



# Racism 101

| *Toward a definition of racism and deeper understanding of its many aspects.*

## Introduction

Much has been accomplished through civil rights legislation that has paved the way legally for racial equality. Nevertheless, racist attitudes and practices still exist. The election of the first African American president and the possibility of the first Latina appointment to the Supreme Court offer hope for continued progress toward the elimination of racism. This study attempts to help define racism and some of the pertinent concepts involved in discussing it. The hope is that by the end of this session members of your group will have a deeper understanding about racism and the role each can play to ensure its demise.

## Difficulty of Defining Racism

Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum suggests that how racism is defined depends on whom you ask.<sup>1</sup> And she is right. Racism is multifaceted and has both racial and cultural considerations. The complexities of racism make it nearly impossible to define as a singular concept. Part of the difficulty is rooted in racism's characteristics and the tendency to interchangeably define it simply as racial prejudice, racial stereotyping, and racial discrimination. There are differences between each of these. They are distinguishable and describe different realities based



Three USA Presidents on Cash © robert lerich—  
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on race with varied consequences. Although racism is informed by perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors associated with one's own racial group and other racial groups, the key factors that make racism what it is are the elements of power and privilege. Two definitions helpful in providing a foundational understanding of racism and how racism works are:

- Racism is a system of advantage or privilege based on race,<sup>2</sup> and
- Racism is racial prejudice plus institutional power.<sup>3</sup>

These definitions set a framework to look at racism's various manifestations.

### RACISM STUDY PACK

This study is part of the Thoughtful Christian Racism Study Pack. The list below is the suggested order of the study pack, although you may study it in any order your group chooses.

- Why Is it So Difficult to Talk About Racism?
- Racism 101
- The Bible and Racism
- A History of Racism in the United States
- White Privilege
- Is Affirmative Action Still Needed?
- Do Segregated Churches Imply Racism?

## RACISM IS

- **intentional and unintentional.**

The personnel committee's policy is to interview members of various racial groups to meet the organization's diversity employment requirements. They continually select members of one racial group for the final candidate pool.

A teacher provides a reading list of contemporary authors to the class. The list is not racially diverse.

- **overt and covert.**

Members of specific racial groups are steered by a real estate agent to look at housing only in a particular neighborhood. All other clients are offered several options.

A congregation's outsourced operating functions are always provided by individuals or businesses owned by members of one racial group.

- **connected to privilege.**

Some members of a college's student activities committee challenge the nomination for committee president of someone from a different racial group, stating, "We've never had a . . . in that position and now may not be the time."

A security guard routinely interrogates members of certain racial/ethnic groups while allowing others to simply pass by.

- **connected to power.**

Members of particular racial/ethnic groups are racially profiled, causing them to be stopped by police while driving when no laws have been broken.

A health facility's expansion plans result in the displacement of community residents who are mostly members of one racial and economic group.

## Types of Racism

The multiple manifestations of racism are contributing factors to the complexity inherent in defining it. The definitions associated with racism reflect the types of racism perpetuated by individuals, systems, and institutions within society. To gain a deeper understanding of racism, we need to distinguish racial prejudice, racial stereotyping, and racial discrimination.

**Racial prejudice:** judgments, opinions, attitudes, or feelings formed before the facts are known or in disregard of the facts that contradict them related to race. Racial prejudice is seen when the dominant group treats other groups worse, but is also seen when they treat their own group members better.<sup>4</sup>

### Defining Terms

#### Privilege

Access to benefits, advantages, and opportunities is based on social category or group membership. Privilege is always connected to something valued within a group and/or society.

#### Power

The capacity to make decisions that define reality and shape beliefs and values. The power of racism's oppression serves the needs and interests of the privileged.

- Members of one racial group engage in informal mentoring opportunities that often lead to career advancement for members of their group.

**Racial stereotyping:** characteristics, ideas, or images attributed to a specific person, group, or organization based on race.

- Being told you are a credit to your race when you have done something well.

**Racial discrimination:** the act or practice of giving different treatment to persons according to their racial or ethnic group membership.

- Being treated poorly or denied service in a restaurant.

## The Family of “-isms”

Racism gets expressed in different ways, from patterns of access to schools, housing, employment, and health care; to language and assumptions about competency and ability; to hate crimes and violence. It has been suggested that rather than continue to view racism as a singular concept, the particular nuances of types of racism are better captured if it is “conceived as a family of *-isms* based on race, or racisms.”<sup>5</sup> Following are definitions of several types of racism and examples of each.

### Individual/Personal Racism

An individual’s belief in the superiority of her or his own racial group over other racial groups that is expressed

#### Race, Culture, Ethnicity

**Race**—a social construct, first introduced as a biological concept to categorize humans based on skin color, hair texture, eye color, etc., and used to develop a racial hierarchy and justify racial inequality.

**Culture**—generally defined as the shared, learned behaviors, thoughts, and values of a group. It is the dominant force that shapes values and behaviors within a group.

**Ethnicity**—a group characterized by a shared history, country of origin, language, religion, ancestry, and culture.



Business Group Meeting at the Office © Stephen Coburn—Fotolia.com

Understand the impact your cultural values may have on others in your work and worship settings.

through attitudes and behaviors that maintain those superior and inferior positions. It is the form of racism most closely related to racial prejudice.<sup>6</sup>

- A parent explains to a child that a classmate can’t be as smart as she is because people in that racial group just aren’t as smart as people in their racial group.
- One colleague expresses to another that the new executive was only hired to meet a racial quota.
- A store manager instructs a salesperson to “keep an eye on” patrons who belong to particular racial groups.

### Institutional/Systemic/Structural Racism

Laws, traditions, and practices that systematically result in inequalities based on racial preconceptions. It is the perpetuation of a double standard of treatment and opportunities evolving from a positive valuation of the dominant racial group and a negative valuation of non-dominant racial group members.

- A bank refuses mortgage loans for the purchase of homes in neighborhoods where mostly Latino/a, African American, and new immigrant groups reside.
- Local media coverage of an inner-city neighborhood is only about criminal activity.
- A congregation only displays images and cultural perspectives that reflect the dominant racial group in its church bulletin and information boards.

## Cultural Racism

Combined elements of individual and institutional racism that express superiority or domination of one race's cultural heritage over that of another race. One group holds power to define cultural values and the individual forms those values take, rewarding those who possess them and punishing or ignoring those who do not.<sup>7</sup>

- A Korean merchant requires as a condition of employment that all employees communicate with him in his language. The business is located in and serves a racially diverse community.
- An African American receptionist at a medical office is noticeably agitated when engaging patients who do not speak English.
- A school continues to use a Native American image as its mascot, after having community members request that it not do so.

## Internalized Racism

The destructive patterns of feelings and behaviors experienced by recipients of racism when they internalize racial stereotypes, racial prejudices, and misinformation about their own racial group.<sup>8</sup>

- Expressing thoughts, attitudes, and engaging in behaviors that support perceptions of laziness, inferiority, unimportance, or stupidity of self and/or group members of the same race.<sup>9</sup>
- The practice of placing higher value on members of racial and ethnic groups who appear more white based on skin color, hair texture, and other physical attributes, or the alienation of group members who appear white by questioning the legitimacy of their racial group membership.<sup>10</sup>
- The rage of racism is exhibited through physical attacks or killing of one's own group members.<sup>11</sup>

## Environmental Racism

The placement of toxic and hazardous waste sites, landfills, and polluting industries in African American, Asian, Latino/a, Native American, migrant worker, and working poor communities.<sup>12</sup>

- A community's housing values decrease when it's discovered that the homes have been built on a toxic landfill.

## Three Myths About Racism<sup>17</sup>

"I'm colorblind. Everyone is the same to me."

To be "colorblind" in a racialized society denies the realities of racism. To be "colorblind" is to deny the cultural values, norms, histories, and life experiences of diverse racial groups.

"You only need to work hard to achieve the American dream" (bootstrap mentality).

This belief does not consider the impact of racial inequality, generational advantages of some groups, or circumstances pertinent to racial group membership and access to the benefits and opportunities within society.

"I'm not racist. Some of my best friends are . . ."

Associations with individuals of other racial groups through friendship, marriage, mission and/or volunteer work, does not eliminate racist conditioning. Overcoming racism is an ongoing process.

- Children are experiencing symptoms of asthma and lead poisoning. A chemical plant is located in their community.
- State and city officials do not apply environmental laws, regulations, and practices uniformly across all communities.<sup>13</sup>

## Damages of Racism

Many who have been the targets of racism can readily express the harm of racism in their lives. What is often missed is the effect of racism on the individuals and members of groups who perpetuate it. Racism for many is defined on a personal level only. They view it as something that resides in peoples' attitudes and beliefs about their own groups' superiority, and builds upon their stereotypes and beliefs that others are inferior. Some believe we simply need to concentrate on changing individual feelings, thoughts, and behaviors to eliminate racism. Individual transformation is indeed essential. However, we must not lose sight of how racism is built into the systems that individuals live and work in.<sup>14</sup>

United to End Racism (UER), a collection of people in many countries working to eradicate racism on the individual level, assert:

Racism is an integral part of our societies. It is not just an aberration of some small collection of people. To end racism, policies must change, racist behavior must stop, the injustices from racism must be redressed, and all people must recover from the damage done to them by racism. . . . To fully eliminate racism, we must heal three forms of damage. . . . Damage done to individuals targeted by racism. . . . Damage to members of targeted groups from “internalized” racism. . . . The corruption of the minds and spirits of those conditioned by society to act as the agents of racism. . . .<sup>15</sup>

## Steps to Challenge Racism

While learning and exploring the many aspects and dimensions of racism, one might feel overwhelmed that there is so much to learn and understand. Living within a society where racism exists, we have all been affected in some way. This includes experiencing feelings of hurt, pain, anger, guilt, embarrassment, shame, or powerlessness. As Christians, we are called each day to realize God’s desire for us to be in community, and, through Christ’s example, encouraged to move ahead boldly. There are many concrete steps we can take. Here are just a few:

- Be open to talking about the history of your racial group and other racial groups.
- Check yourself to see if assumptions are not based on racial stereotypes or racial prejudices.
- Be open to continuous learning to address the harm of racism.
- Recognize the privilege and power you may have based on racial group membership.
- Understand the impact your cultural values may have on others in your work and worship settings.
- Be aware of your racial prejudices and stereotypes about others.
- Appreciate the challenges and opportunities presented by perspectives from diverse racial and ethnic groups.
- Create opportunities at church, work, and in your community to be racially diverse and inclusive.

## Conclusion

As people of faith, we view racism as an affront to God. Racism contradicts the belief that each of us is created in the image of God and, at its basic level, infers that some are more valued than others in the human family. Ronice Branding, an antiracism educator, expresses the urgency of the need for a faithful presence in addressing racial diversity beyond the occasional sermon about racism. Branding states,

Today is the time to hope, envision, plan, and act on God’s sacred intention for all people to live in dignity. It is time to *make* true what most certainly *is* true. We teach our children and others about God’s love for the human family by what we say and do. It follows that we must begin to embody a future of justice and inclusion, willing to risk and struggle with the difficult issues of race. . . . God’s gifts of hope and healing will nourish us as we bring justice and partnership to life, creating new ways for people to share and delight in their differences. Everyone is needed for this journey of faith.<sup>16</sup>

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

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2. David T. Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
3. Joseph Barndt and Charles Ruehle, “Understanding Institutional Racism: Systems that Oppress” in *America’s Original Sin: A Study Guide on White Racism*, ed. Bob Hulteen and Jim Wallis (Washington, DC: Sojourners Resource Center, 1992), 165–68.
4. James M. Jones, *Prejudice and Racism*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 140.
5. *Ibid.*, 374 and 12.
6. *Ibid.*, 13.
7. *Ibid.*, 14.
8. Tim Jackins, *Working Together to End Racism: Healing from the Damage Caused by Racism* (Seattle, WA: Rational Island Publishers, 2002).
9. *Ibid.*, 9.
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12. "Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty: 1987–2007," A Report Prepared for the United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries, 2007, <http://www.ucc.org/justice/environmental-justice/pdfs/toxic-wastes-and-race-at-twenty-1987-2007.pdf>.
13. Ibid.
14. Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 2nd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006).
15. Jackins, *Working Together*, 1–3.
16. Ronice Branding, *Fulfilling the Dream: Confronting the Challenge of Racism* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1998), 7.
17. From the work of Joan Olsson, "Detour-spotting for White Anti-Racists," 1997, [http://www.eraseracismny.org/html/library/racenracism/ER\\_jo\\_DETOUR.pdf](http://www.eraseracismny.org/html/library/racenracism/ER_jo_DETOUR.pdf).