

# Equipping the White Church to Pursue Racial Reconciliation

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23 April 2017

Some material included in this thesis was previously submitted to meet the requirements for the following MAICD Course(s): GLST 5503 Culture Studies in a Global Context, GLST 5313 Community Development, GLST 5673 Globalization and Development, GLST 5203 Spirituality, Culture, and Social Justice, GLST 6423/Environmental and Social Justice, GLST 5153 Research for Social Change, GLST 5923 Fieldwork, GLST 5962 Practicum IV, and GLST 5972 Practicum V.

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## **Introduction**

Our society is divided. Race lines have been drawn, creating tension, anger, hurt, and injustice. Black people are suffering because of racial barriers, and the white Church remains ignorant of the existing racial injustices and the role our white privilege plays in these issues. Thankfully, Jesus is moving in our society by His Spirit and through his people, and we can follow his lead in pursuing racial reconciliation.

Jesus calls us to be reconcilers. Throughout Scripture, we see the Lord reconciling His people to Himself. Because the Lord reconciled us to Himself, we must be proactive in removing the racial barriers that exist in our society and in seeking reconciliation.

In order for the white Church to engage in racial reconciliation, we must first acknowledge the existing injustices and brokenness of our world, repent, and then pursue racial justice and forgiveness. Reconciliation cannot take place until the white Church recognizes racial injustice as well as our own privilege and implicit biases; only then can we as white believers follow Jesus' lead in pursuing justice for all. Drawing on the experiences and testimonies of pastors, church congregants, and community members of different ethnicities, I will identify existing racial injustices and provide steps the white Church can take in seeking justice. I will offer an accurate description of current racial injustices and explain the role white privilege and implicit bias play in these injustices. I will discuss a biblical view of reconciliation and justice, the realities of white privilege, the history of racism in America, and practical steps the white Church can take towards racial reconciliation.

## **Defining Reconciliation**

Last summer, I met with Keith Jenkins, a black pastor in Los Angeles, who opened my eyes to the racism that still exists in the United States. Before our conversation, I believed overt racism had ended with the Civil Rights Movement. I could not have been more wrong. Black people in America face injustices daily and white privilege further oppresses them.

Through Keith, the Lord opened my eyes to see that the black community in America is hurting and our society is not taking them or their pain seriously. People are oblivious to racism and their ignorance is negatively impacting many lives. Disregarded and overlooked, white privilege only perpetuates injustice. During this conversation, I realized I have the power to make a change, and I desire to use my white privilege to bring awareness to racial injustice.

The white Church needs to be involved in ending racism in America. We must be part of the solution to the current racial injustices and give a voice to our hurting brothers and sisters. By modeling our lives after Jesus, taking the Lord's command to love our neighbor seriously, and using our privilege as a platform to advocate for the black community, the white Church can begin to move towards reconciliation and healing.

In order for the white Church to move towards racial reconciliation, we must first define the word "reconciliation." Defining the word will provide a depth of understanding for the white Church to use as a stepping-stone towards racial reconciliation.

"Reconciliation" carries undertones and implications for each of us depending on our race and our background. During my fieldwork, I found that the word "reconciliation" had specific connotations, both positive and negative, for each individual I interviewed. When considering the idea of racial reconciliation, I found that most people became frustrated; both black and white stakeholders felt that reconciliation required apologies for actions for which



neither group felt responsible. Suffering from oppression, most black stakeholders hoped to see the white community apologize, while the majority of white stakeholders did not feel personally involved in the injustices, and, therefore, did not feel the need to apologize. Reconciliation, however, demands action from both groups.

Reconciliation is when we come alongside those who are different than us and humbly approach the common ground Jesus created on the cross for every man and woman. It involves setting aside our pride and our own agenda in order to repent, forgive, and restore broken relationships. For reconciliation to take place, both black and white people must acknowledge the other's grievances and hurt and be willing to take steps towards restoration. Reconciliation requires humility from everyone involved. Miroslav Volf acknowledges the importance of listening to the viewpoint and opinions of the other. He contends, "We enlarge our thinking by letting the voices and perspectives of others, especially those with whom we may be in conflict, resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us see them, as well as ourselves, from their perspective, and if needed, readjust our perspectives as we take into account their perspectives" (213). To pursue reconciliation, we must be willing to respectfully listen to people who are different than us. By setting aside our own judgments and preconceived notions, we have the opportunity to mature and learn new opinions and worldviews that have the potential to change our own ways of thinking and living. We must choose daily to humble ourselves and listen to the other group involved.

When God created us, He made us partners with Him in causing the world to flourish. We have a responsibility to take care of His creation and to help those around us grow. An important piece of reconciliation is addressing this intrinsic longing within each of us to see creation thrive by seeking to see healing and flourishing within relationships. In *Roadmap to*

*Reconciliation*, Brenda Salter McNeil defines reconciliation as “an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect God’s original intention for all creation to flourish” (22). White Christians must choose each day to seek restoration in relationships to help each other prosper.

Choosing each day to love people and approach them with grace, no matter our differences, leads to embrace and reconciliation. The white Church has to be willing to humbly approach the black community as their brothers and sisters in Christ and be prepared to listen to their perspectives, hurts, and opinions. This act of humility and embrace must happen to begin the reconciliation process; it will pave the way for healing and restoration between the black community and the white Church.

### **Biblical View of Reconciliation**

Racial reconciliation begins at the cross. On the cross, Christ united us to himself and to each other. When Jesus died on the cross, he took each of our sins and bore the wrath of God for them. Sin once separated us from God, but because of Jesus’ sacrifice, God now sees us as His perfect Son. Through Jesus, the Lord mercifully reconciled us to Himself, even though we did not deserve it. Since we have been so graciously saved and reconciled, the Church must make reconciliation a priority.

In order to be reconcilers and understand why white Christians must seek reconciliation, we have to first understand the theological roots of reconciliation. When we take a deeper look into Scripture and see what the Lord says about reconciliation and removing barriers, we gain a better understanding of the importance and necessity of reconciliation. In Ephesians 2, Paul states the following:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 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, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (*English Standard Version*, Eph. 2:13-16)

In this passage of Scripture, we see that God not only wants to reconcile us to Himself, but He also desires reconciliation between opposing groups of people such as the Gentiles and the Jews. We see this evidenced in verse 14, which states, “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.” In the first part of this verse, we see that Jesus was a peace offering, reconciling the Jews and the Gentiles. He “made both one,” uniting the two groups of people, and he broke down “the dividing wall of hostility,” removing any existing barriers. Jesus, through his sacrifice on the cross, tore down the dividing wall between the Gentiles and the Jews; therefore, the cross is our common ground, the place where every group of people, no matter how different, can come together and find peace. Jesus died for all of us, not one race or one people group. We all have equal access to God. If the white Church chooses to ignore racial injustice and not seek reconciliation, we are choosing to deny the Gospel.

In the article “Ephesians 2:13-16: Are the Barriers Still Broken Down?” author Bertram L. Melbourne explains how the church must seek reconciliation because of Jesus’s work on the cross. Melbourne writes, “The church must be that place where hostility and alienation are crushed because the barriers have been broken down. It should be the place

where love and acceptance reign” (116). On the cross, Jesus erased years of hostility between two different groups of people. Jesus, our peace, created a place of unity. Therefore, the church must display the peace of Christ and seek reconciliation.

In addition to Ephesians 2, we see Jesus eradicating cultural and racial barriers in John 4 through the account of the woman at the well. In this chapter, we discover that Jesus was leaving the Judean countryside to head to Galilee. Jews traveling from Judea to Galilee would typically cross the Jordan River and travel east of Samaria because they despised the Samaritans (*Archaeological Study Bible*). Jesus, however, being obedient to his Father, chose to travel directly through Samaria where he encountered a Samaritan woman at a well in Sychar. By being obedient to his Father and entering Samaria, Jesus showed us the importance of breaking down cultural and racial barriers. Through sharing spiritual truths with the Samaritan woman, Jesus radically changed her life and the lives of many in the town of Sychar. This passage from Scripture encourages us to be obedient to God, to break down barriers, and love people as Jesus did.

The Lord calls us to be reconcilers. Time and time again, we see Jesus bridging the gap between people of different cultures, races, and social and economic statuses. While we might recognize in Scripture that Jesus desires restoration and reconciliation in relationships, it can be difficult for us to follow his example. Pride, ignorance, and indifference stall us. If we as the Church are to truly seek reconciliation, we must go beyond just acknowledging Jesus’ reconciliatory work and put his teachings into practice. The world needs us. The world needs the church. We must be willing to walk through Samaria.

## **Biblical View of Justice**

Through Jesus' crucifixion, the Lord demonstrated his justice and mercy. When we deserved punishment and death, He acted justly and mercifully, sacrificing His Son in our place. Jesus paid the ultimate price for us and wiped our slates clean. Because Jesus achieved justice for us, how can we as Christians, in turn, not seek justice for others?

Throughout Scripture, we see God's heart for justice for the poor and oppressed. Justice is sacrificing our own agenda to take care of and meet the needs of the vulnerable in our society. Justice moves beyond empathizing with the oppressed; it demands action. To seek justice for other people, we have to generously serve them, protect them, and change the social structures that are oppressing them. Currently, most white Christians are not seeking justice for the oppressed black community. White people might be upset about racial injustice, but they need to allow their emotions to propel them to action.

Oftentimes, when it comes to pursuing racial justice, our pride, "moral circle," and inhumanization keep us from pursuing justice (Beck 99). We become comfortable with groups of people who are similar to us, and we begin to view people outside of this circle as inferior and less human (100). In *Unclean*, author Richard Beck states, "We treat those inside the moral circle with love, affection, and mercy, and those outside the moral circle with indifference, hostility, or pragmatism" (101). The white Church cannot succumb to this mindset or treatment of the black community. Jesus died for each of us and achieved justice for all, so we do not have the right to decide who will continue to suffer and who will not. Daniel Groody contends, "From a Christian perspective, whenever a community ceases to care for the most vulnerable members of society, its spiritual integrity falls apart" (loc. 1239). If we are going to claim to be Christians, we need to care for the defenseless and the vulnerable in our society. Christ did not overlook or disregard

those in need, so neither can we. White Christians can no longer ignore the oppressed black community; we have a Biblical mandate to pursue justice for all of the poor and oppressed.

The Lord clearly calls us to love one another and to pursue justice. Micah 6:8 states, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (*New International Version*, Micah 6:8). In this passage of Scripture, the Hebrew word for “mercy” is *chesedh*, referring to God’s unconditional mercy and grace, and the Hebrew word for “justly” or “justice” is *mishpat*, meaning to treat everyone equitably, to give people their rights, and to “[give] people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care” (Keller 3). Here, we see an intertwining of mercy and justice; to walk humbly with God, our response to His mercy and grace towards us should be to seek justice.

Throughout the Old Testament, we also see the Hebrew word *tzadeqah* used in reference to being just. While *mishpat* involves administering punishment or protection, *tzadeqah* literally means “righteousness” or “justice” and emphasizes being in right relationship with God and people (Keller 7). In *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*, author and pastor Tim Keller explains how a Biblical view of justice is more than just taking care of the poor; justice involves right relationships. Keller writes, “But in the Bible *tzadeqah* refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts all relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity, and equity” (7). When sin entered the world, it distorted our relationship with God and with people. Our relationships are now broken, and out of that sin and brokenness, comes injustice. Julie Clawson, in *Everyday Justice*, explains the impact of this brokenness on our relationships. She states, “Whether we intend to or not, our everyday actions hurt others and damage those relationships. Through anger and malice, self-centeredness and greed, we deny the image of

God in others and fail to reflect God's love to them. We treat others unfairly or unequally, using them as objects that can be exploited for personal gain" (loc. 169). To seek justice, we must recognize the image of God in the people around us and love them as our brothers and sisters. Justice is when we put our love and compassion into action and treat people as children of God.

To seek justice today, white Christians need to live out a combination of *mishpat* and *tzadeqah*, actively giving people their rights, protecting the vulnerable, and seeking right relationship with God and with others. The white Church cannot begin to pursue racial reconciliation without an understanding of Biblical justice. Justice demands that white Christians make caring for the black community and extending to them God's love a priority.

### **Historical Roots of Racism**

In order to address racism today in the white Church, we must have a better understanding of the history and development of racism in our society. In this section, I will discuss the historical roots of racism; more specifically, I will discuss some of the major events regarding racism that have occurred in the United States' history. Studying our nation's history and the development of racism can help us identify particular events and actions that have perpetuated racism as well as events that have moved us towards restoration. Racism is a systemic issue. If we are to uproot racism, we have to first see how it has grown. Reviewing our history can help white Christians recognize specific actions that have and have not been successful in regard to racial reconciliation. In his lecture "The Half-Life of Freedom: Race and Justice in America Today," Professor Jelani Cobb acknowledges the importance of understanding racism in our country's history. Cobb states, regarding the historical roots of racism in America, "It's not simply an issue...we can't fundamentally understand how the country came into existence or what the country is without looking at this subject" (Cobb). Many

of the issues surrounding racial tensions today are rooted in our country's history; we cannot move forward and properly address today's injustices until we understand what has happened previously.

Memory and remembrance of the past can give us hope and compel us towards action. When we take a closer look at Scripture, we see the impact remembrance has on God's people and their future. Deuteronomy 8:2 states, "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands" (*New International Version*, Deut. 8:2). Here, we see that God wants His people to remember how He has provided and cared for them; remembering causes us to dwell on God's faithfulness and grace. John Drane, in "Remembrance: A Biblical Perspective," writes, "The constant theme of the Bible is that remembering the past is not about dwelling on human shortcomings, but about divine grace and the possibility of new life" (12). Memory and recalling the past allows us to remember God's faithfulness in our own lives and gives us hope for the future. We can acknowledge past mistakes and failures, but ultimately, remembrance leads us towards a better future.

Just as God calls the Israelites to remember, we, too, should remember. Doing so can help us to identify mistakes and injustices from our past and compel us to trust the Lord with our future. Through remembrance, we can claim a better future.

#### *Slavery In North America And The Civil War*

As European settlers began to establish colonies in America, and as labor needs grew, the African slave population in the United States began to grow exponentially. In *American Slavery: 1619-1877*, Peter Kolchin describes this growth of slavery. He states, "It grew like a cancer, at first slowly, almost imperceptibly, then inexorably, as colonists eager for material gain imported



hundreds of thousands of Africans to toil in their fields” (4). As colonies continued to grow and spread throughout America, the number of slaves grew for the next two centuries. According to Gabriel Stepto in “African Americans and the Civil War,” slavery remained and continued to grow into the 19th century, eventually dividing the United States: the Union opposed slavery, while the Confederacy was dependent on slavery for their economy (169). While the Civil War ended with the Union triumphing over the Confederacy, the struggle for freedom continued for black slaves. Even with the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, racism and a lack of rights still existed.

Understanding the origins of slavery in North America helps us to better understand racism today. By reviewing history, we see an overwhelming contradiction in America’s foundation: those enslaved paid the price for others’ freedom. In “Origins of American Slavery,” Philip D Morgan states the following:

The stark polarity between freedom and bondage became glaringly evident, for the debasement of slaves liberated others to take control of their destiny and to dream of liberty and equality. This profound contradiction lay at the heart of the United States, a country conceived in freedom but based on slavery. The American dream always had its dark underside. (56)

History shows the origin and growth of racism in the United States. While several Executive Orders have attempted to create equality for blacks and whites, our nation’s foundation was not created with equality in mind. Therefore, we still have racial issues today.

In my interview with Keith Jenkins, he elaborated on America’s constitutional issues concerning racism. Keith explained, “When the black culture laments, it’s 300 years in the making. It’s historic. It is not an incident or a momentary event. It’s, ‘Here we go again.’ The

system was never geared toward equality for [black people]. It started in a place where, constitutionally, we weren't human. The constitution wasn't set up for us" (Jenkins). Throughout American history, the black community has faced injustice, racism, and inequality. Keith helped me to see that black people still face these injustices today. Our nation's foundation was built on racist ideas and systems, and these structures have not been changed. Racism is still a systemic issue.

### *Jim Crow*

After the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era, state and local laws enforced segregation in the South; these laws became known as the Jim Crow laws. These laws forced proprietors to have separate spaces for blacks and whites in their businesses, banned intermarriage, forced blacks and whites to sit separately on buses, and demanded separation of black and white students in schools. The Jim Crow laws gave all power and authority to the white community. According to "Jim Crow" in the Encyclopedia of Race and Racism, during the Jim Crow period, "Blacks lost many of the civil rights and liberties they had gained during Reconstruction... antiblack violence, lynching, segregation, legal racial discrimination, and expressions of white supremacy were the order of the day" (Kamalu 19). During this time period, whites viewed the black community as second-class citizens, and society sentenced black citizens to inferior treatment. Racism during the Jim Crow era was, arguably, worse than any other time period in American history in the South.

### *The Civil Rights Movement*

Roosevelt Rumble, a black man, was born in 1960 and grew up in Birmingham, Alabama. The following is just a glimpse into his childhood during the Civil Rights Movement:

I've seen a lot. I was right in the middle of things. I went to 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist church. I was in preschool, just a few blocks from where the bombing was at that Baptist church. I remember when Dr. King got shot and was assassinated. I grew up around the legacy of him...you know you're six years old and you're sitting there talking to your grandpa about Dr. King. There were times where I thought my dad would be going hunting, but he would actually be doing block watch, shot gun block watch. There were these white guys throwing what they'd call cherry-picker bombs into our neighborhood. What'd they do is they'd throw one cherry-picker bomb, and people would go out to see if anyone got hurt, and then you'd be out there looking and another one would go off. It seemed like a scene from a movie you'd see. It'd be the KKK or greaser-lookin' white guys with confederate flags in their trucks. (Rumble)

The American Civil Rights Movement was a large, non-violent, protest movement in the South, opposing racial-segregation, inequality, and discrimination. Clayborne Carson, in "American Civil Rights Movement," explains that during the 1950s and 1960s, civil rights activists used civil disobedience and non-violent protests to bring about change (4). During this time, well-known leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks emerged. The Civil Rights Movement eventually led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which according to the Library of Congress, "prohibited discrimination in the workplace, public accommodations, public facilities, and agencies receiving federal funds, and strengthened prohibitions on school segregation and discrimination in voter registration" (Rauh). The Civil Rights Movement led to a decline in overt racial discrimination and repression.

*The New Jim Crow*

History books tell us that the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 abolished the Jim Crow laws, but in reality, there is a new version of Jim Crow that exists today. In *The New Jim Crow*, author Michelle Alexander explains the re-birth of a racial caste-system in the United States, a system that uses the War on Drugs to discriminate against African-American males (5). Alexander writes the following about the realities of our criminal justice system:

Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color “criminals” and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you’re labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal. (2)

Here, Alexander acknowledges how the U.S. criminal justice system targets African-American males and removes their civil rights. This is not fair or just. Our justice system has allowed racism and stereotypes to affect their decisions and actions. The color of a person’s skin should not impact a judge’s decision to incarcerate them or strip them of their civil rights. History claims that the Civil Rights Act abolished the Jim Crow laws, but they still exist today, just in a different, more hidden, form.

If the white Church is to seek restoration in their relationship with the black community, they need to have a better understanding of our nation’s history and the development of racism. When we examine America’s history, we recognize how our country originated with racist systems and ideas. This racism still exists today and our nation’s systems still do not have

equality for black people in mind. The white Church needs to step up and fight for equality for the black community.

### **The White Church's Role In Racial Reconciliation**

As Christians, God calls us to be reconcilers. He also commands that we “go and make disciples of all nations” and of all ethnicities (*New International Version*, Matt. 28:19). This truth should encourage us to seek racial reconciliation and to strive for unity and the removal of racial barriers within the Church. The white Church has a vital part to play in racial reconciliation, but we must start by acknowledging our own privilege and our role in racial injustice. Only then, can we take steps forward to seek justice.

In this section, I will explore practical steps the White Church can take in racial reconciliation, including the following: identifying existing injustices, acknowledging our White privilege and implicit biases, repentance, praying for people suffering from systemic injustices, seeking ethnic diversity in our relationships, raising awareness and advocating for those suffering from injustice.

#### *Identifying Existing Injustices*

Unfortunately, racism is prevalent in our society. Unfair wages, inequitable workplaces, and inequality in the education and justice systems demonstrate racial injustice. Recognizing and admitting that these injustices are real and impact a large portion of the American population is the starting place for the white Church. If we do not understand or accept the root of the problem and the systemic injustices, we cannot begin to seek solutions and reconciliation.

If the Church is to participate in racial reconciliation, we have to first be aware that a problem exists. In *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda states, “To repent of structural evil, we must recognize it” (xvii). Reconciliation

starts with awareness. During my fieldwork, I discovered that many white people are unaware of racial injustices or do not think they actually exist. This ignorance disturbs me because it is perpetuating racism in our society. We cannot fight an injustice if we do not know that it exists. If white people are not aware that racism and injustice are real, then they will never seek justice. Therefore, the church must help identify injustice so that we can counter it.

Moe-Lobeda contends that “critical mystical vision”—acknowledging injustice, being hopeful for change, and recognizing God is with us— “offers a framework in which to acknowledge structural evil, name it, and counter it with its opposite: justice-making love” (xviii). Moe-Lobeda teaches us to start by recognizing injustice, hoping for a better future without injustice, and then partnering with God in His redemptive work.

During my interview with Roosevelt Rumble, he shared with me some of the injustices he experiences as a black man. The following is an excerpt from my interview with Roosevelt:

I ask people all the time, “Are you sure you’re not racist? So, how would you feel if your daughter came home with a black guy?” Could they honestly say they’re not racist? I’ve been in places where I have felt people asking, “Why is this guy here?” You and I could go into a store, a business we’ve never dealt with, and we’ll go in, and I guarantee you that as a white female, you’ll get more positive attention, and anything I said, they’d look to you to confirm it. If I’m speaking and say, “I have a great idea,” they’ll look to you to double check. If I’m with my wife and share a story, their eyes will go to Theresa, my white wife, to check to see if I’m lying. There’s something I’ve never wanted to accept. When I was in school, it always seemed like people were saying, “Oh here comes the black guys.” There’s a shadow that’s presented before black guys. I even experienced it in the military. I mean, I had a lieutenant one time, I was standing in the middle of the

hall, shootin' the breeze with four black guys, and he said "Uh oh, the brothers in the hall, they're up to something." (Rumble)

Roosevelt's experiences and the racism that he still faces today anger me. Because of his skin color, people question his motives and doubt him. Decades of societal and historical racism negatively impact Roosevelt's every day life. This reality is not fair.

In my conversation with Aloysia Tennial, a young black woman, she shared the following experience from when she was a teenager:

I was sixteen years old and working at McDonalds. I was working at the cash register, taking orders, when an old, white man came up to the counter. He looked at me and said, "I don't want you to serve me." You know, it might not have even been a racism thing, and I want to give him the benefit of the doubt, but deep down, I felt like his problem was with the color of my skin. (Tennial)

Even if the older man's problem was not related to race or Aloysia's skin color, the fact that she had to consider whether or not race was the issue demonstrates that racism is a systemic issue in our society. Aloysia should not have been in a position where she was wondering or worrying if her skin color was an issue. But, unfortunately, this encounter left her contemplating whether or not racism was the root of the problem. Aloysia's skin color should not determine the way people treat her. She is a kind, loving, beautiful, young woman. God created her in His image and she has inherent value; therefore, she deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. The white Church needs to model Jesus for our society by treating everyone equally and respectfully. When white Christians witness injustice and racism, we need to stand up for and defend the oppressed.

Racism has greatly shaped America's history. And today in the United States, five

decades after the Civil Rights Movement, a racial divide still exists. Some of these injustices include inequalities in education, income, homeownership, and incarceration rates. It is important as we attempt to understand and pursue reconciliation that we identify and acknowledge these systemic injustices.

Major disparities can be seen in today's justice and education systems. In "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration" Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, "In 2000, one in 10 black males between the ages of 20 and 40 was incarcerated—10 times the rate of their white peers. In 2010, a third of all black male high-school dropouts between the ages of 20 and 39 were imprisoned, compared with only 13 percent of their white peers" (Coates). Black people typically face longer sentences than white people for similar crimes, and black people are more likely to be searched during a traffic stop than white people (Hagler). Jamal Hagler sheds light on the racial injustices in the education system. He writes, "Black students are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than white students. During the 2011-12 school year, 16 percent of black K-12 students were suspended, compared with ... 5 percent of white students" (Hagler).

Racial inequalities can also be seen in the workplace and in income. In 2015, white men made 25% more in median hourly earnings and, according to the Pew Research center, "College-educated black and Hispanic men earn roughly 80% the hourly wages of white college educated men" (Patten). There is a great difference in the experiences of both blacks and whites in the workplace. When interviewed, the majority of working white people said they felt that they were treated fairly, while the majority of working black people felt that they had been treated unfairly at some point (Patten). The difference in these experiences is not surprising when considering the cultural dimensions of the United States.



According to Geert Hofstede, the United States is a highly individualist nation, scoring a 91, meaning individuals look after only themselves and their immediate family (“What about the USA?”). Individual interests prevail over group interests, and in the workplace, incentives and accolades are given based on performance (Hofstede et al 65). The United States is also a high-ranking Masculinity nation, driven by competition and success (“What about the USA?”). The high Masculinity score combined with the high Individualist score results in a work culture in which employees compete with one another for success and care about achieving personal goals and status. This type of culture is a poor setting for pursuing justice because individuals are looking out for themselves, and the needs and best interest of the group are often ignored. In *Money & Faith: The Search for Enough*, Michael Schut recognizes how individualist cultures rarely produce equality. Concerning income in the workplace he writes, “An extreme communist anthropology would insist on absolute parity in material goods, while an extreme individualistic anthropology— as we increasingly have in the global market economy— resists all forms of limits to inequality” (99). America’s cultural dimensions can make recognizing injustice difficult. Concerned with our own agendas and goals, we often overlook the needs of the people around us. If the white Church is to begin addressing the systemic racism in America, it is essential we look beyond ourselves and towards others. We must rid ourselves of our tunnel vision that focuses on wealth, power, money, and success and instead, begin to look for ways to serve our neighbors.

The first step white Christians have to take in seeking racial reconciliation is acknowledging that racial injustices exist and that racism is still prevalent in our society. If we do not acknowledge and recognize injustice, nothing will change; the oppressed black community will continue to suffer. The white Church can learn about racial injustices by

educating themselves through reading, research, and conversations with people in the black community. Once the white Church identifies these systemic injustices, we can take the next step towards reconciliation: acknowledging our own role and participation in racial injustice.

### *Acknowledging Our Privilege And Implicit Bias*

Our society privileges and accommodates white people. I am a young, white woman. In contrast to what many black people experience today, when I walk into a store, I can expect to find make-up, Band-Aids, and nylons that match my skin tone. Security personnel will not harass me or follow me around the store, and when I am in the checkout line, I will see my race represented on the covers of magazines. In school, I can expect to learn about my race in history books and find white people in authority and leadership. In the workplace, I do not have to consider how my skin color will affect my hiring potential or my income. These are examples of white privilege.

Many white people are ignorant of their privilege or refuse to acknowledge it. We have to understand how our privilege propels our progress through life and hinders the progress of others. In doing so, we can recognize injustice and combat it. More specifically, white Christians must acknowledge their own privilege and the role it plays in existing racial injustices. In *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships across Race*, Francis E. Kendall defines white privilege as “an institutional (rather than personal) set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in our institutions” (1). Kendall explains that these benefits and privileges are not granted to us because we deserve them, but solely because we are white (2). The reality is we are born with certain privileges based on our skin color. A common metaphor used for explaining white privilege is a race in which a black person and a white person are running in a race, but the

white runner has a head start. The white runner takes off, while a lack of running shoes holds the black runner at the starting line. Both runners are running the same race, but the white runner has an undeserved advantage, and the black runner has to catch up.

Admitting our white privilege does not mean that white people have not struggled or suffered, but rather, it is recognizing that white people benefit from decades of historical and societal racism. We cannot get rid of our privilege, but we can acknowledge our privilege and use it as a platform to confront injustice.

During my fieldwork, I found that many white people are either unaware of their privilege, they disagree that their skin colors gives them more privileges than African-Americans, or they do not think white privilege is as prevalent as it was during the Civil Rights Movement. In an interview with Sarah Myers, a white woman, she stated the following concerning her own privilege in comparison with African-Americans: “Sometimes I feel like I don’t have privilege, but I feel like I’m not allowed to feel that way” (Myers). Another white woman I interviewed, Nikki George, explained that her privileges are not so much related to her skin color, but they stem from the fact that she is a woman (George). In my conversation with Josh Potts, a white pastor, he shared his thoughts on white privilege: “It is something that is still happening, but I don’t think it means as much as it used to” (Potts).

In contrast, the majority of black people I interviewed recognize the existence of white privilege and the prevalence of racism in today’s society. Aloysia Tennial stated the following during our conversation:

I think that white privilege really does exist. Like take, for example, a job interview. I feel like a white woman would be someone’s first choice. I have felt like in the workplace I get asked more questions than a white woman would in an interview. It

seems like black people have this stereotype that they come from a wild or unstable place, so employers ask more questions to make sure that they are stable before hiring them. (Tennial)

As I interviewed both black and white people during my fieldwork about the reality and impact of white privilege, the staggering difference in answers I received about whether or not white privilege exists today demonstrated a need for clarity and awareness.

In *Resisting Structural Evil*, author Moe-Lobeda acknowledges society's lack of awareness. She discusses hegemonic vision and the systemic injustice within society that allows one group of people to unknowingly have power over another group of people. According to Moe-Lobeda, "hegemony refers in particular to the processes that convince people to accept rather than to resist cultural norms and practices that betray their own best interests while appearing to support them" (89). Because the people in power, in this case white people, are unaware of their privilege, the injustice is difficult to approach and change.

We have a choice. We can remain unaware and unmovable in our understanding of privilege, or we can acknowledge our privilege and its impact on our African-American brothers and sisters. We can understand our privilege and stay apathetic towards injustice, or we can use our privilege to make a positive difference in removing racial barriers in our society. We can feel guilty about our white privilege, or we can use it as a platform and as motivation to do something about injustice in our society.

Another hurdle in the path to racial reconciliation is implicit bias. Implicit biases are inescapable; everyone carries them, whether or not we want to admit it. In an interview with Sarah Myers, she confessed, regrettably, her own implicit biases. She shared the following: "I try my best to have an open mind, but when I see someone who looks Muslim, or is wearing, you

know, the specific head dress, I become fearful and I get feelings of distrust” (Myers). According to the Kirwan Institute, “The implicit associations we harbor in our subconscious cause us to have feelings and attitudes about other people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, and appearance” (“Understanding Implicit Bias”). These underlying feelings towards other people have the potential to create racial and ethnic barriers, making reconciliation difficult to pursue. But once we recognize and acknowledge our implicit biases, we can take the next step towards reconciliation: repentance.

### *Repent*

It is important for the white Church and white Christians to repent for racism and systemic injustices. We all have blind spots, but once we recognize them, it is vital that we repent and turn from our previous actions or ways of viewing other people. Without repentance, our society will remain stagnant in the pursuit of reconciliation. Repentance requires a heart change. When we recognize sin in our lives, bring it before the Lord, confess, and choose to turn away from the sin, our hearts are set right. Repenting of racism in our lives involves turning away from that injustice and instead turning to God. This act of repentance and turning from racism makes our hearts right before the Lord. Pastor George Clines said to me, “True Christians will never stop repenting” (Clines). In *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*, Harvey encourages white Christians who desire racial reconciliation to repent and make reparations, explaining that a posture of repentance is the starting place for white Christians who seriously want to see healing take place (14). She explains that while many white Christians want to see reconciliation, it has not happened because we have yet to repent for the existing injustices (15). Reconciliation with God consists of repentance, and so does reconciliation with other people.

One of the best ways for us to identify what is hiding in our blind spots is through prayer. Freely communicating with God through prayer creates space for God to reveal to us the truth within our hearts. In *Soul Feast*, Marjorie Thompson writes, “Indeed, God is the one who prompts us to look at what we have swept under the rug of our repressions and rationalizations. The Spirit awakens us to what lies hidden within— sometimes gently, sometimes with a jolt, but always so God can work with our conscious consent to free us for growth” (39). Thompson acknowledges that prayer allows us to express the truth hidden in our hearts, truth that God can clearly see.

The white Church must repent. We need to repent for our individual racist actions and thoughts, our lack of awareness of injustice, our complicity in racism, and the Church’s historical role in racial oppression. Only then will our hearts be ready to move towards reconciliation.

#### *Pray For People Suffering From Injustices*

Prayer is one of the most powerful tools Christians have for reconciliation and should be one of our first responses to injustice. The living God invites us into His presence to freely communicate and share our hearts with Him. Prayer gives us the opportunity to worship the Lord, thank Him, lament, repent, and bring our requests before Him. It is crucial for the Church to pray for their neighbors and those suffering because the Lord moves according to His will in response to our prayers. The Church can begin to pray for peace, love towards all races, and for opportunities to change systemic injustices. Prayer is powerful and it is crucial to seek the Lord in pursuing justice.

In *Soul Feast*, Marjorie Thompson writes, “God can use [our prayers] to ‘tip the balance’ and change the shape of distorted realities in our world” (41). Prayer allows us to partner with

God in his work of reconciliation and “participate in willing His will” (41). Prayer leads to change, peace and justice. Prayer and justice go hand in hand.

Throughout the Bible, the Lord directs us to pray for others. James 5:16 states, “Pray for one another, that you may be healed” (*English Standard Version*, James 5:16). In Ephesians, Paul encourages us to continue to pray for each other, “praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit” (*English Standard Version*, Eph. 6:18-20). Paul also teaches us that intercessory prayer should be done for all men (*English Standard Version*, 1 Tim. 2:1). In my own life, I have found that intercessory prayer not only makes a difference in the lives of others, but it also changes me. Praying for other people shifts my focus off of myself and onto others, and through this process, I have found that the Lord softens my heart and causes me to be more compassionate towards others.

Prayer is one of the most important steps in pursuing racial reconciliation. When we pray and allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives, transformation occurs. As people, we can plan programs and implement new systems, but without the Holy Spirit, these are merely programs and systems. In *Walking with the Poor*, Bryant Myers writes, “If there is to be any human transformation that is sustainable, it will be because of the action of the Holy Spirit, not the effectiveness of our development technology or the cleverness of our participatory processes” (loc 2179). While we play a part in development and change, ultimately, it is God who draws His people closer to Him, and it is the Holy Spirit who transforms lives. When we come humbly before the Lord, seeking His will and wisdom, we can surrender our lives to Him and allow Him to work through us to transform our communities.

If the white Church starts praying for our black brothers and sisters in Christ, our society will drastically change. Compassion will grow. Love will abound. Barriers between races will begin to crumble.

*Seek Ethnic Diversity In Our Relationships*

In today's society, it is common for people to seek relationships with people whom they are similar to and feel comfortable. This reality results in a society filled with isolated, homogenous groups of people. Racial reconciliation cannot happen unless people of different ethnicities start to build relationships with each other. If we continue to have mono-ethnic friendships and relationships, racial injustice and segregation will only continue. We have to purposefully reach out and pursue relationships with people who are different than us.

During my fieldwork, I noticed that the churches that are successful at building ethnically diverse relationships intentionally pursue diversity in their services and programs. At Jerusalem Foursquare Church in Tijuana, Mexico, the worship team performed songs in both Spanish and English to include both the local people and the visiting Americans. La Hermosa Foursquare Church in Rosarito, Mexico held part of their service in English to intentionally welcome the English-speaking congregants, visitors and missionaries.

In my conversation with Pastor Keith Jenkins, we discussed ways in which people of different ethnicities can go about including each other in their worship services and in their daily lives. At his church, New Life Foursquare, Keith and his team are purposeful in planning their services so that they are welcoming and reflective of the different ethnicities and cultures in their community. Keith shared the following with me:

I have hope that your generation actually will solve [racial issues], that they'll be on the forefront to do something about it, to bring reform. It's not uncommon for you guys to



cross genres of culture, of music. You have to take the community into account. Your church ought to always reflect the community. Like for me I don't speak Spanish. Sharing power, resources, everything, so that [the Hispanic people of my church] can reach a community base I can't reach... that's the gospel. [Our church] wants to be multi-cultural, but there's a rut that we get into. It's a gospel music rut. The riffs that the singers sing in, it always defaults into this place. So to pull them out of that has to be intentional. I think it's funny when I hear pastors say, "We're multicultural, and you know, we want to have diversity." And then there's a white guy with a guitar, and you're playing Hillsong, I'm like, that's like inviting me over to eat and you don't fry anything. You didn't prepare for me. I have to assimilate into your culture. The ecclesiology of the church—how we build, the traditions, how we communicate, everything—has to be reflective of that vision. It's easy to hang the sign out that says 'multicultural,' but it's much different when you say, here's the one table we all sit at. How do we all eat at this table? (Jenkins)

Keith helped me to see that, as white Christians, we must be intentional about reaching across ethnic and racial boundaries. We need to prepare for the people we want to include in our communities and consider how we can welcome everyone, no matter their skin color or background, to sit at the table.

In *Welcoming Justice: God's Movement Toward Beloved Community*, authors Charles Marsh and John Perkins explain God's heart for reconciliation and equity in our communities. The authors discuss how God has been moving in our society over the years, bringing restoration to many places and people. Marsh and Perkins give the Church a great starting place in pursuing reconciliation. Perkins states, "It may sound simple, but I think you've got to have neighbors you

talk to and get to know before you can love your neighbor as yourself. That's why community development is so important" (115). We must get to know the people around us. We cannot seek reconciliation with people with whom we have no relationship; we must be willing to step out of our current circle of friends or group with which we are comfortable and get to know our neighbors and the people in our communities.

Miroslav Volf, in *Exclusion & Embrace*, looks to the Bible and Jesus for his approach to justice and reconciliation, and he explains that having a Christ-like willingness to embrace others and work towards reconciliation is vital. He writes, "As we keep the vision of God's future alive, we need to reach out across the firing lines and join hands with our brothers and sisters on the other side" (54). To work towards justice, we must look to Jesus's example of reconciliation on the cross and reach out to embrace people who are different than us.

If we truly desire reconciliation, we have to be willing to get uncomfortable and step outside of our normal circle of friends. We have to be intentional in our relationships and make an effort to befriend people who are different than us. Many opportunities exist for white Christians to build diverse friendships. As individuals, we can do the following to foster these relationships: attend cultural events, sign up for clubs and classes that draw an eclectic group of people, go to events in diverse areas, and have conversations with different types of people about their culture and customs. As the Church, we can seek diverse relationships by intentionally incorporating different cultures and styles into our services. The Church should also establish a diverse leadership team that is a reflection of the different cultures and ethnicities in its surrounding community. Until we are willing to reach across cultural and ethnic boundaries, we cannot move towards reconciliation.

*Awareness and Advocacy*

We all have the ability to make a difference. We all have the power to create change. But we have to decide to act. Once we are aware of an injustice, we must move. It is necessary that we bring awareness to the injustice and advocate on behalf of our oppressed brothers and sisters. Change cannot happen without awareness.

Communication, whether it is the white Church speaking up on behalf of others or creating space for the oppressed to speak, brings awareness to injustice. If we do not speak, change will not happen. Awareness does not transpire in isolation; we have to gather together in community so that we can learn from each other. Todd and Rufa argue, “Understandings of social justice do not develop in a vacuum, and many social settings such as families, schools, and religious congregations provide a rich context for social justice development” (315). Bringing awareness and speaking out can be uncomfortable, but it creates opportunities for people who are unaware to learn, to be stirred, and to be compelled to act. There are many different ways in which the white Church can bring awareness to racial injustice, including the following: communicating through social media, peaceful public demonstrations, and hosting lectures. Churches can also take the time during their services on Sunday mornings to make their congregations aware of racial injustices, or they can host small groups that discuss the realities of racism in our society.

It was not until my fieldwork and research last summer that I became aware of the realities of racial injustices in our society and my own white privilege. I had seen and read the news, but I was ignorant and removed from the situation, so I did not act. Pastor Keith took the time to talk with me, to have a conversation, to shed light on injustice. As a result of my conversation with him, I now feel that bringing awareness to racial injustices in our society is

part of what Parker J. Palmer would call my “vocation.” Palmer writes, “Vocation at its deepest level is, ‘this is something I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling’” (25). If Pastor Keith had decided not to speak up, I might still be in denial about my own white privilege and today’s racial injustices. Now that I am aware, I have a responsibility to act. I feel compelled to make a difference. I now have the opportunity to share truth with people around me and raise awareness so that we can work together towards justice and racial reconciliation.

While raising awareness helps other individuals in our society to identify racial injustices, the white church cannot stop there. We must advocate. White Christians cannot sit idly by as the black community suffers. If we are serious about our faith and following Jesus, we have to be willing to take a stand, even if that costs us our pride, reputation, and comfort.

Advocacy is taking action to speak on behalf of and to support another person. Advocating allows for change to happen at a greater level. Racism and racial injustice are systemic issues that have to be addressed on political, social, and economic levels. Choosing to advocate means we as white Christians are doing more than just speaking up; rather, we are attempting to change and address these systemic issues to create a new system that means justice for everyone.

In the podcast titled “Advocacy,” Mickey Scott Bey Jones, a mother and activist from Nashville explains part of the reasoning behind her decision to advocate on the behalf of others. She states:

For me it has been a deep personal cost... when you start to change, and for me it was this change from a pretty typical conservative, evangelical framework to this understanding that Jesus has something to do with justice and that when Jesus announced that he came

to set the captives free, he meant actual people and actual jail, and actual poor people... For me this about creating a better world for my kids, for all kids. I can't walk away from that (Jones).

Through advocacy, we can make a better world. Advocacy is an avenue the white Church should utilize to support those suffering from racial injustice and inequalities in the United States.

There are many different ways in which we can advocate on the behalf of others and steps we can take to become effective advocates. One of the first steps that we as white Christians can take in order to become an advocate is to immerse ourselves in the issue and to educate ourselves. We have to move past seeing the problem from a distance and engage; we cannot fully understand the situation and reality of racial injustice unless we participate in the conversation and continue to learn from the oppressed. We can learn and engage by building relationships with people who are already advocating, partnering with organizations working towards racial reconciliation, reading literature about the issue, and attending public events that address racism and reconciliation.

Another step we can take to advocate effectively is to use our social networks and platforms to reach out to people. White Christians can share personal posts, articles, and news regarding racial reconciliation on a variety of social media platforms. Supporting and bringing attention to the pursuit of reconciliation on social media and inviting friends and coworkers to attend events and to get involved are just some examples of using social networks to advocate.

Working with government officials is another practical way to advocate. By reaching out to our state senators and representatives, we can work with them to seek solutions. Many people oppose working with government officials because they do not want to get involved with politics. Julie Clawson addresses this issue in *Everyday Justice: The Global Impact of Our Daily*

*Choices*, and acknowledges the hesitation to work with politicians. She writes, “Many... prefer to work for change on a much smaller scale by helping one person at a time. While I understand this perspective and applaud that work, I also firmly believe that political involvement is a necessary step in some situations” (182). These elected officials have a voice at the governmental level; therefore, working alongside them and making them aware of racial injustice can lead to positive action within the government.

### **Conclusion**

Racial injustices exist in our society today, creating tension, brokenness, and hurt. In examining our nation’s history, we see the development and roots of racism, and the systemic issues that have resulted today. White privilege, as well as the lack of awareness of this privilege, only propels these injustices and makes it harder to pursue reconciliation. But as Christians, the Lord calls us to seek reconciliation and healing in our society.

At the cross, Jesus leveled the playing field. He broke down every barrier between his people, and he created a common ground for everyone, no matter his or her race, to find peace. Through Jesus, the Lord reconciled us to Himself; therefore, the white Church must be reconcilers, proactive in our pursuit of racial reconciliation. In order for the white church to engage in racial reconciliation, we must first acknowledge the existing injustices and brokenness of our world, recognize our white privilege and implicit biases, repent, pray for people suffering from injustice, seek ethnic diversity in our relationships, bring awareness to injustice, and advocate for the oppressed.

White Christians have an important role to play in seeking racial reconciliation. Racial reconciliation is not just another peripheral issue to be solved; it is a Gospel issue. Throughout Scripture, we see the Lord, in His love, pursue His people and reconcile them to Himself. We

have a divine mandate to reach across ethnic and racial boundaries and to tear down existing barriers. We must allow the message of the Gospel to propel us towards racial reconciliation.

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## Appendix A: New Friendships



I took this photo during my fieldwork in Tijuana, Mexico in July 2016. The American and Mexican youth in this photo sang songs together in English and Spanish and became friends during the process.