

# “We Are One in Christ”

## *Healing the Racial Divide – Study #4*

### **Introduction**

*There is a false perception in black America that makes it nearly impossible to bridge the divide in our country. That is the belief that black Americans cannot be prejudiced. It is important for us to better understand how that belief arose and how it distorts our well-meaning efforts to improve relations. It will also help us to lean more upon our Lord to overcome the painful life experiences which have divided our nation.*

### **Discrimination is Not Only a “White” Problem**

Many people in the black community feel it is impossible for them to discriminate. Of course, we all recognize discrimination when we see it—treating one group of people differently simply because they are of a different skin color, age, or sex. It would certainly seem that blacks are no more exempt from that than whites or anyone else.

However, far more African Americans believe they can't be prejudiced than you may realize. It stems from the notion that their ancestors were victims of exploitation and oppression from white Americans. Since they are descendants of a victimized, oppressed people, they feel they are not prejudiced when they lump all white people together or make judgments about what must be in a white person's heart.

No group of people is immune to the effects of sin, and to believe otherwise is a trick of the evil one. Because of this fundamental distortion of the truth, any discussion on race starts as a one-sided conversation. Blacks who hold this view see white people as the ones with the prejudice problem, and since they have the problem, they are the ones who need to change. It is obvious this isn't helping the racial situation in America.

But even worse, this assumption turns black people into powerless victims. Whether one person or two create a problem, it takes both to seek reconciliation. While history, slavery, and the pain of the Jim Crow segregation laws have made the divide deeper, we need both sides to work together to find a new pathway forward. The work of healing race in America is our problem, not a problem for "those people." We need to work at this together. The racial divide in this country is ripping apart the fabric of the nation and putting us at risk of destroying ourselves and the freedoms that so many of our ancestors (of ALL races) bled and died to defend.

1. In what way does this “I’m not prejudiced” attitude increase the divide between black and white America?
2. Can you think of an experience you had with this kind of distrust when you were trying to interact with a person on the other side of the racial division?
3. How does Black America's one-sided view of prejudice make it impossible for white Americans to heal the racial divide by themselves.
4. Imagine a white person saying the following to a black person. “When I look at other people, I don't see color.” Why might the black person respond with skepticism, distrust, or a harsh reply? Why do you think a black person might object to the statement “I don't see color”?
5. Describe a time when you were once mistreated by one person and later found yourself having a hard time trusting anyone when you were in a similar situation.

6. How might a black person's former experiences with prejudice and discrimination contribute to his or her skepticism at remarks from well-meaning white people?

### **Have We Made Any Progress?**

While we have made progress, the deep and often dark history of black and white relations in America clouds our progress and increases our distrust of one another. When a black person hears you say you don't see color, that person feels you are not acknowledging the past conflict and issues. The embarrassment and humiliation felt when that person was singled out precisely because of the color of his or her skin can make you come off looking insensitive and naive when you say you don't see color. To pretend that "color" has never been an issue creates a false sense of reality.

It is important for white people to understand the life experiences that have led black Americans to distrust police officers, politicians, white people, and even black people who think differently than they do. But it is also important for black Americans to see how blanket distrust of all whites, or all police officers, or all of those in authority is a form of prejudice in and of itself.

As children, many white Americans watched the video of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking in front of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. They agreed with his dream of a day when all of us would not judge a person by the external color of their skin, but by the character of their heart. To reflect their belief that all people are equally precious in God's sight, they try to look deeper than the color of the other person's skin, to look into the heart and soul and see people as individuals. That is what they mean when they say, "I don't see color."

This same mis-communication process happened in connection with the "Black Lives Matter" movement in 2015 and 2016. Many whites heard the chant "Black lives matter" and responded, "All lives matter." They expected the blacks to answer, "Of course!" but were upset when they learned their words had only offended the Black Lives Matter people more. It came off as though the Black Lives Matter people thought only black lives matter. Again, the racial divide grew larger and larger.

7. What would be a more helpful response to "Black Lives Matter" than retorting, "All lives matter"?

The reality is that we do have a diversity of cultures in America. To say, "I don't see color," might also mean "I don't see culture." That would be a mistake. In not seeing color, we also risk not seeing the rich diversity God created within our human family and the rich contribution each culture brings.

### **Breaking Down the Barriers**

To put this in a Biblical context, let's look through the eyes of the Church in Ephesus. The conflict in that particular church went back long before its founding. It began in the Old Testament, when God chose a little insignificant nation, the Israelites, to be the one through whom the Savior, Jesus Christ, would bring salvation to the world. The way the Israelites handled that responsibility put them into direct conflict with every other nation.

Other nations were suspicious because the Israelites separated themselves from all other countries, as God had commanded, and because they lived differently. But the Israelites let this go to their heads. They became prideful, valuing themselves and despising the Gentiles. They valued their position more highly than their calling by God. Their calling was to be the vehicle of God to send His Son into the world to save the world from their sins. In the meantime, they were to be sharing the glory of God and His promised salvation with their Gentile neighbors.

The Jews should have seen themselves as ones called to lead others to the Most High God. Instead, they formed this exclusive circumcision-only members club. The thousand-year-old tension reached a boiling point in the Church in Ephesus:

*Ephesians 2:11-17 Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—*

*(12) remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (13) But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (14) For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility (15) by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, (16) and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (17) And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.*

The Early Church was far from perfect. The young Ephesian Church experienced friction between Jewish and Gentile Christians. This is the reason Paul assumes a shepherding role and opens a discussion about the destructive relationship between those two groups. In verses 11-12, Paul shows the hopelessness of the Gentiles' condition before the coming of the Gospel by contrasting them with the Jews.

God's plan of salvation in the Old Testament came through the nation of Israel That did not mean the Hebrews were intrinsically more holy than Gentiles, or closer to God, only that the Anointed One of God, the Christ, would be a descendent of the Hebrew nation. The salvation of every Israelite was completely dependent on his or her Holy Spirit-given faith in the coming Messiah—not based on birthright or circumcision. Paul points out that the Gentile Christians in Ephesus did not receive their salvation by inheritance (birthright), as the Jewish Christians were claiming. Paul contrasts the conditions of the Jews and Gentiles to show the Ephesians how significant their salvation is.

For the Jews, circumcision was a source of pride. It provided them with a visible sign of their historic relationship with God. Therefore, they used the term "uncircumcised" as a religious slur against the Gentiles. Paul challenged the false security of the Jewish believers who thought their salvation was based on their birthright and/or their circumcision; he also challenged the Jewish presumption that the Gentiles were excluded because they were uncircumcised. He even had to confront Peter when he began treating Gentile believers different from Jewish believers:

*But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2:11-16)*

The division between Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus was a deep divide over which side had the right relationship with God. And what was to determine that right relationship? Was it about birthright or was it about faith? In truth, the Gentile Ephesians had it right – by God's gift of faith they were truly God's people. And actually, so long as the Jewish Ephesians relied on their own circumcision and heritage, they were separating themselves from God.

Just as in the racial division facing our country today, there were technically two different groups of people. In Ephesus, it was the Jews and the Gentiles. They did not have two different skin colors. They were, however, two distinct kinds of people. Yet, in Christ, they were now one, ready to reach out to their neighbors—both Jewish and Gentile.

8. In Ephesians 2:11-12, Paul describes the fact that the Gentiles had no relationship with God before the Gospel was brought to them. How does Paul make his case?

9. Paul also explains the deep spiritual rift between the Jewish and Gentile believers in Ephesus. What was the primary theological understanding that separated them.
10. How does Jesus restore this broken relationship between two different peoples in the Jews and Gentiles in Ephesians 2:13-14.
11. As we consider the racial issues that divide us today, Paul shows us a pathway to reconciliation. Where does that path begin, as laid out in this text?
12. If Jesus was able to heal the rift between God and humanity caused by sin, can He not also heal the racial divide? What is the tougher thing to cure?

### **So, What Does This Mean?**

In the days and weeks that lie ahead, ask God to help you appreciate the diversity He has created within the human family. Think about some of the similarities and differences you share with people from your work, school, neighborhood, or friends who are from “the other side” of the racial divide.

### **Wrapping Things Up**

The Jewish temple was surrounded by three walled courtyards. The court furthest from the temple building was the Court of the Gentiles. On the wall leading from the Court of the Gentiles into the Court of the Women (for Jewish women and children) was a sign giving warning that any Gentile who passed beyond it would be killed. In His death on the cross, Jesus tore down every wall dividing one human from another. In Him, all are made one. *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:28-29)*

So, what is the proper response when a person from “the other side” rejects your attempts to embrace the diversity God has made? If you are white, ask the person of color what his or her experiences have been. Then assure the person that you are not trying to understate the difficulties he or she has suffered, but to see how we can move forward together with Jesus, our Savior. If you are a person of color, ask God to help you forgive and put your trust in Him so that you might reach out in love and give white people in your life another chance. Jesus did not notice nationality, color, or gender. He saw people as individuals – people for whom He took time out of His life to stop and show love and mercy. Jesus shows understanding and unconditional love to each person regardless of skin color, nation of origin, or gender. It has been given to us by our Lord to do the same thing – to view everyone as an **individual brother or sister in Christ** while at the same time recognizing the beauty of the diversity God has created **within our** human family.

Christ alone can tear down the racial walls. Jesus not only made peace between sinners and God through His death and resurrection but He also made peace between Jews and Gentiles, male and female, black and white. Jesus took sinful tribes, nationalities, and even political party affiliations and, through His death on the cross and His shed blood, He made for Himself a new man, a new nation, a new tribe—the Church. We can now celebrate the beauty and the diversity of “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). We are a diverse people united by our shared faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, whose righteousness unites all believers as one.