



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Avoiding Racism  
in Starting New  
Congregations  
(*Racism*, pp. 75-81)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Apostle to the Gentiles  
(*Racism*, pp. 50-51)

### 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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# Avoiding Racism in Starting New Congregations

A distorted culture is always at the heart of racism, prompting us to react to people of other cultures in ethnocentric ways. How is our ethnocentrism—expressed in the homogeneous unit principle that says “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers”—infecting the practice of starting new congregations in the United States?

### Responsive Prayer

Faithful God, gather us together!

**We have been scattered and divided.**

Gracious God, gather us together!

**Your people, the humble, forgiven people you have chosen to bear your good news, have come to this place to study your word and sing your praises. Amen.**

### Scripture Reading: Revelation 7:9-12

### Reflection

When the prophet John glimpses the worship of God that continually goes on in heaven, he sees “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Revelation 7:9). Congregations here and now should be preparing disciples to join in that “noisy, multicultural community” of worship, Damian Emetuche writes. “In God’s kingdom there is no room for individualistic faith. We are a family.”

Too often, however, our best efforts to welcome different people groups to share in God’s kingdom have been marred by ethnocentrism—the attitude that one’s own people group and cultural ways are superior. We see this in the history of missions. “The West accepted the gospel and correctly contextualized it to fit the Greco-Roman mindset,” Emetuche notes. But when Western missionaries planted churches worldwide, “indigenous churches were never given the opportunity to contextualize the gospel in their culture.”

As we share the gospel with new immigrants in America, ethnocentrism continues to distort church planting when we:

- ▶ *embrace the homogenous unit principle.* A leading church-growth strategist advises, “When marked differences of color, stature, income, cleanliness, and education are present, unbelievers understand the gospel better when expounded by their own kind of people. They prefer to join churches whose members look, talk, and act like themselves.”

This approach is not biblical, Emetuche objects. It appeals to our fallen cultural sensitivity: “we resist integration across racial, ethnic, and class barriers because we cherish personal freedom and individualism.” Not only have white church planters embraced this principle, but also “Non-Caucasians, in reaction to the racialized culture of the American church, have planted immigrant and ethnic congregations. Many of these...are not much more than subculture social organizations which further segregate the people of faith.”

- ▶ *inadequately fund nonwhite church planters.* While it is difficult for any church planter to secure ministry partners, nonwhite planters



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have the most trouble, Emetuche reports. "Most ethnic planters suffer financial hardship, and many work odd jobs to support their families." Gary Irby, the Puget Sound Baptist Association director of church planting, notes, "Just as denying the existence of racism is the strongest support of perpetuating it, the lack of awareness about the inequity in funding is one of the biggest issues in overcoming it."

► *fail to include people of color in leadership positions.* The decision-making bodies of most churches "continue to be largely under the direction of the descendants of Europeans," Margaret Guider has written. "They set the standards of behavior considered to be normative, if not superior, and these standards continue to be those by which the behaviors of other groups are judged. When talking about racism, the descendants of European immigrants often define reality incorrectly. As the beneficiaries of racism, they fail to understand that the 'problem' tends to be constructed in ways that repeatedly overlook the dynamics of racial privilege."

Since our best intentioned "attitudes and actions often are embedded in unacknowledged ethnocentrism," Emetuche concludes, "we need vigilant circumspection and correction by our brothers and sisters in Christ in order to recognize and repent from racist thoughts, words, and actions."

### Study Questions

1. What are some specific ways that ethnocentrism distorted church planting by Western missionaries after the rise of Western political states and spread of colonization?
2. Discuss the homogenous unit principle and how it has shaped church-planting and church-growth strategies in the United States. Do you agree with this application?
3. As people accept the gospel, they must "correctly contextualize" it in their culture, Damian Emetuche notes. How would you apply this principle to church planting in a multiethnic culture like the United States?
4. Why, according to Emetuche, should more people of color be included in American church leadership positions?
5. Emetuche sees the Apostle Paul as a model of sharing the gospel across racial, ethnic, and class barriers. How is the difficulty of Paul's mission foreshadowed in Caravaggio's painting, *The Conversion of St. Paul* (on the cover of *Racism*)?

### Departing Hymn: "Come, Let Us Join Our Cheerful Songs" (vv. 1 and 5)

Come, let us join our cheerful songs  
with angels round the throne.  
Ten thousand thousand are their tongues,  
but all their joys are one.

The whole creation join in one,  
to bless the sacred name  
of him who sits upon the throne,  
and to adore the Lamb.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Suggested Tunes: GRÄFENBERG or ST. ANNE

# Avoiding Racism in Starting New Congregations

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Responsive Prayer	Responsive Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2, 3, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider how distorted missionary activities during the period of Western colonialism.
2. To review how racism, and ethnocentrism more generally, continue to distort church-planting strategies in the United States.
3. To discuss how Caravaggio depicts the personal sacrifice of the Apostle Paul in communicating the gospel across racial, ethnic, and class boundaries.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 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 the suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Come, Let Us Join Our Cheerful Songs” locate one of the familiar tunes GRÄFENBERG or ST. ANNE 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

Damian Emetuche recounts the story of a “full-time Hispanic pastor in a congregation in which the Hispanic membership was spiritually vibrant and growing as new converts were baptized. In the same congregation, a part-time Anglo pastor served the Anglo portion of the congregation which unfortunately was dwindling in numbers and experiencing no spiritual growth. Yet, the church placed the Anglo pastor on a salary of over \$4,000 a month, while the hard working, full-time Hispanic pastor received less than \$2,000 a month. The Hispanic pastor discovered what was happening only when the bookkeeper of the church made a mistake and sent the wrong payment voucher to him. When the Hispanic pastor tearfully confronted his colleague, the Anglo pastor pretended he was not aware of his financial difficulties. The Hispanic minister asked him, ‘Is it because I am not white?’” (*Racism*, 79).

This sort of racial insensitivity and lack of financial support for ethnic church planters is all too common, Emetuche warns. It is just one of the ways that ethnocentrism continues to distort our efforts to share the gospel with new immigrants in America.

## Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the responsive prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Revelation 7:9-12 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

In this study Damian Emetuche explores how ethnocentrism can distort our sharing the gospel across racial, ethnic, and class boundaries. Focusing on his area of expertise, church planting in cosmopolitan areas of the United States, he describes three manifestations of ethnocentrism – using the homogeneous unit principle to guide church starts, unequal pay for nonwhite church planters, and inadequate representation of nonwhites

in denominational leadership positions. Your group might discuss how the three problems are manifest in other church contexts as well.

Gauge the group's interest in starting a multiethnic congregation. Several books reviewed by Kersten Bayt Priest in "Let's Get It Together: Multiracial and Interethnic Congregations" would be appropriate for follow-up studies.

### **Study Questions**

1. Damian Emetuche notes that missionaries changed indigenous names to English, Greek, or Hebrew even when native names were more theologically sound, and used Western music and translations of Western hymns in worship. Members may mention other ethnocentric practices such as missionaries leading indigenous churches and seminaries, using Western garb, importing factional jealousies among denominations, etc. "While the missionaries may have been versed in the Scriptures, they did not understand the people they were called to served, and this led to their message not being understood by the people," he concludes.
2. The homogenous unit principle states that "People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers." Some church-growth strategists and church planters have interpreted this to mean that building monoethnic congregations is the most efficient use of limited resources. "Yet this does not follow the guidance of the New Testament, in which there are no homogeneous new congregations. The Jerusalem church in Acts 2 consisted of Jews from more than fifteen nations, and Gentile proselytes. The Antioch church in Acts 13 was a multicultural congregation of Jews and Gentiles. All of the Pauline house churches were located in strategic cosmopolitan centers and their members were drawn from diverse ethnic backgrounds and social standings," Emetuche objects. "This principle does no harm, of course, when it is applied in the settings of homogenous tribes – because there are no competing cultures and no part of the population is left out or discriminated against. But to apply the homogeneous unit principle in modern cosmopolitan centers today to violate the New Testament model."
3. When people groups are encouraged to properly contextualize the gospel in their cultures, they might form monoethnic congregations. If so, this contextualization principle will stand in some tension with Emetuche's rejection of the homogenous unit principle. While he does not address this tension explicitly, Emetuche might respond by pointing out that he is talking about church planting and growth in "modern cosmopolitan centers" where people of various ethnic backgrounds already live, play, and work together. Thus, contextualizing the gospel in their multiethnic community would lead to a multiethnic church.  
The practical problem in forming a healthy multiethnic congregation remains how members can respect various cultural styles in worship, leadership, and Christian practices. This is a heavy burden to place on new Christians. Is it another reason for mature Christian congregations to lead the way in producing working models of multiethnic churches?
4. Due to the dynamics of racial privilege, white leaders may fail to recognize the racialized nature of church policies and structures. The story of the underpaid ethnic church planter and Gary Irby's observations illustrate the problem. People of color who are formed in Godly wisdom may provide a corrective vision to the leadership of a church or denomination.
5. "Caravaggio painted *The Conversion of St. Paul* as a pair with *Crucifixion of St. Peter* to establish a theme of suffering," says Heidi Hornik. "The suffering of Peter, the apostle to the Jews, as he is crucified upside down on a cross is immediately apparent. As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul endured suffering and ridicule as he took the gospel to those outside the Jewish faith." The artist foreshadows Paul's suffering by showing him knocked on his back and almost into our space, and his commission to the Gentiles by the Roman garb he wears.

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.