful flesh, and regard them according to the way God does.

**APPLICATION**

Living in repentant faith, and empowered by God’s Word and Sacraments, we can begin living up to Paul’s expectation that Christians will see people not “according to the flesh,” as he says in 2 Corinthians 5:16. Discuss these practical suggestions to help us see each other as people dearly loved by God. Which might work in your congregation and community?

- Fill our lives with friends of diverse backgrounds. Some of our congregations/members are fortunate enough to live in integrated neighborhoods. Others may want to consider connecting with families in public schools or joining weekend activities such as sports leagues or social clubs that are integrated.
- Choose books that help you gain insights into the life and culture of persons of different backgrounds and ethnicities.
- As a congregation, sponsor visits to museums that feature exhibits about a variety of cultures and religions.
- Have groups in your congregation host and celebrate cultural events with friends of different faiths.
- Invite others to share their cultural experiences.

Although God created mankind as one human race, our sinful, selfish natures have created false lines of color dividing that race. Over the years, these false perceptions about different races have been cooked into the recipe of our culture. We have seen them played out in the media, on television sitcoms, and in books. The challenge now is, how do we get around what we believe to be true and start seeing people as individuals? The apostle Paul gives us a pathway forward—start seeing as God does, not “according to the flesh.” To bring about real healing, we have to find our identity in the new life we have in Christ. Paul paints this beautiful picture of that new life: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Paul presents the benefits of Christ’s death for the believer (see v. 14). Because we believers are united with Jesus both in His death and resurrection, we are connected to Jesus and one another
in this new creation. Our new identity as God’s children strives against the identity of our sinful flesh. Christ gives us an altogether different perspective from what we had before conversion, and we must resist the urge to return to that former, sinful perspective.

**MISSION OPPORTUNITY FOR THE WEEK**

Ask God to open your mind to understand different perspectives people have, based on their upbringing and their life experiences. Pray for wisdom to perceive how Jesus can bridge the differences between you and them.

In your conversations with people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and skin colors, listen closely to how they perceive the world around them. Ask them to help you understand the origins of their view of the world.

**CONCLUSION**

Our only hope to change is not to look for our identity in a DNA test but to look to Christ. The apostle Paul describes this new identity that Jesus gives. All things have become new in Christ. A believer’s life and identity change because he or she is being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Instead of living for oneself, a believer lives for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15). Instead of evaluating others with the values of the world, a believer looks at this world through the eyes of faith (2 Corinthians 5:16).

So what is the solution to healing the racial divide? Try this as a start: You will not find true love in the words that are expressed in today’s culture. You will find at best a distorted view of love. True love is found only in God, revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.