



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

Racial Equity & Women's Intercultural Ministries

FACING RACISM:

A Vision of the Intercultural Community

Antiracism Study Guides



Week 4. Racism 101

Introduction

Having conversations about racial injustice is hard work. One of the difficulties is unspecific terminology. Words like “racism” and “racist” are used very loosely in common parlance. This creates a lot of opportunity for confusion, defensiveness, and unintended offense. In order to make conversation easier and more productive, let’s begin with some shared definitions.

Race

People come in different colors, shapes, sizes, and body types. They always have. Yet it was not until the era of Western colonialism that the concept of race was constructed. When European colonizers arrived on a new continent, they did not understand the subtleties of tribes, family groups, religious groups, or geographical regions that the current inhabitants of that land used to identify themselves. The colonizers lumped whole continents of people together into one new category, with skin color as its marker. That is how race was invented. It is a made-up category from the beginning. Also, the colonizers’ labeling of people according to skin color was not neutral observation. It served the economic and material interests of the colonizers to disregard the distinct cultures they encountered. The colonizers got to be the ones who named and identified whole peoples, while the self-identification of groups was erased. For example, before European colonizers arrived, the Americas were populated by several distinct groups, each with their own language and traditions. After colonization, the rich variety of societies within this large swath of land were all called Indians--a name that reflects the (mistaken) perspective of the colonizers, rather than the perspective of the people themselves. In a similar fashion, during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, people from a wide variety of cultures within the enormous continent of Africa were kidnapped, brought to a foreign land, and all lumped together as Negroes. While the words we used have changed--we now say Native American and African American--for the most part we retain a classification system based on the self-interested perspective of European colonizers from centuries ago.

The notion that all dark-skinned people were of one category simply did not exist before this time, when this classification system was created to enable and justify the subjugation of other peoples by European colonizers. The various racial categories (races or colors) that were invented at this time were placed in a hierarchy, with Europeans (whites) at the top. The categories evolved over time through now-defunct regulations that classified different Asian ethnic groups as either black or white, and several U.S. Supreme Court decisions that further defined who is considered white and who is not considered white. For example, *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* in 1923

further defined white persons as not inclusive of Caucasians of Indian descent (or those who do not fit the “common understanding” of Caucasian). This system of racial categorization is called white supremacy.

White Supremacy

While individual people might believe in the supremacy of white people as an ideal, the term white supremacy really refers to the system itself and its effects. Historically, the economic, social, and legal systems of the U.S. have been constructed with the assumption (spoken or unspoken) that white people are the normal citizens with which they are concerned.

Let's consider an analogy. Louisville, KY is a city built with the assumption that people have cars. It is car-centered, car-dominant, and car-identified. The public transportation system is not well-developed; we have buses that run limited routes on limited schedules. There are no subways. There are large sections of town with no sidewalks. There are bike paths for recreation, but cycling to work requires trying to find space beside the cars on the road. Driver's licenses are required for a whole variety of non-car-related activities, including opening a bank account. A person may get an alternate form of identification, but this requires going to the Department of Motor Vehicles. This structural feature of Louisville makes daily life much harder for people who do not have cars. Getting to work takes longer, getting to the doctor or the dentist can be tricky, and so on. White supremacy is like this. It is a structural feature of the U.S.: white-centered, white-dominant, and white-identified (Doucot 2010, see also Johnson 1997). White supremacy has been an unfortunate reality in this country since early in its inception. Indeed, from the moment race based (black) slavery became a dominant economic factor in the country's development, white supremacy became more and more intrinsic to the culture. History was distorted to substantiate it, laws were instituted to sustain it, and rationalizations were created to support it. Increasingly benefits, services, and opportunities were assumed to belong to white people. Freedom, citizenship, education, voting rights, and so forth were for white people. Very slowly, over the years, this has been challenged and some changes have been made. Yet these have been limited. By analogy, adding sidewalks everywhere in Louisville would help, but the basic services of the city are still so spread out that having a car is far easier than walking.

Racism

Racism is the term for the ongoing effects of white supremacy. It refers to the systemic and structural ways that our society is still white-centered, white-dominant, and white-identified. It is an ongoing structure of society that gives advantage to whites at the expense of people of other racial groups. Racism is ingrained in almost every aspect of

our culture and society. It affects us all--positively or negatively, directly or indirectly--on a daily basis.

This definition of racism is structural and systemic. It does not apply to individuals and it is not concerned with personal feelings or attitudes. There are persons who believe that white people are better than others, who harbor ill feelings towards people of other racial groups, and who perceive others through the lens of racial stereotypes. These persons are prejudiced and bigoted.

Of course, bigotry and prejudice contribute to systemic racism. But the tendency to frame racism in terms of personal attitudes does, too. Focusing on the feelings of individuals prevents us from recognizing and addressing the economic, legal, and societal structures that benefit white people and disadvantage others. It can also lead us too quickly to absolve ourselves of responsibility to change these larger structures. To return to the car analogy, if one person perceives the problem and chooses to walk, bike, or ride the bus, this does not change the reality of Louisville's car-centered structure. Likewise, if one or even many people do not harbor racial prejudice or bigotry, this does not change the inherited structures of our society that are white-centered.

Note also that this definition precludes so-called "reverse racism" or racism among different racial groups. When blacks harbor prejudice against whites, or Latinas/Latinos are bigoted towards Asian Americans, this cannot be accurately called racism because it is not structural. There is no structure in the United States that gives power and advantage to blacks over whites, or to Latinas/Latinos over Asian Americans.

Finally, it is important to recognize racism as one of a number of structural hierarchies of power. Sexism refers to the ways in which our culture is male-centered, male-dominated, and male-identified (Johnson 1997). Historically, the economic, educational, legal, and social structures of the U.S. have been built for men. The ongoing effects of these structures grant power and advantage to men over women and transgender people. These various structures of racism, sexism, classism, and so forth connect and overlap. The term "intersectionality" is used to describe this. For example, a black woman occupies the space where racism and sexism intersect. The way racism disadvantages her will be influenced by the structures of sexism, and vice versa.

Biblically, we consider racism as a sin against God and against humanity. It is helpful to recall that Reformed theology includes an account of original sin (a state we find ourselves in regardless of our own choosing) and actual sin (particular ways of being in the world that make original sin concrete and break relationship with God and neighbor). Racism is the original sin of the United States. No one alive today created the system of white supremacy. Although we are neither responsible nor guilty for creating this system, we recognize it as part of our fallen state and as a violation of who we are meant to be together. Trusting in the grace of God, we confess the brokenness

that we inhabit. We can also confess that it inhabits us. Born and raised in a wider culture of racism, some of the prejudice and bigotry has seeped into our minds and hearts. For those who are white, the temptation simply not to see the advantages that we reap from a sinful system is often too great to resist. And we have not done enough to change the structures of our society together. For these actual sins, we also confess. All confession takes place within the sure knowledge of the grace of God, who is eager not only to forgive us, but to empower us to repent and change our ways.

Discussion questions

1. In what ways have you experienced racism directly or indirectly in your life? Each group member is invited to share his/her experience as they feel comfortable. [Leader's Note: Keep in mind of the sensitivity of the subject as it relates to one's past hurt and pain.]
2. Through your observation and/or experience, how do you think the church has handled such issue of racism in society and also in the church?
3. What are some obstacles and stumbling blocks that we must overcome in order for us to move toward the Beloved Community, the New Creation?
4. If you overheard a discriminating comments or racially insensitive jokes being made by one of your friends or someone from your church or at work, what actions would you take towards those who make those remarks?
5. What one small step can our church take in order to eradicate racism in our society and in our church?

Resources

The Racism Study Pack. Louisville, KY: The Thoughtful Christian, 2009.
Johnson, Allan G. *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997.
Doucot, Christopher. *Race, Class, and Gender*. Course taught at Central Connecticut State University, 2010.