



# A History of Racism in the United States

## SESSION 1

| 1492–1790: European colonialism and U.S. nation building

### Goals for the Session

- To present the interrelated and dependent strands that have shaped the early history of racism
- To explore how we are wrapped into our history even if we do not mean to be and are shaped by it
- To begin to open up new perspectives on the way we have viewed our beginnings as a nation

### Preparing for the Session

- This study is part of the Racism Study Pack. Your group may use this study alone, although we suggest you use it along with the other studies in the pack. Suggestions for using this study in various groups of people are found in the “Additional Teaching Tips” at the end of this Leader’s Guide.
- The following is the suggested order of the study pack, although you may study 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?

### Session at a Glance

#### OPENING

- Read Psalm 78:1–8
- Pray together

#### EXPLORING

- Setting the stage
- Achieving consensus on the framework for the study
- Whose story?
- Begin the time line

#### RESPONDING

- Engaging in mutual invitation

#### CLOSING

- Sing “Amazing Grace”
- A testimony of words
- Preparing for the next session

- If your group has used the previous studies in the packet and participants began journals in which they are recording definitions of terms relevant to racism, read this session and make note of terms you will want them to add to their journals.
- Begin a time line to which the group can add events during these four sessions. One way to do this is with a clothesline stretched across the wall, to which you

can clip large index cards or poster-board strips with major headings. Before the session each week, write the main events (usually found in the major subheadings in the Participant Handout) with dates on large white index cards or poster-board strips and place above the time line. Use colored index cards or self-stick notes to add names or persons or events that are often not told in official histories. Participants may come up with additional “often untold” events or names. Allow them to add these to the time line. For this session over the time line, put the heading “1492–1790” and add the major heads “European Colonialism” and “U.S. Nation Building.”

- Print on newsprint or a white or chalkboard the “why” questions found in the Participant Handout under the heading “About Reading History” (“Why do we tell the stories we tell?” and so forth).
- On separate index cards print the following words: *discovery, expansion, nation building, formative, seminal, and growing*. Make a separate stack (preferably on a different color to keep them separate) with the words *genocide, slavery, land theft, conquest, systematic destruction of culture, and dehumanization*. These will be used for the “Closing” activity.
- Have available a dictionary to look up the terms *colonialism* and *white supremacy*.
- Make copies of the second Participant Handout to give members at the end of this session so they may read it during the week.

## Materials Needed

- Bibles and hymnals
- Newsprint sheets and markers
- Prepared newsprint sheets and index cards
- Time line (see preparation)
- Paper and pencils or pens
- Copies of the second-session Participant Handout to distribute at the end of this session

## Teaching Tip

You may encounter resistance to the framework used by the writers. African Americans may resist not using

African chattel slavery as the framework, whereas some white participants may resist considering the interrelated strands at all, or may evidence denial or guilt. Encourage all participants to accept the framework for the sake of exploring the history in the depth it deserves.

## Opening (5 minutes)

If participants have begun a journal of terms, invite them to look up and write down the definitions for *colonialism* and *white supremacy*.

### 1. Read Psalm 78:1–8

Read aloud Psalm 78:1–8. Say that the history of racism, “dark sayings as of old,” casts a long shadow across our nation’s history. Bringing the several narratives of the groups that have shaped this country into the light and speaking and hearing truth is a more complex and difficult task than accepting one narrative. But it is key to understanding racism, and these sessions on the history of racism are one way to begin that conversation.

### 2. Pray Together

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

Gracious God, Scripture testifies to the truth that we are made in your image. We know that our experiences with others shape our understanding of just what that means. Sometimes we are blind to the incredible diversity of your human creations, and often we are unaware that what we call history reflects a limited perspective. Help us to be receptive to truth telling, even when we resist what we hear and the truth telling is hard. **Amen.**

## Exploring (20 minutes)

### 3. Setting the Stage

If your group has preceded this study with the studies “Racism 101” and “Why Is It So Difficult to Talk about Racism?” spend a few minutes reviewing both the definitions participants included in their journals and the reasons why these conversations are so challenging. If the group has not engaged in these studies, review the following points about talking about race:

- It is hard when we live separate lives.
- Such conversations often include stories that are hard to hear.

- Conversations are important to help us discover the effects of our assumptions.
- Our operative definition of racism can make a big difference in our conversation.

Emphasize that definitions matter because they shape the way we interpret situations and how we take action. Encourage the group to adopt the understanding that racism involves a system of advantage or privilege based on race, and that institutional power is involved.

#### 4. Achieving Consensus on the Framework for the Study

Point out that the writers of this study state up front that they “will engage in a ‘biased’ exploration of history, not to oversimplify history but to bring its complexity to the surface,” and that their bias will be seen most clearly in the use of colonialism as the framework. Ask:

- Why this framework?
- Consider the metaphor suggested by Robette Dias, that of a braid of interrelated and dependent strands. How does that metaphor work for you? Is there another that expresses this interrelationship better? What about using the metaphor of a loom, with colonialism as the warp threads and white supremacy and racism as woof threads?

#### 5. Whose Story?

Call the attention of participants to the beginning of the Participant Handout under the heading “About Reading History.” Refer the group to the “why questions” from the Participant Handout that you recorded on newsprint and invite them to respond. Then ask:

- The writers observe that all history is biased. Would you agree or disagree?
- Whose story would you say our commonly accepted history is? Whose is left out, or unheard? Why?

#### 6. Begin the Time Line

On newsprint or a chalk or whiteboard, print the following events: “Christopher Columbus Discovers America”; “Settlement of Jamestown, 1607.”

Divide into two smaller groups and assign one of these events to each group. Distribute self-stick notes in two colors and fine-lined markers to each group and arbi-

trarily assign one color to history as most of us were taught it, the other to the perspective of these events expressed by the writers. Ask the two groups to record events or details from each perspective on the appropriate color and use them to construct a time line. Discuss, using some of the following:

- Which details that we were taught as fact are most deeply ingrained for you?
- What about the writers’ interpretation rings the most true? What makes you the most uncomfortable?
- The writers acknowledge presenting a bias in this study. In what places in the history we were taught do you see the most pronounced bias coming through?
- How would you change the major heads on this time line to reflect a different perspective of history?

### Responding (15 minutes)

#### 7. Engaging in Mutual Invitation

Tell the participants that often in discussions about race, people enter the conversation from unequal positions of power. Sometimes those inequities are the result of those who hold power, usually whites, assuming that their own ways of interacting are the norm and not taking into consideration the diverse ways people of other cultures engage in conversation. In groups of one culture or race, the game changer may be the gender or class of participants that leads some to feel less able to make a contribution. Mutual Invitation, a group dynamics process conceived by Eric Law, can be a helpful tool. Ask the group to divide into smaller groups of no more than five or six. If your group is small, you may be able to use the process in the total group. Ask someone to serve as convener to begin the discussion. That person will respond to a question briefly and then invite another person in the group by name to respond. That person can respond, pass, or pass for now, and then invite another person to respond. Continue until all have had a chance to respond (or to pass) and return to those who have passed to ensure they have a chance to speak if they so choose. No one can speak again until all have spoken. Ask that they respond to the following using mutual invitation:

- The writers note that the first “Naturalization Act,” passed in 1790, limited citizenship to “free white persons of good and moral character.” Do you agree

that this is a prime example of deeply held beliefs about the superiority of northern Europeans? Why or why not?

- Who was left out? How would you say this has impacted the way our “social experiment” has developed?

(Note: Some may mention that the writers do not include women, who were also left out until fairly late in the game.)

## Closing (5 minutes)

### 8. Sing “Amazing Grace”

Call the attention of participants to the sidebar about John Newton, and ask a volunteer to read it aloud. Newton is the first of several persons or events the writers will cite as dissenters over the course of the next sessions. Sing “Amazing Grace” together.

### 9. A Testimony of Words

This exercise has one group slowly read words associated with conquest and dominance and the other group slowly read words associated with how people experienced the conquest.

Again divide into two smaller groups and ask the two groups to turn their chairs so that one group is facing the other. Distribute one stack of the word cards you prepared to each group (if you have fewer participants than cards, give some participants two cards). Say that each group, facing the other, will slowly read aloud the words on their cards, allowing for some silence between each spoken word. Ask the group with the stack of cards that includes the words *discovery*, *expansion*, *nation building*, *formative*, *seminal*, and *growing* to begin, followed by the second group. Conclude with a time of silence, followed by reading Psalm 78:2–4:

[We] will open [our] mouth[s] in a parable; [we] will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from [our] children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and [God’s] might, and the wonders that [God] has done.

### 10. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute copies of the Participant Handout for the second session and have members commit to reading it prior to the session.

## Teaching Alternatives

- **Explore the intersection between cross and sword.** Invite participants to discuss the following from the Participant Handout:
  - The statement of Cristobal Colón to the queen in his report
  - The information about John Winthrop’s views on the city on the hill
  - The statement of Brother Luis Brandaon
  - The statement of the colonial government of New York Colony concerning the baptism of a slave

Ask: In your opinion, what was the relationship between the cross (a symbol of Christian faith) and the sword (a symbol and tool of colonial expansion) in the period of our history covered in this session? What racist assumptions seem embedded in the statements cited here?

- **Servitude versus enslavement.** Explore the different treatment and ultimate status afforded European indentured servants and African slaves brought over to early settlements. What accounted for the fact that one group was allowed to work out its period of indenture and the other was bound in permanent enslavement? Can you think of another explanation besides race to account for the difference?
- **Research John Newton.** Invite participants to do further research on John Newton and to present a report of his life. What factors accounted for his transformation from slaver to opponent of slavery?
- **Examine some school history texts.** If possible, obtain copies of the history texts in use in your local high schools. Examine the books to see what perspective seems to be presented about America’s “discovery” and the early settlements. How are major figures depicted? Major events?
- **Present alternative history skits.** Invite participants to present short skits depicting the arrival of Columbus and the settlement of Jamestown from the viewpoint of Native Americans and African slaves. What differences emerge?
- **Evaluate U.S. census categories.** Invite the group to read over the categories used by the U.S. Census

Bureau in the text box. Ask: Which category would you check to identify yourself? If you could create a category that more clearly says who you are, what would it be? What do you think the category “White” means?

## For More Information

### Films

As a prominent feature in U.S. life, culture, and history, race is a common theme in film—as the subject or as the backdrop for the story. It is one way to examine and reflect on our shared experience. The following list reflects just some of the possible selections.

*Amistad*, DVD, directed by Steven Spielberg (1997; Universal City, CA: Dreamworks Video, 1999).

*Cheyenne Autumn*, DVD, directed by John Ford (1964; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007).

*Crash*, DVD, directed by Paul Haggis (2004; Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Films, 2005).

*The Color Purple*, DVD, directed by Steven Spielberg (1985; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2003).

*Cry the Beloved Country*, VHS, 1951 version directed by Zoltan Korda (Monterey Video, 1998).

*Cry the Beloved Country*, DVD, 1995 version directed by Darrell Roodt (New York: Miramax, 2003).

*A Day without a Mexican*, DVD, directed by Sergio Arau (Santa Monica, CA: Xenon Pictures, 2004).

*Eyes on the Prize*, DVD, directed by Henry Hampton (Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1999).

*Get on the Bus*, DVD, directed by Spike Lee (1996; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures, 2001).

*Imitation of Life*, DVD, directed by Douglas Sirk (1959; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2003).

*The Joy Luck Club*, DVD, directed by Wayne Wang (1993; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2002).

*Lone Star*, DVD, directed by John Sayles (1996; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 1999).

*The Long Walk Home*, DVD, directed by Richard Pearce (1990; Charlotte, NC: Platinum Disc, 2002).

*Malcolm X*, DVD, directed by Spike Lee (1992; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2000).

*The Mission*, DVD, directed by Roland Joffe (1986; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2003).

*Rosewood*, DVD, directed by John Singleton (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 1997).

*Skins*, DVD, directed by Chris Eyre (2002; Century City, CA: First Look Pictures, 2003).

*Zoot Suit*, DVD, directed by Luis Valdez (1981; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2003).

### Books

Karen Anderson, *Changing Woman: A History of Racial Ethnic Women in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Valerie Babb, *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, 30th anniv. ed. (New York: H. Holt, 2001).

Nicholas M. Evans, *Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism, and Modern Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000).

Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York: Viking, 2000).

Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007).

Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 2008).

Thom White Wolf Fasset, *Giving Our Hearts Away: Native American Survival*, with study guide by Brenda Connelly. This 2008–2009 mission study for the United Methodist Women gives a comprehensive look at the history of Native Americans.

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# Additional Teaching Tips for Various Types of Groups

Leading a session on racism is ideally accomplished with a diverse group of participants representing a variety of heritages. But unfortunately this is not always possible or realistic. Given these circumstances we have provided tips for facilitating these sessions in a fruitful manner.

## General Guidelines

- Remind participants that these sessions are a starting point. The work to challenge racism is ongoing. Remind yourself that conversations dealing with racism are difficult and uncomfortable. This is normal.
- All voices need to be heard and respected. Be mindful that no one is targeted for their views. Encourage everyone to listen to each other and the writers of the sessions without being defensive.
- Be mindful that the conversation stays on topic with time to share experience, analysis, and hopes for the future.
- Identify your own struggles with race and racism in order to check any negative assumptions or stereotypes you may have.

## All-White Congregations

- Be alert that the conversation stays on topic and does not downplay the effect of racism.
- An all-white conversation may provide a forum for an honest expression of views. Issues of white guilt and denial are normal if the discussion is fruitful. Address these issues and avoid the tendency to downplay or ignore them.
- Racism cannot be and is not an issue only for people of color. Encourage participants to take ownership.

## Primarily White Group with a Few People of Color

- Be alert to statements or questions that ask the person of color to make a sweeping generalization for all people of color. For example: What do people of color need or want?
- Racism must be challenged together by people of color and white people. Watch for manifestations of white guilt in the form of denial.
- If possible, have two facilitators, one white and one person of color.
- This group makeup can be tricky because the power dynamic so closely mirrors what people of color experience in many aspects of their lives. Be mindful that the people of color in the room don't feel pressured to "educate" the white participants about race or racism. Also, make sure that the experiences of the people of color don't get sidetracked, downplayed, or explained away even if there is disagreement in the room.

## Primarily People of Color with a Few White People

- The white participants may feel unable to express themselves openly, resulting in a lack of honesty. Be careful to keep the conversation from becoming accusatory.
- If possible, have two facilitators, one white and one person of color.

## Group with All People of Color

- Facilitator must be a person of color for honest exchange.
- Not all people of color will agree about what the definitions or implications of racism are in society or in their lives, so don't assume opinions or feel the need to force consensus. Instead, call participants to a spirit of support amid different experiences, creative collaboration, and coalition building.