

## Diversity and the Common Good

The Urgent Need to Train the Minds of Children and Renew the Minds of Adults  
Natasha Sistrunk Robinson

*Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.*

Romans 12:2 NLT

“I don't see color.”

I cringe every time I hear these words. In most instances, people utter them in an attempt to let me and all who are listening know that they are not racist or that they value people regardless of their race. But the statement itself devalues me as a person of color, and it does not foster the racial reconciliation and healing that is currently needed within our churches and the broader culture. My mind races with many questions after hearing statements like this. At first, I wonder, “Why not? What is it exactly that you are refusing to see? How would you feel if I said that I didn't notice the fact that you were a woman?” Both our gender and our ethnicity are intentionally given to us as a part of God's good creation. God made us different on purpose.

More important than the answers to those rhetorical questions is the reality that we do see color. We acknowledge its beauty when selecting fashion patterns. Colors contribute to our enjoyment of food. Color is one of the many things that we appreciate about nature. All able-bodied people see color. So, if we claim that we do not or if we refuse to see color when we look at the body of another person, we are inherently acknowledging that something is wrong with our gaze. Something is indeed wrong, but it is not the color of the other person's skin.

The negative connotations or actions that are imparted because of the color of a person's skin is colorism. Colorism is one of the effects of racism.<sup>1</sup> The idea of racism or being racist is what people are desperately seeking to avoid. Some Christians are under the false illusion that we will somehow all get along if we just ignore the issue of race. This illusion is often prompted by well-

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<sup>1</sup> This is a short and fun cultural video to breakdown the connection between the two.  
Why Color Blindness Will NOT End Racism

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4LpT9TF\\_ew&list=PLp0D5p1bgGy5Q-9XKWXsg4k88qXXFxyvq&index=13&t=0s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4LpT9TF_ew&list=PLp0D5p1bgGy5Q-9XKWXsg4k88qXXFxyvq&index=13&t=0s). Published June 8, 2016. Accessed January 20, 2020.

intentioned white Christians who make statements like, “I don’t see color,” or those who express the desire to raise “color-blind” kids. However, ignoring color or denying the fact that racism exists will not solve the race issues in America, nor will it enable the racial reconciliation<sup>2</sup> that is needed in the American Church.

Author Patricia Raybon is the product of the Civil Rights Movement and Jim Crow era. She is also a black woman and the mother of black children. In her forward to Amy Julia Becker’s book, *White Picket Fences*, Raybon wrote candidly about their relationship and shared intimate conversations she had with the white author. “She and I went back and forth on when to tell children about hard things such as racism. I argued that the question itself is a luxury allotted to children who don’t have to worry about this particular terror—while children of color, by default, are forced to see from their earliest months that they are targets, often, of many kinds of racism.”<sup>3</sup> Within the last decade, the #BlackLivesMatter mantra has been raised in response to the senseless lives of those murdered for driving while black, playing while black, being big and black, being slow to respond and black, or even illegally selling or stealing a box of cigarettes while black. Several of these murders have been a result of violent actions by the state upon children or in front of children. None of these actions warranted capital punishment. These actions perpetuate a domestic racial terror and generational trauma. For African American Americans specifically, this history is a part of a layered narrative about the devaluing of black bodies that includes bounty hunting or raping slaves, lynching black bodies on trees, and now, the bondage of mass incarceration. “Thus, all children, [Raybon argues], should see that racial terror exists—just as they’re taught that a stove is hot, a speeding car can kill them, and sadly so

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<sup>2</sup> Several Christians are moving away from the phrase “racial reconciliation” because “re-” implies that the addressed people groups were at one time united and equal, which is not the case in America. The founders of America did not construct equitable laws concerning indigenous people, the original inhabitants of our land. There was certainly no unity between the colonizers who enslaved free Africans to build this nation’s wealth on their backs. I continue to use the phrase, however, chiefly because the ministry of reconciliation is a New Testament biblical principle and because the sin of racism did not start in America. The seed of racism, like all other sin, finds its roots in the garden where the original sin occurred in Genesis 3. Prior to that point, man and woman, different humans, were one with each other, God, and the rest of creation. Therefore, any work that we do must be in light of the unity the Jesus prayed for (John 17), the redemption that he ushered in his new kingdom, and the original desire that God had for his human creation in the beginning.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Julia Becker, *White Picket Fences: turning towards love in a world divided by privilege* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2018), xvii.

can other mayhem. Racism kills, too, and all children, no matter how young, should know about it. Then they can become justice allies and advocates, no matter how young.”<sup>4</sup>

### Renewing the Mind of Adults

At best, the “color-blind” philosophy is irresponsible, and does not allow us to address the social construct of race and its impact on society. Race is a social construct created for the purpose of defining and classifying people. In America, those distinctions are then used to determine who has legal rights—to freedom, land or property ownership, education, home ownership, quality health care, quality legal counsel, etc.— and who does not. In their classic work, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, sociologists and Drs. Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith report that we live in a racialized society. “A Racialized society is a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships. A racialized society can also be said to be ‘a society that allocates differential economic, political, social, and event psychological rewards to groups along racial lines; that are sociality constructed.”<sup>5</sup>

This social reality has historical context that impacts our social conscious and creates implicit biases in our daily lives, personal relationships, and social systems. In 2012, CNN released a report which stated that children are learning racist thought processes in their homes, and then expressing them when they were as young as six years old. They start becoming aware of racial attitudes as young as five. The report stated that “making friends with kids of other races is hard, and only gets harder as they grow up.”<sup>6</sup>

The problem does not start with children. The Public Religion Research Institute has reported that the majority of white Americans have very few non-white friends,<sup>7</sup> and are very unlikely to have intimate relationships with non-white people—the type of relationships in which they have

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford, Oxford university Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>6</sup> CNN, *A Look at Race Relations through a Child’s Eyes*, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPNJgfDwpw> (accessed March 13, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Ingraham, *Three quarters of whites don’t have any non-white friends*, The Washington Post, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/08/25/three-quarters-of-whites-dont-have-any-non-white-friends/?utm\\_term=.2fb20a7c34ec](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/08/25/three-quarters-of-whites-dont-have-any-non-white-friends/?utm_term=.2fb20a7c34ec) (accessed March 13, 2017).

important conversations or consider the person trustworthy.<sup>8</sup> If their parents' friends are all of one skin color, it should not be surprising that children find engaging with individuals from other people groups hard.

We all have implicit biases—thoughts that turn into actions which are often based on assumptions received and then believed as true. Because they are subconscious, these assumptions are the easiest to adopt unwittingly, and the hardest to identify or correct once they have taken root in our hearts. When unchallenged, such implicit biases have a profound effect, not only on our own relationships but on our kids, and therefore on the society at large.

Racism continues to cast clouds of darkness and division over America. The good news is, only light puts out darkness. If good people do not know the history, do not understand the times, and do not tell the truth about the darkness, then our light remains hidden. Then, *how can people see?* Christians cannot simply accept or ignore the reality of our social condition. We cannot be silent. Our brothers and sisters of color are constantly mourning over these injustices. The Bible affirms that the things which cause my brother or sister to mourn should also be of concern to me (Rom. 12:15). We have a responsibility to renew our minds, to educate ourselves, to humbly confess when we are wrong, and unlearn harmful beliefs and practices. Only then can we intentionally teach our children to love their neighbor by being merciful, valuing our ethnic differences, naming racial injustices when it happens, and prayerfully taking the risk of responding righteously against this evil. This is what the Lord requires of good people (Micah 6:8).

Here are some ways that we can work towards the common good:

**1. Be Hospitable.** Intentionally seek to develop close relationships with those who are of a different ethnic background and/or economic class. This action is more than having minority coworkers as associates. I'm talking about inviting people into your home, being vulnerable, asking tough questions, inviting intentional conversations, and listening well. Try to enter into the life experiences of person of color. Be honest. Confess sin. Pray together.

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<sup>8</sup> Emily Swanson, *Do Most White Americans really Only Have White Friends? Let's Take a Closer Look*, The Huffington Post, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/03/black-white-friends-poll\\_n\\_5759464.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/03/black-white-friends-poll_n_5759464.html) (accessed March 13, 2017).

2. **Educate Yourself.** Read books, watch movies, and documentaries. Having a racial focus in the learning material is not necessary. It is more important to hear the voices, share the experiences, convictions, life rhythms, and practices of people that are different than us. Seek material that is authored and produced by racial and ethnic minorities.

3. **Intentionally pick your Leaders and Mentors.** With the changing demographics in America, it is more important than ever for people of color to have safe places to live authentically, serve humbly, and use their influence and experiences to shape our theology (what we know and believe about God) and our praxis (the ethics of our human behavior or what we actually do). Our institutions—especially the Christian ones— need the leadership of people of color, and our organizational leaders need mentors who are people of color. Our children also need to regularly connect with and learn from minority leaders of color.

4. **Embrace the Other.** Unity in the diversity of God’s kingdom is good, must be prayerfully cultivated for the sake of our Christian witness (John 17:20-21, 23), and is a welcomed eternal reality (Rev. 5:9-10, 7:9). The most affirming thing we can do for our brothers and sisters of color is choosing to see and understand the issues before we speak or act, remembering that small things done with great love can be a source of healing and redemption.

5. **Fight for Justice.** This social reality is systemic not just individual work. While our personal relationships are important, we must also seek to understand how our social structures impact the lives of people who are not like us. Jesus offered good news that had spiritual and physical consequences (Luke 4:18-19). Seeking the common good requires that we commit to and become like God, who is love. Seeking the common good means becoming people of justice who like Jesus, are willing to lay down our lives and privileges for the sake of others (John 15:9-10, 12-14, 17; Phil 2:5-8). Justice is love in action.

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