

Discussion Guide

Beneath the Skin

Baptists and Racism

A DVD from EthicsDaily.com



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A Note about Viewing Options

"Beneath the Skin: Baptists and Racism" comes with two versions on the DVD: a long version (47 minutes) and a short version (35 minutes).

Each version contains an introduction and four chapters:

1. Racism Defined
2. Opening the Bible
3. Encoded Racism
4. Five Ways Forward

The DVD may be shown in its entirety, or chapter by chapter in different viewing sessions. The choice is yours.

Consider the shorter version for public screenings with panel discussions, as that will allow more discussion time. Such public screenings offer different racial and ethnic Baptists an opportunity to gather in community to explore a difficult issue, and to find ways to work constructively together to advance the common good.

We recommend the longer version for more intense small-group study over multiple weeks. With the longer version, each chapter becomes a starting point for the session study. The longer version is ideal for Sunday school classes, Wednesday night forums and other educational experiences.

Also note that the DVD is packaged with several "extras," or features, on various topics. These are:

- "Remembering Henlee Barnette," which profiles the legendary Baptist ethicist who invited Martin Luther King, Jr. to the campus of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1961, an event which generated a great deal of controversy. The feature takes its shape through a meeting of "Barnette's Buddies"—a group of thinkers in Louisville that still meets to discuss ethical and moral issues.
- "Will Campbell on Racism," which briefly outlines some of the Baptist activist's thoughts on an issue that has consumed his life.
- "Church Segregation," which includes comments from numerous interviewees on why American churches remain largely segregated. They suggest three reasons why this is so: power dynamics, cultural expectations and blatantly racist attitudes.
- "Family Influences," in which several interviewees tell stories about how family members opened their eyes on issues of race.

One or more of these features may be of special interest to your viewing group.

Introduction

Baptists have a long and storied history on the issue of race and racism.

The Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845 largely over the issue of slavery. Northern Baptists favored the abolition of slavery, whereas Southern Baptists supported it.

White Baptists in the South were also slow to oppose lynching and to support desegregation and civil rights. Nevertheless, days after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down school segregation in 1954, leaders in the SBC named A. C. Miller and J. B. Weatherspoon made support for the Supreme Court's decision part of their report to the convention's annual meeting. They said the court's ruling was "in harmony ... with the Christian principles of equal justice and love for all men." They persuaded the SBC to adopt their controversial report on race.

White Baptists in the South were mostly absent from the Civil Rights Movement, despite the fact that a fellow Baptist, Martin Luther King, Jr., led the charge.

In 1995, the SBC issued an apology for slavery. Its non-binding resolution pledged Southern Baptists to "eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry." Nonetheless, things remained basically the same.

In 1999, the Baptist World Alliance held an international summit in Atlanta under the banner, "Baptists Against Racism: United in Christ for Racial Reconciliation." Global Baptists pledged to develop a program of education to address racism, yet no real educational program ever emerged.

In 2007, some 400 Baptists met at Cape Coast Castle on the coast of Ghana during the annual Baptist World Alliance gathering. They prayed and pledged to fight racism. The service's symbolism was replaced the next day with a substantive decision to elect unanimously the first non-white general secretary in the Baptist World Alliance's 102-year history. A descendant of Africans, whose ancestors came to Jamaica on slave ships, became the BWA's new general secretary. The following November, the Baptist Union of Great Britain apologized for "'their share in and benefit from' the nation's participation in the transatlantic slave trade."

In January 2008, North American Baptists gathered in Atlanta around Jesus' moral mission statement found in Luke 4:18-19 with a commitment to work in unity to address racism and to seek social justice. Thousands of black, brown and white Baptists—across denominational affiliation—gathered to forge a new covenant of cooperation.

Many hope that a fresh breeze is blowing through Baptist life from outside of

Accra to downtown Atlanta that will create racial unity and deepen a commitment to seek justice.

The Baptist landscape is dotted with groups: Southern Baptist Convention, American Baptist Churches USA, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, National Baptist Convention, Progressive National Baptist Convention, Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas and scores of others at both state and national levels. Most of these conventions break down along racial and ethnic lines.

As “Beneath the Skin: Baptists and Racism” shows, racism is far from eradicated—inside or outside the church. Yet many Baptists are working together in proactive ways to break down the racial and ethnic walls of division and to be faithful to the Bible’s moral vision.

Chapter 1: Racism Defined

Chapter 1 focuses on defining racism, and interviewees in the DVD offer various definitions.

For example, Marilyn Turner, associate executive director for National Ministries of American Baptist Churches USA, calls racism “an awareness of race gone sour.”

James Stallings, regional minister for American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York, says, “I think racism is a nice, acceptable word for white supremacy, because when we talk about racism in this country, we’re really talking about white supremacy.”

Wayne Ward, retired theology professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, says: “Racism at its heart is an effort to make oneself superior to somebody that’s different from me. It’s extremely ego-centered. All racism is rooted in, ‘Why can’t everybody be just like me.’”

Do you agree with any of these definitions? How would you amend them? Expand them?

What, if any, is the real difference between the terms “racist” and “racism”?

Several interviewees speak of racism in terms of sin, and the Bible addresses sin in a variety of ways:

- Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (KJV). Sin is a moral failure, missing the mark.
- 1 John 3:4 says, “Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness” (NRSV). Sin is rebellion against God and the divine order.
- Amos 5:10 says, “For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who affect the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate” (RSV). Sin is injustice.
- James 4:17 says, “Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin” (NRSV). Sin is sloth, moral indifference to do what is right.

Do you think of racism as a form of sin? How does this affect your understanding of racism?

Aidsand Wright-Riggins, executive director for National Ministries of American Baptist Churches USA, mentions "powers and principalities." He is referring to Ephesians 6:12, which says, "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness..."

Is his introduction of "this present darkness" relevant to a discussion of racism? Why or why not?

Joe Phelps, pastor of Louisville's Highland Baptist Church, and Aidsand Wright-Riggins go on to discuss racism as "America's original sin."

When many Christians think about original sin, they think about the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). God had given them a clear instruction which they willfully broke. The consequence was human suffering.

When some American Christians refer metaphorically to racism as the nation's original sin, they mean that racism was with us at the very beginning.

What do you think about racism being called America's original sin?

In July 2007, the Baptist World Alliance held a service of reconciliation at Cape Coast Castle in Ghana. Cape Coast Castle was founded in the 1600s and served as a headquarters for the trans-Atlantic slave trade for a couple hundred years.

Do you think it's necessary to repent or apologize for slavery? Who must repent or apologize? Who decides whether to accept?

During the BWA's service of reconciliation, a Ghanaian Baptist pastor read an apology issued by the chiefs of Ghana. He said, "We ask for forgiveness on behalf of our ancestors, those chiefs who reigned centuries ago and accepted guns and promises in exchange for men, women and children from their villages."

How does that statement strike you?

Chapter 2: Opening the Bible

Chapter 2 examines how Christian Scriptures have been used to justify racial oppression as well as racial reconciliation.

The chapter includes several biblical themes: the Curse of Ham; Exodus; Image of God; Stranger in the Land; and Being in Christ.

The Curse of Ham

Here's an excerpt from the King James Version related to the "Curse of Ham" discussed by Emmanuel McCall, pastor of The Fellowship Group in East Point, Ga., and Wayne Ward:

Genesis 9:18-27 18And the sons of Noah, that went forth of the ark, were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth: and Ham is the father of Canaan. 19These are the three sons of Noah: and of them was the whole earth overspread. 20And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: 21And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. 22And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. 23And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. 24And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. 25And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. 26And he said, Blessed be the LORD God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. 27God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.

Have you ever heard of the so-called Curse of Ham?

Emmanuel McCall, pastor of The Fellowship Group in East Point, Ga., says a "theologian" named Josiah Knott helped popularize the idea in the 1800s that the line "Cursed be Canaan" should be taken as a curse on all of Ham's descendants.

Some biblical scholars point to Ham, Shem and Japheth as fathers of various "races." Shem, some say, fathered the Semitic peoples of the Middle East, Japheth fathered Caucasians and Ham fathered the nations of Africa.

Thus, Ham's actions in Genesis evolved into the notion that dark-skinned people were cursed and slavery was their punishment.

How do you rebut this argument called the Curse of Ham?

The DVD shows several verses pertaining to comments about slaves, including:

- Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ. (Ephesians 6:5)
- Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. (1 Peter 2:18)
- All who are under the yoke as slaves are to regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and our doctrine will not be spoken against. (1 Timothy 6:1)
- Urge bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative. (Titus 2:9)

What do you make of these passages—for ancient and modern audiences?

Exodus

A powerful biblical theme is that God frees slaves from bondage and creates a new community. That theme is found in the early chapters of Exodus, where Moses returns to Egypt to set the Hebrew slaves free.

Exodus 3:7-8 records: "Then the Lord said, 'I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their suffering, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.'"

In Exodus 5:1, Moses and Aaron, his brother, said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go.'"

The exodus event was so pivotal that one of the justifications for keeping holy the Sabbath day was to remember that "the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand" (Deut. 5:15).

The message of exodus is the message that God acts in history to free his people from oppression.

"It does something to the poor person to be able to read the Scriptures that way and see themselves and God's presence being with them, which is a very different way from the way that we have been used to reading the Bible," says Javier Elizondo in the DVD.

Image of God

Genesis 1:27 records, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." This biblical truth is at the heart of Christian ethics which teaches that God values every human being with the divine image. Our value comes from what God has done. Because of what God has done in valuing every human being, we, as children of God, should do likewise.

The biblical witness also teaches that human sinfulness distorts, corrupts and twists the divine image, leading us into sinful actions and attitudes such as racism.

Aware of the distorting and crippling reality of sin, the biblical writers repeatedly note that God shows no partiality (Rom. 2:11). The Baptist New Testament scholar and leader on racial reconciliation, Clarence Jordan, translated Acts 10:34-35 to read: "God pays no attention to a man's skin. Regardless of his race, the man who respects God and practices justice is welcomed by him."

"When we deny the presence of God in another, when we refuse to see and acknowledge the sacredness of human personality, what we do is 'thingify' persons," says Aidsand Wright-Riggins in the DVD. "And when we do that, we develop the capacity to treat them in some of the most horrible ways possible."

Stranger in the Land

The DVD also highlights several passages talking about "the stranger," including:

- The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:34)
- So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:19)

What do you believe God desires regarding how we treat one another? How does this apply to the immigration issue?

In Christ

Christians confess that we “walk in newness of life” because we are in Christ, having been buried with Christ in baptism and raised from the watery grave. “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom. 6:6). Before Paul spells out how Christians are to live in Romans 12, he notes that Christians “are one body in Christ.” Being in Christ is what determines how Christians treat others (Rom. 12:9-21).

Paul writes, “For as many of you were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27-28).

“God has made us one,” says Emmanuel McCall in the DVD. “We may look differently. Culture makes us respond differently. But as a mortician friend of mine says, “When you cut beneath the skin, it’s all the same.”

Miguel A. De La Torre, associate professor of social ethics at Denver’s Iliff School of Theology, writes in his book *Reading the Bible from the Margins*: “Reading the Bible from the margins provides a salvific message of liberation for all of humanity by providing the key to combat the oppression of humans by other humans so that all can enjoy the abundant life.”

Would you say that you have been taught to read the Bible through a certain lens? Is it a lens of privilege? Of marginalization? Are there aspects of the Bible to which you may be blind?

If racists claim some Bible verses as “proof texts” for their positions of prejudice, what makes those who “proof-text” racial reconciliation different?

Chapter 3: Encoded Racism

In Chapter 3, interviewees emphasize the systemic or institutional nature of racism, noting how racism has become “encoded” in the culture. They refer to racism now being “subtle,” “sophisticated” or “covert.”

In other words, racism isn’t as easily or readily seen today as it was in, say, 1963 Birmingham, when Police Chief Bull Connor used fire hoses and attack dogs to repel demonstrators marching for civil rights.

Do you agree? If so, what are the implications?

What are some causes of or contributing factors to systematic racism?

Interviewees mention several examples of encoded racism: public education, criminal justice, predatory lending, sports, immigration, and poverty and wealth.

Do you see racism encoded in the culture in other ways? If so, what are they?

Miguel A. De La Torre suggests that we can claim to be “color blind” on matters of race while institutions are “racist for us.”

Do you agree with De La Torre?

James Stallings offers a nuanced reflection on De La Torre’s comment, saying that we still make choices with regard to institutional biases. Stallings implies that we can’t absolve ourselves from racism embedded in our institutions simply because institutions are larger than any one individual.

What do you think about Stallings’ statement? Do you see racism embedded in any institutions or organizations of which you are a part? If so, do you feel compelled to do anything about it?

The DVD presents several statistics in Chapter 3 (e.g., 33% of Blacks and 33% of Browns attend high-poverty schools, whereas 4% of Whites do).

What do you make of these kinds of statistics?

Javier Elizondo, executive vice president and provost at Baptist University of the Americas in San Antonio, tells his story of coming to the United States from Mexico when he was 15 years old. He contextualizes his eventual success with the "bootstraps" metaphor, calling the metaphor "a lie" and saying he has never known anyone to pull him/herself up by the bootstraps.

What do you think about Elizondo's analysis of the bootstrap metaphor or myth? Would you say some Christians embrace "bootstraps" imagery more easily than they do the "burden" imagery about which Elizondo speaks? Why?

How do you think theologically and morally about encoded racism?

Chapter 4: Five Ways Forward

Chapter 4 lists five ways we can move forward regarding racism. It cites:

1. Be honest.
2. Make new friends.
3. Share.
4. Be courageous.
5. Be reconciled.

Which of these ways forward is easiest for you personally? For your church?
Which is hardest for you personally? For your church?

Yana Pagan, associate pastor of Upper Merion Baptist Church outside Philadelphia, says the church isn't really being honest about the problem of racism.

What has your experience been in this regard? Do you ever talk about racism at church?

Javier Elizondo says most people take the "tourist approach" when it comes to interacting with other races.

Do you agree? Do you "tour" or "camp" in other neighborhoods? Does it matter?

Joe Phelps quotes John 13:34: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."

Phelps says Jesus calls us to love one another, and one way in which we do that is setting aside whatever power and privilege we have.

Is Phelps right? Does Jesus really call us to abandon ways in which we benefit from power structures? If so, how can you share your power, resources or privilege?

Miguel A. De La Torre says: "I cannot be saved if I continue to hate my brother or sister. And I hate them by denying them a living wage. I hate them by denying them access to the resources of this country. I hate them by maintaining structures that cause them to be disenfranchised."

The Apostle John wrote:

1 John 3:14-17 14We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. 15Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. 16We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

Are De La Torre's conclusions justified by this or another passage?

Phelps also tells the story of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary professor Henlee Barnette, who risked much by inviting Martin Luther King, Jr. to campus in 1961. This is a historical example of courage in the arena of race relations.

How can you exhibit courage on this front today?

Some people see "reconciliation" as a first step in race relations, whereas others see it as a last step—the result of other actions. Barnette said "justice" must precede any attempt at reconciliation (see "Remembering Henlee Barnette" in the DVD extras).

Where do you see reconciliation in the process of race relations? Is it a first step—embodied in a service like that sponsored by the BWA in Ghana—or is it something that eventually happens after other steps have been taken?

Baptist preacher and activist Will Campbell started a magazine in 1964 named *Katallagete*, a Greek word for "be reconciled."

He drew the word from 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, where Paul wrote to Christians: "We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (v. 20).

We have a moral imperative to be reconciled, regardless of our color.

How do we do that? When are we going to be reconciled?

EthicsDaily.com Articles

The articles mentioned below are available free of charge at EthicsDaily.com and make robust supporting materials for DVD viewings and discussions.

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Moderate and Conservative Southern Baptists Differ on Race at Three Points (09-18-08)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=11075

For Southern Baptists, Racial Reconciliation Must Go Beyond Words to Deeds (06-11-07)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=9038

The Birthing of an African-American Rural Church (11-11-04)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4967

LifeWay's Asian-Themed VBS Material Draws Protests (11-26-03)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3418

Southern Baptists and Race: A Historical Perspective (02-27-02)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=399

A Look at African-American Baptist Denominations (02-20-02)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=368

SBC Mission Agencies Using Racially Controversial Poster (11-06-00)

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=676

Civil Rights History

'I Have a Dream' Sermon Established Martin Luther King as Prophet (08-28-08)

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Martin Luther King Jr. Was Prophetic Voice for Peace (04-04-08)

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What Praising Rosa Parks Should Mean (10-27-05)

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Southern Baptists Slow to Embrace Rosa Parks (10-26-05)

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First Baptist Church, Savannah Couldn't Avoid Civil Rights Debate (02-06-02)

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Environmental Racism: Another Inconvenient Truth (04-28-08)

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Profiles

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Henlee Barnette: Teacher, Friend, Encourager (06-14-06)
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