



# The Bible and Racism

## SESSION 2

*As people of the Book, Christians are compelled to engage the troubled past between the Bible and racism while seeking to transform the world and others through an engagement of those same biblical texts.*

### Goals for the Session

- Examine the role of interpreters in creating meaning from biblical material and explore ethics and strategies for justice-oriented interpretation.
- Confront the troubled intersection between racism and the Bible.
- Seek to transform the world and others through the engagement of those same texts.

### Preparing for the Session

- Again in this session, it's important that every participant have a Bible. Provide copies of the NRSV for each participant. If possible, have on hand at least one other translation of the Bible for comparison.
- On newsprint, print the following: "I am black and beautiful" (Song 1:5 NRSV) and "I am black but comely" (Song 1:5 KJV).
- Print the following question from the Participant Handout: "What interpretive practices or set of values help Christian communities to read the Bible in ways that address the problem of racism responsibly?"
- Also print the following Scripture references: Genesis 2–3; Genesis 12:1–3 and Genesis 15; Genesis 12:2 and Exodus 3:8; Deuteronomy 7:1–2; Isaiah 65:17 and Revelation 21:3; Matthew 28:19 and Acts 1:8.
- Make copies of appendix 1, "Lessons Learned from History," for participants.

### Session at a Glance

#### OPENING

- Sing a hymn
- Pray together

#### EXPLORING

- Considering what's in a conjunction
- Examining historical criticism
- Exploring the Bible, colonialism, and racial superiority

#### RESPONDING

- Reflecting on the lessons of history

#### CLOSING

- Read Scripture
- Sing a hymn

### Materials Needed

- Bibles and hymnals
- Newsprint sheets and markers
- Prepared newsprint sheets (see preparation)
- Copies of "Lessons Learned from History" found at the end of this Leader's Guide

### Teaching Tip

For some participants, the idea that one's own context can shape the meaning one gains from the text may be

new and even troubling information. White participants may be accustomed to considering the way they interpret text as normative or true, because one effect of racism on the dominant group is the belief, unconscious or otherwise, that their perspective is the only valid way to view the world. Gaining the understanding that context differs from one group to the next and that those on the margins may read Scripture differently than those in positions of privilege is a step toward undoing racism.

## Opening (5 minutes)

### 1. Sing a Hymn

Sing a hymn about the Bible, such as “Deep in the Shadows of the Past” or “Thanks to God Whose Word Was Written.”

### 2. Pray Together

Pray the following, or a prayer of your own choosing:

Eternal God, we give thanks for your Word recorded in the Scriptures. We confess that sometimes we view the Bible as a static record of the dim past, not as your living, breathing Word. We confess that sometimes we look for some immutable truth, forgetting that though the words are the same for each reader, their meaning is conditioned by our cultural lens and life experience. We confess that some have used Scripture as a battering ram to beat down a people, a race, or a culture, rather than as a liberating Word. Most of all, we confess that sometimes we forget to listen for how you speak to us through Scripture, opting instead to attempt to proof-text some individual belief. Guide us as we consider the interaction between your Word, others, and ourselves. **Amen.**

## Exploring (25 minutes)

### 3. Considering What’s in a Conjunction

Call the attention of participants to the line from Song of Solomon from the Participant Handout that you posted on newsprint. Ask the group to respond to each translation. Ask:

- Do you see a difference in what each translation conveys? What is it? How does the conjunction subtly shape the meaning?
- The writer asserts that the use of the conjunction “but” reflects the bias of a certain culture. Do you agree or disagree?

Invite the group to look at the question from the Participant Handout you posted on newsprint, and say that this question will be the major focus of the session. Then discuss the following:

The writer comments that “interpretation is a dynamic process that involves both the text and the communities that read the text,” and that “both racist and liberationist interpretations of the Bible emerge out of the complex relationship between the texts themselves and the cultural contexts that produce meanings from these texts.” How do you respond? What would you say to those who believe the Bible is clear and there is only one literal interpretation?

### 4. Examining Historical Criticism

Invite the group to quickly scan the information in the Participant Handout about historical criticism (under the heading “Racism and Biblical Scholarship”). Ask a volunteer to define historical criticism. Then ask:

- What was the original intent of historical criticism? Out of what impulse did it arise?
- How has that original intent been subverted? What has been the result?
- Do you think it is possible to focus on the meaning of the text within its original context without bringing your own context to bear? Why or why not?
- The writer refers to “the privileging of objectivity.” What does he mean by that term?

### 5. Exploring the Bible, Colonialism, and Racial Superiority

Call the attention of participants to the Scripture references you posted. Divide into six small groups or pairs of participants (or in a very small group, each participant may need to take a passage). Ask that they read their passage, as well as what the writer says about it in the Participant Handout, and then discuss it in their pair or small group. Then discuss the following in the total group:

- The writer asserts that the Bible’s story was distorted in order to rationalize conquest. How do you see that reflected in the passage you read?

- Respond to the following: “European colonizers built their empires on the backs of the peoples that they subjugated.”
- The writer states, “The New Testament theme of spreading the good news of God becomes an empire’s way of disseminating European cultural and religious values to other countries.” Do you agree or disagree?
- There are those who assert that the United States has taken the role of empire building. Do you see evidence that some are using the Bible in similar ways to spread U.S. culture and religious values? Is this a good thing, or a bad thing?

Finally, read or have a volunteer read aloud Ephesians 6:5 (“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ”). Ask: “How does this passage reflect the needs of a particular ancient or modern culture? What does it mean for us today?”

## Responding (20 minutes)

### 6. Reflecting on the Lessons of History

Distribute copies of appendix 1, Lessons Learned from History. Ask that participants reflect on the lessons and respond to questions posed on the sheet. Allow about five minutes for them to work independently. Then ask for volunteers to respond to each of the questions.

## Closing (5 minutes)

### 7. Read Scripture

Call attention to the writer’s statement that there is an interpretive dilemma posed by the fact that persons and groups use the Bible to support both justice and injustice, racism and liberation. This dilemma requires us to engage simultaneously the Bible, each other, and ourselves while holding faithfully to the complexity involved in such an interaction.

Say that the writer suggests that doing so will help us live into the words of Micah 6:8.

Read that passage slowly, pausing between each phrase, inviting the group to reflect on its meaning.

### 8. Sing a Hymn

Invite the group to sing a hymn based on Micah 6:8, such as “What Does the Lord Require of You?” as a closing prayer.

## Teaching Alternatives

- **Explore other translations.** Invite the group to read Song of Solomon 1: 5 in several other translations to see what connotation is being conveyed. What conjunction is used in each?
- **Research diversity in theological schools.** Invite members of the group to use the link cited by the writer to research racial ethnic diversity in the Association of Theological Schools, and to report on what they find. What effect would they say a relative lack of diversity in theological education is having on biblical scholarship? On the preparation of ministers?
- **Read the *Gospel according to Solentiname*.** Obtain a copy of this book. Tell participants that from 1965 to 1966, Ernesto Cardenal, a Nicaraguan priest, established a religious community on Solentiname based on Christian liberation theology and principles of social justice and community sharing. One thousand Nicaraguan *campesinos* (peasants) participated in dialogues about social equality, analyzing their present living conditions. The book, the *Gospel according to Solentiname*, evolved from a series of conversations in which *campesinos* reflected on the life of Jesus Christ and how their Savior would have acted in contemporary Nicaragua. Invite participants to choose one of the Scripture passages addressed in the book and read it. Then read and discuss the commentary from the persons in the base community. How is the perspective different? What factors of the context of base community members might influence their perspective?
- **Apply the lessons of history.** Invite the group to read Genesis 12:1–3 and Genesis 15, applying the five lessons from history enumerated by the writer. Use the questions on appendix 1 to guide a discussion of the passages.
- **Read the exodus from the margins.** Ask the group to read the story of the exodus. Ask: Who in the story

is the dominant culture? Who is marginalized? If your group is primarily Caucasian, encourage them to consider with whom they would be identified in terms of their position of Western European privilege and power (the Egyptians). Ask: With whom do we normally identify in this story? Is it really possible for those of us who are white in this culture to

read this narrative from the margins? In what ways does the passage come alive when we make this effort?

## About the Writer

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# Appendix 1

## Lessons Learned from History

### 1. Attention to context matters.

The context of the Bible assumes its audience is part of a minority group within the context of larger empire. How is the American context different? Do you consider yourself one of a group of marginalized outsiders in our culture, or part of the mainstream? In what ways does this change the way you interpret a particular passage of Scripture?

### 2. Read the whole of Scripture and acknowledge the blind spots in your own limited perspective.

In your opinion, what elements of the Bible have been silenced? Which ones have been made prominent? What criteria do you think are important in looking at the total message of Scripture? What blind spots or inconsistencies can you identify in how you interpret the Bible's message?

### 3. Make room for diverse perspectives.

What examples of diverse communities are you able to cite within the Bible? Where can you identify different sources, traditions, or theologies in the biblical record? Would you agree with the writer that listening to the voices of others is "biblical" in the best sense of the word? Within this study group, how diverse are the perspectives, theologies, and experiences of individuals? If the group is fairly homogenous, how might you provide space for diverse voices to be heard?

### 4. Read from the perspective of the oppressed.

The writer comments that it is important for those in power to avoid adopting the mentality of the marginalized uncritically. Do you consider yourself part of the majority, or one of the marginalized? If yours is the dominant cultural perspective, how do you read from the perspective of the oppressed? In what ways do you see this as transformative?

### 5. Adopt a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Where have you seen the Bible used as a weapon to justify someone's superiority? Do you agree or disagree that the Bible's message can be co-opted by the forces of sexism, classism, racism, and heterosexism? What texts do you know of that oppose oppression? Which, if any, of these are particularly meaningful to you?