



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Persistent Problem  
(*Racism*, pp. 11-18)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Race in Evangelical  
America  
(*Racism*, pp. 82-86)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# The Persistent Problem

While whites focus on creating good-intentioned, right thinking people, people of color focus on group equality and justice. Both are important, so they need not be at war. But our focus must be on working together to undo the racialized society, and that, by definition, is not just about individuals.

### Unison Prayer

Eternal God, you have reconciled a sinful world to yourself in Christ, and given your Church the ministry of reconciliation. In your new creation, everything old is passing away.

We confess that we have been slow to believe and follow you into the newness of your kingdom. We have feared and distrusted our brothers and sisters, allowing ourselves to be ruled by the divisions of race, gender, nation, and wealth that belong to the old order, which is passing away.

Holy and gracious God, pardon our sins and free our captive imaginations. Renew us in the power of your love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Galatians 3:27-29

### Reflection

Racism is such a persistent problem, in part, because we cannot even agree on what the problem is! “Whites tend to view racism as intended individual acts of overt prejudice and discrimination,” Michael Emerson observes. In this *individualist* definition, the core of a racist’s personality must be spiritually bent. No wonder, then, that to whites, being called “racist” is so very offensive. Most people of color, however, favor a *structuralist* view: “Racism is, at a minimum, prejudice plus power, and that power comes not from being a prejudiced individual, but from being part of a group that controls the nation’s systems.”

Why do whites tend not to notice the structural aspects of the problem? The reason may be found in what scholars call “white privilege,” which has the following three aspects:

- ▶ *White structural advantage* refers to those benefits in everyday life and institutional settings that come from having a white identity. Whites have an advantage because they “occupy the location of dominance—politically, economically, culturally, and numerically—within the racial hierarchy. They have disproportionate influence of political parties, legal system, government-controlled institutions, industry, and business.”
- ▶ *White normativity* makes the practices and beliefs of white culture standard or “just how things are” in a way that needs no social justification. Anything that diverges from this norm is deviant. So, to have access to power, one must act “white.”
- ▶ *White transparency* is a tendency of whites to not think about norms, practices, and beliefs that are white-specific. “Most whites are unaware that they are ‘raced,’ and that their race has real consequences for their lives. Rather, they believe that they earn what they get, and their achievements are nearly all based on individual effort, talent, and creativity.” This is a powerful tool for maintaining white advantage, for “how can one challenge



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white privilege if there is no such thing as white culture/white practices?" Emerson notes. "To be white means in part that one does not see the advantages garnered from being white, so any threats to taken-for-granted ways of life are indeed threatening and feel unjustified."

So, how can we move forward together toward racial reconciliation if white privilege often is invisible to whites, but as clear as day to people of color? Emerson suggests that we take the focus off of racism and put it where it belongs: our society is *racialized*, allocating what we value—"income, wealth, fine neighborhoods, quality schools, social status, respect, psychological well-being, health, life expectancy—unequally along racial lines."

To address this racialization problem, he is developing a Mutual Obligations Approach with George Yancey. It features "interracial contact under controlled conditions, listening to each other, acknowledging and defining racial problems, searching for a critical core that is agreed upon by all, giving voice to cultural uniqueness, recognizing and incorporating self- and group-interest, and devising ways that allow for negotiation of these self- and group-interests to produce an agreed upon solution." This approach may be local, messy, and difficult, but "it can be done," he concludes. "And with our undying hope in God's power and kingdom of heaven on earth, it will be done."

### Study Questions

1. Discuss how whites and people of color tend to define racism differently. Have you noticed this disparity in practice?
2. According to Michael Emerson, how do white structural advantage, normativity, and transparency work together to sustain whites' position at the top of society? How can they produce dominance without whites' feeling like it is true?
3. What evidence do you see of the racialization of American society? How do the elements of the Mutual Obligations Approach address the problem of racialization?
4. Edward Gilbreath notes, "it's no longer slavery, Jim Crow or organized discrimination that we're up against in our churches, ministries and society; it's an institutionalized racialization of religion that blinds us to the systemic issues of justice and reconciliation, even as it purports to bring us together." Yet, he firmly believes that "the church is the one institution that's best equipped to overcome racial divide."<sup>†</sup> Can both assertions be true?

### Departing Hymn: "O God of Creation, We See All around Us" (v. 3)

O God, by your Spirit, now give us a vision  
of life in your kingdom through Jesus your Son—  
where birthright and culture don't lead to division,  
your children are welcomed as members of one.  
God, now may we work with a new dedication  
for justice, equality, freedom and peace,  
until we are called to your great celebration  
and share at your table in your banquet feast.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2010)

Tune: ASH GROVE

<sup>†</sup> Edward Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 174 and 21.

# The Persistent Problem

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To discuss how racial groups, on average, define racism in different ways.
2. To consider how the elements of racial privilege – structural advantage, normativity, and transparency – can work together to produce whites’ dominance in society without their feeling it is true.
3. To articulate the persistent problem as the racialization of society.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Racism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. The departing hymn “O God of Creation, We See All around Us” is sung to the familiar melody ASH GROVE, which can be found in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Story

For most racial groups, we know there is a highly offensive, derogatory word meant to belittle them. Is there such a word for white Americans? “When I ask my students this question – no matter their hue – they are befuddled,” sociologist Michael Emerson notes. “‘Honky’ or ‘cracker’ seem nothing more than funny-sounding words to them. Any words they can think of simply do not feel offensive or highly derogatory. Such words are all bark, and no bite.

“Then I point out to my students that indeed there is such a word, one that will get whites’ blood boiling in a heartbeat. That word? ‘Racist.’ Call a white American a racist and that person will be angered, the pulse will increase, and the skin will redden. Almost as if by instinct, the accused will lash out at the accuser, either with strong denial or with name calling of his or her own.”

“Why is this word so upsetting to so many white Americans?” Emerson asks (*Racism*, p. 11). To answer that question, he explores how different racial groups, on average, define racism differently. This difference of meaning, it turns out, is one reason why racism is a persistent problem in our society.

## Unison Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer in the study guide in unison.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Galatians 3:27-29 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

To begin this study of the persistent problem of race in the United States, Michael Emerson refocuses our attention on the racialization of society, rather than racism. This is important because racism is a contested concept among racial groups: whites usually give an *individualist* definition and people of color adopt a *structuralist* account of racism. Racial groups cannot work together toward a solution when they fundamentally disagree on the nature of the problem. Yet, all can agree society is racialized in that many valuable things are

unevenly distributed along racial lines. In a racialized society, “race matters considerably for people’s identities, whom they know, where they live, whom they marry, and their life chances.” He says that white privilege – a combination of white structural advantage, normativity, and transparency – reinforces whites’ dominance in society, but disguises from them the racialization of society.

### Study Questions

1. Michael Emerson cites research that shows “Whites tend to view racism as intended individual acts of overt prejudice and discrimination.” According to this *individualist view*, “Groups, nations, and organizations are not racist; people are. Second, to be considered racist, the person must classify a group of people as inferior to others, and then whatever they say or do must result directly from that view. That is, they must mean for their actions to be racist for them to actually be racist. Third, racism is equated with prejudice (wrong thinking and talking about others) and individual discrimination (wrong actions against others). Finally, because of the other components of racism’s definition, if a person is a racist it is a master status, a core identity of who the person is, not just some passing act. In short, it defines the person’s essence.” (Interestingly, this individualist definition of racism is even more strongly held by white evangelical Christians than by other whites.)

Most people of color, on the other hand, give a *structuralist definition*. “Racism is, at a minimum, prejudice plus power, and that power comes not from being a prejudiced individual, but from being part of a group that controls the nation’s systems. So while anyone can be prejudiced, only whites can perpetrate racism in the United States, for they hold and have always held most of the power in American institutions.”

2. After reviewing the definitions of white structural advantage, normativity, and transparency that are given in the study guide, invite three groups to brainstorm everyday actions and institutional settings that illustrate these three dimensions of white privilege.

Members might discuss the class assignment that Emerson gives students in his race and ethnic relations course: “For the next twenty-four hours, any time you refer to someone who is white, preface it with the word white. So if you are telling someone about your professor, say ‘my white professor.’ If you are talking about your friend, say ‘my white friend.’ After the twenty-four hours are completed, write a paper about your experience. How did you feel? What were people’s reactions?” Emerson reports that students of color usually say this is not unusual to do, but white students typically find it difficult to do. How does this activity challenge white transparency and undermine white normativity?

3. “White Americans have on average ten times the wealth of black and Hispanic Americans,” Emerson writes. “That superior wealth allows white Americans to obtain the finest of neighborhoods, the best of educations, and access to many other social goods that help them pass on their advantages to their children. It allows them to help one another out in ways impossible for other groups. We can summarize it this way: What does it cost to be black, Hispanic, or American Indian in the racialized society? On average, about 40% of your income, 90% of your wealth, and five to ten years of your life.” Encourage members to give evidence from personal experience of the unequal distribution of income, wealth, fine neighborhoods, quality schools, social status, respect, psychological well-being, health, or life expectancy along racial lines.
4. Discuss evidence of racialization – unequal distribution of status, responsibilities, opportunities, and resources along racial lines – in your congregation or other Christian organizations and institutions. Are systemic issues of racial justice and reconciliation regularly identified and addressed? Three studies in this series – “Christian Practices for the Journey toward Shalom,” “Let’s Get it Together: Multiethnic Congregations,” and “Avoiding Racism in Starting New Congregations” – explore responses to racialization in Christian communities.

### Departing Hymn

“O God of Creation, We See All around Us” can be found on pp. 37-39 of *Racism*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.