

The Art of Inclusivity – Which face does God favor?

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BIG IDEA – Inclusivity instead of inferiority.

scripture focus - “The next day as Cornelius’s messengers were nearing the town, Peter went up on the flat roof to pray. It was about noon, and he was hungry. But while a meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the sky open, and something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners. In the sheet were all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. Then a voice said to him, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.” “No, Lord,” Peter declared. “I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean.” But the voice spoke again: “**Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.**” The same vision was repeated three times. Then the sheet was suddenly pulled up to heaven.” **Acts 10:9-16 NLT**

“Each time history repeats itself, the price goes up.” ~ Ronald Wright. When it comes to the division and strife of humanity, under the weight of diversity, the price is enormously high – too high. However, racial discrimination has always existed within our shared life experience and God has never been for it. We have all erred and fallen short of the glory of God, specifically when it comes to how we believe and behave towards one another. A redeemed human being is a reconciled person both to God and the human race. Who is God’s favorite? Which face does God favor? Let’s discover that together.

Where did all this come from?

Racism is discrimination and prejudice towards people based on their race or ethnicity. Racism can be present in social actions, practices, or political systems that **support the expression of prejudice or aversion in discriminatory practices.** The ideology underlying racist practices often **assumes that humans can be**

subdivided into distinct groups that are different in their social behavior and innate capacities and that can be ranked as inferior or superior.

According to the United Nations' **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination**, there is no distinction between the terms "racial" and "ethnic" discrimination. **It further concludes that superiority based on racial differentiation is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust, and dangerous. The convention also declared that there is no justification for racial discrimination, anywhere, in theory or in practice. Thank you, U.N., for upholding a Biblical standard.**

Wikipedia says that **"Racism is a relatively modern concept, arising in the European age of imperialism, the subsequent growth of capitalism, and especially the Atlantic slave trade."**

I am not smart enough to disagree with Wikipedia and the history of the word "racism," but I can tell you that **the ideology did not start in 1902 when Richard Henry Pratt first used the word** (amazing story forthcoming), and it **did not arise because of imperialism or capitalism.**

I'll repeat this as often as I can, racism and division came from our rebellion against God's order and our own bent desires to do whatever we please. Sin is systemic all right, and we are really good at it.

Does that lessen or excuse the atrocities we have done to our black brothers and sisters, or those of every skin color on the human pallet?

No! Each and every offense is egregious and hideous.

But it is a part of our sin story and should never be Biblically twisted to justify our behaviors nor finance our social mobility!

I want to share two stories **about our mistake in thinking that some people are inferior to others.** Let's find out which face God favors!

Which face does God favor?

Inclusivity is the art of including everyone. Why is that so difficult to do? In the past we may have chosen to view people through the lens of “inferiority” rather than inclusivity.

I’m just going to dive into the deep end pool of controversy. Let’s peek into the history of inferiority & racism.

A New Testament biblical figure who struggled with racism was Peter. The “rock.” One of the three leaders of the early church.

Peter saw that the Jews were the superior race of people, and he was prejudiced against the Gentiles.

God decided it was time to reconcile His brand-new Church.

Acts 10:1-8 NLT “In Caesarea there lived a Roman army officer named Cornelius, who was a captain of the Italian Regiment. He was a devout, God-fearing man, as was everyone in his household. He gave generously to the poor and prayed regularly to God. One afternoon about three o’clock, he had a vision in which he saw an angel of God coming toward him. “Cornelius!” the angel said. Cornelius stared at him in terror. “What is it, sir?” he asked the angel. And the angel replied, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have been received by God as an offering! Now send some men to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying with Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore.” As soon as the angel was gone, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier, one of his personal attendants. He told them what had happened and sent them off to Joppa.”

Peter is led to pray and his hunger kicks in.

Acts 10:9-16 NLT

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by its four corners. In the sheet were all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. Then a voice said to him, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat them." "No, Lord," Peter declared. "I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean." But the voice spoke again: "Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean." The same vision was repeated three times. Then the sheet was suddenly pulled up to heaven."

Was this a supernatural coincidence? – Nah, it was pure providence!

Acts 10:19-20 NLT

Meanwhile, as Peter was puzzling over the vision, the Holy Spirit said to him, "Three men have come looking for you. Get up, go downstairs, and go with them without hesitation. Don't worry, for I have sent them.

Peter is reluctantly obedient.

Acts 10:25-29 NLT

As Peter entered his home, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter pulled him up and said, "Stand up! I'm a human being just like you!" So, they **talked together and went inside**, where many others were assembled. Peter told them, "**You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean.**" So, I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. Now tell me why you sent for me.

Peter declares his new position on racial/ethnic profiling.

Acts 10:34-35 NLT

Then Peter replied, "**I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right.**"

End of story, right? Peter being the "head" of the Church has been corrected and has accepted God's position on racism!

WRONG! Even Peter's status and clout could NOT protect him from the word in the street, the "perception of evil," when it was reported that Peter was fraternizing with a gentile, Roman centurion!

Peter was called out!

Acts 11:1-4 NLT

Soon the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. But when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, **the Jewish believers criticized him**. **“You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!”** they said. Then Peter told them exactly what had happened.

God changed Peter’s perspective, but He had to change theirs.

Just to let you know that this whole ethnic profiling was challenged and commanded by God in the Torah (one of the five books of the law), **Deuteronomy 10:14-19 NLT**

Look, the highest heavens and the earth and everything in it all belong to the Lord your God. **Yet the Lord chose your ancestors as the objects of his love. And he chose you, their descendants, above all other nations, as is evident today. Therefore, change your hearts and stop being stubborn.** “For the Lord your God is the God of gods and Lord of Lords. He is the great God, the mighty and awesome God, **who shows no partiality** and cannot be bribed. He ensures that orphans and widows receive justice. **He shows love to the foreigners living among you and gives them food and clothing. So you, too, must show love to foreigners, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.**

Why did God choose this method to change the minds of the Jewish Christians?

- A vision given to a Roman centurion. Acts 10:1-7
- A vision to key leader (Peter) in the early Church? Acts 10:8-17
- Peter experiences what is completely contrary to his understanding of what God is up to? Acts 10:34-47
- Peter, seeing with his own eyes, must face the truth – God favors ALL faces! Acts 10:34
- **Word spreads to the Jewish believers! The word was not, “God favors ALL faces.”**

- The word that traveled was, “Peter entered and ate with Gentiles!” Acts 11:2-3
- Peter must defend himself by blaming God! Acts 11:9
- They all realized this was of God and celebrated! “When the others heard this, they stopped objecting and began praising God.” Acts 11:18 NLT
- **Yet, we know it was still a struggle for the Church leadership to fully wrap their heads around this!**

In Acts 15, the Pharisees made a formal objection to the “loose ways” Gentiles were allowed to experience God! Their demand, “The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses.” Acts 15:5 NLT

This demand still exists in the modern Church today! In other words, God favors only faces that show works of righteousness! God cannot love, cannot forgive, cannot save some by grace alone – they must believe in Jesus, but it must be followed by an external sign of righteousness to fully be saved!

Interesting fact: Peter continued struggling with racial profiling behavior!

The Apostle Paul writing to the churches in Galatia, gave proof defending his apostleship because the Pharisees/now Judaizers tried to discredit him. He writes, **Galatians 2:6-8 NLT** “And the leaders of the church had nothing to add to what I was preaching. (By the way, their reputation as great leaders made no difference to me, for God has no favorites.) Instead, they saw that God had given me the responsibility of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as he had given Peter the responsibility of preaching to the Jews. For the same God who worked through Peter as the apostle to the Jews also worked through me as the apostle to the Gentiles.”

As an example, Paul called out Peter for being a hypocrite!

Galatians 2:11-16 NLT “But when Peter came to Antioch, **I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. When he first**

arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. As a result, other Jewish believers followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. When I saw that they were not following the truth of the gospel message, I said to Peter in front of all the others, "Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions? "You and I are Jews by birth, not 'sinners' like the Gentiles. **Yet we know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law.** And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. **For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law.**"

Peter was alright sharing some bacon with Gentiles, until some friends of James showed up! Then he stopped eating with them because he was afraid of criticism! Paul nails it when he tells the church, **Peter's hypocrisy led to others doing the same thing! The church quit fellowshiping with "those people" because Peter quit fellowshiping with them.**

The story of one man's attempt to tackle racism and how it ended up being America's favorite sport.

That's right, Richard Henry Pratt, who first publicly used the word, "racism" was the catalyst for the creation of American Football.

Lt. Col. Richard Henry Pratt started the The Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1879. Pratt was a fierce abolitionist who believed that Native Americans deserved a place but needed to be "civilized" into American society.

The school's purpose was to facilitate the assimilation of the Native American population into mainstream American society. He is associated with the first recorded use of the word "racism," which he

used in 1902 to criticize racial segregation. **Pratt was not a religious man but believed that God had created all people as equals.** Pratt's experience came from when he had re-entered the Army in March 1867 as a second lieutenant of the 10th United States Cavalry. This was an African American regiment, some of whose members were freedmen. When they were assigned to Fort Sill in the Oklahoma Territory, they were nicknamed by Native Americans as the "Buffalo Soldiers", because of the texture of their hair.

Later, President Grant's Attorney General had ordered all the Native Americans to be sent as prisoners of war for permanent imprisonment at Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Florida. **Pratt was chosen to lead and supervise the prisoners at the fort, because he had experience with both the Indians and interpreters from working on their cases.** After he requested further authority over the prisoners, he began to experiment with education at the fort.

In the 1870s at Fort Marion, he introduced classes in the English language, art, and craftsmanship to several dozen prisoners who had been chosen from among those who had surrendered in the Indian Territory at the end of the Red River War. In addition, he worked to give prisoners agency and some independence: enlisting them in guard duty, assigning them other supervisory roles over their community, leading marching and maneuvers for exercise.

Pratt made a treacherous journey to the Dakota Territory to recruit Carlisle's first students, and **three years later the students started a football team.**

Pratt hired a famous coach to lead the new team – Glenn Scobey Warner, known as Pop Warner, and he created a premier football program at Pratt's the Carlisle Indian Industrial School.

Pop Warner and his "take all" team had taken the most prestigious college teams in the United States. **By 1907, the Carlisle Indians were the most dynamic team in college football. They had pioneered the forward pass, the overhand spiral and other trick plays that frustrated their opponents.**

Even in Pratt's faulty methodology, and what some believe to be Pop Warner's "cultural appropriation," **they were trying to fight against racism and the idea that the Native American wasn't an equal and definitely not inferior to anyone.**

Okay, let's answer the original question, "Who's face is God's favorite?" It's your face! God sees all of us as equals not separated by race, ethnicity, and certainly not by our gender or the color of our skin. The Art of Inclusivity is looking at every human being and knowing that God sees them as His favorite. How can we see them any differently?

I was a white kid, growing up in a white majority neighborhood. I even found out that I grew up with a good friend's brother, who is hispanic. Lupe's brother attended my sister's wedding! I remembered it was the family with all the chickens running around on their property. Lupe and Johnny were a part of Life Center for many years. I was an outlier and felt profiled because I was the "adopted kid" living with divorcee parents and whose father was a drunk. I'm not claiming any kind of mistreatment, I just knew I was different from the rest of the kids in my class.

NOTES

Scriptures

Acts 10:1-8 NLT "In Caesarea there lived a Roman army officer named Cornelius, who was a captain of the Italian Regiment. He was a devout, God-fearing man, as was everyone in his household. He gave generously to the poor and prayed regularly to God. One afternoon about three o'clock, he had a vision in which he saw an angel of God coming toward him. "Cornelius!" the angel said. Cornelius stared at him in terror. "What is it, sir?" he asked the angel. And the angel replied, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have been received by God as an offering! Now send some men to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying with Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore." As soon as the angel was gone, Cornelius called two of his

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is the God of gods and Lord of Lords. He is the great God, the mighty and awesome God, **who shows no partiality** and cannot be bribed. He ensures that orphans and widows receive justice. **He shows love to the foreigners living among you and gives them food and clothing. So you, too, must show love to foreigners, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.**

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Questions

Q: How have you or friends of yours been affected by racism?

Q: Do you believe the ideology of racism was tied to capitalism and imperialism? Why or why not?

Q: What do you think about the Apostle Peter’s struggle with Gentiles?”

Q: What do you think about Peter’s struggle of being “seen” eating with Gentiles?

Q: How do you think the Church’s view on inclusivity would help us welcome all people, regardless of race, color, or culture?

Q: Does God favor some people over others?

COMMENTARY REFERENCES

Lexham Bible Dictionary

Who is Cornelius and why is his story important?

CORNELIUS Roman centurion in Caesarea who was instrumental in spreading the gospel to Gentiles (Acts 10:1–11:18).

Theological Background

The accounts in Acts 10–11 about Cornelius make it a key text in the development of the early church's mission to the Gentiles. **The Old Testament describes the Israelites as special to God in a way that Gentiles were not** (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6, 14:2, 26:18). According to Old Testament law, Gentiles who responded in faith to the God of Israel had to become Jewish proselytes in order to be incorporated into Israel's community. This involved circumcision and the observance of food regulations. **Many early Jewish Christians assumed that Gentiles had to become Jewish proselytes in order to be part of the Church** (Scott, "The Cornelius Incident," 477).

Because Caesarea was the base for Roman military administration, **loyal Jews in Jerusalem considered Caesarea a pagan city** (Kee, *Good News*, 50–51). The conversion of a Roman centurion—a captain in charge of about 100 men—surprised Peter (Acts 10:20, 28–29, 47; 11:17), the Jewish Christians that accompanied him (Acts 10:45), and the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:2–3). **God was now acting in the same way toward uncircumcised Gentiles that He previously had acted toward circumcised Jews** (Acts 11:17–18, compare Acts 2:1–4). Acts 10:1–11:18 addresses the Gentile mission from the authority of God Himself in three ways:

1. a vision to Peter concerning clean and unclean food (Acts 10:9–16; 11:4–10)
2. a vision to Cornelius commanding him to send for Peter (Acts 10:3–8, 30–32; 11:13–14)
3. the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44–46; 11:15–17)

The Character of Cornelius

The book of Acts mentions Cornelius eight times by name (Acts 10:1, 3, 17, 22, 24, 25, 30, 31). He is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. Acts describes Cornelius as an uncircumcised Gentile (Acts 10:28, 35; 11:1–3, 18) who was:

- devout (Acts 10:2)

- just (Acts 10:22, compare Acts 10:35)
- one who feared God (Acts 10:2, 22, compare 10:35)
- one who gave alms generously to the people of Israel (Acts 10:2, 4, 22, 31)
- one who prayed constantly to God (Acts 10:2, 4, 30, 31)
- obedient to the heavenly vision (Acts 10:7–8, 33)
- reverent to the Apostle Peter (Acts 10:25)

The book of Acts exclusively employs the phrases “one who fears God” (φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν, phoboumenos ton theon, Acts 10:2, 22; 13:16, 26) and “one who worships God” (σεβομένην τὸν θεόν, sebomenē ton theon, Acts 16:14, 18:7; compare Acts 13:43, 50; 17:4, 17). The phrases are often understood as technical terms for **Gentiles who embraced Jewish customs and attended synagogue worship without accepting the circumcision necessary to become a proselyte**. However, **in Acts the phrases focus on a person’s piety**—whether Jew or a Gentile (Wilcox, “The ‘God-Fearers’ in Acts,” 102–22).

The Theological Significance of the Cornelius Event

By Old Testament standards, Cornelius was separated from membership in the people of God. His salvation, reception of the Holy Spirit, and baptism shook the foundations of Jewish self-understanding. In the Cornelius account, **God acts in a decisive way to abolish food laws so that Israel may undertake a Gentile mission**. Peter’s comments in Acts 10:28–29, 34–43 show the theological significance of the Cornelius event. According to Peter, Cornelius was aware that it was unlawful for a Jewish man to associate with an uncircumcised Gentile because of the potential for uncleanness (Acts 11:3, Sanders, “Jewish Association,” 170–88). Peter came to Cornelius because God had taught him not to call any person common or unclean (Acts 10:28). **Peter interprets the vision of Acts 10:9–16 in terms of people**. The removal of dietary restrictions would imply a freedom to associate with Gentiles and therefore prepare the way for a legitimate Gentile mission.

The general message of Peter’s speech in Acts 10:34–43 is that Gentiles may receive forgiveness of sins and so experience the gift of salvation and the Holy Spirit. Gentiles are incorporated as Gentiles into fellowship with the Jewish Christians in the Church and share equally with Israel in salvation (Hoch, All Things New, 265). **Peter first argues that God does not show favoritism** (Acts 10:34; compare Deut 10:15–18). The impartiality that God showed to circumcised Gentile proselytes in the past is now extended to uncircumcised Gentiles in the Church. Old Testament food laws are abolished so that Gentiles may be

included in the Church. As an uncircumcised Gentile, Cornelius is accepted as a full member in the church of Jesus Christ along with circumcised Jewish Christians (Acts 10:36). Peter declares, "With reference to the message which God sent to the sons of Israel announcing peace through Jesus Christ: Jesus Christ is Lord of all people" (Acts 10:36). The message of salvation is for Israel first (Acts 3:26, 10:42) because of their place in salvific history and the privileges that accompany that position (compare Rom 3:2, 9:4–5), but Gentiles may share in messianic salvation with Israel on an equal basis now that God has removed all nationalistic barriers. Peter stresses that Jesus is Lord of all people. He is developing a remnant theology in which a group within Israel responds to their Messiah and embarks on an evangelistic mission to both Jews and Gentiles. This remnant of ethnic Israel becomes the foundation of the Church.

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance

Acts 10:34: Favoritism. prosópolémptés: an accepter of a face, i.e. a respecter of persons. one who shows partiality. This word is only found here in the New Testament. The word is a combination of two Greek words: prosópon and lambanó. prosópon is face and lambanó is receive. It's kind of beautiful when you think about God looking at the massive sea of humanity and receiving each and every face as His favorite! What's even cooler, in the Greek Peter says, he now "knows."

Peter now knows...

One kind of know in Greek is katalambanó: to lay hold of, seize. But this kind of knowing is also a combination of two words: from kata and lambanó. Kata: according to and lambanó is, as you see above, to receive. Just as God receives all faces, Peter receives, understands or lays hold of this new knowledge!

Faithlife Study Bible

Cornelius' Conversion and the Mission to the Gentiles

God's bestowing of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius in the same manner as at Pentecost played a decisive role in determining how the early church carried out the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–19). Despite many references to "the nations" being included within God's salvation plan (Matt 28:19; Mark 13:10; Luke 24:47; Acts 15:17; Rom 15:9–12; 16:26), some Jewish believers were still hesitant to embrace this mission.

Peter's reluctance about God's plan for the Gentiles was first challenged by his divine vision (Acts 10:9–17, 28), then by the Spirit's direction to visit Cornelius (Acts 10:19–20, 28–29). The most compelling factor, however, was when he and "those

believers from the circumcision who had accompanied [him]" saw the Holy Spirit poured out "even on the Gentiles," evidenced by their speaking in tongues (Acts 10:45). This had only ever happened to one other group: the apostles and believers at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4).

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, his concerns about engaging in fellowship with non-Jews (Acts 10:28) seemed to be well-founded—the Jerusalem leadership seems to be shocked (Acts 11:3). To explain himself Peter recounted the story of his vision, invitation, and ministry to Cornelius (Acts 11:3). **But it was God's outpouring of the Spirit—without the laying on of hands—that swayed the Jerusalem leadership to accept the Gentiles as part of the Christian community (Acts 11:14–17).** However, the statement in Acts 11:18 clearly indicates that they hadn't expected the inclusion of the Gentiles. At first, they were silent.

Cornelius' reception of the Spirit was also used as support for God's mission to the Gentiles in Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas were appealing to the Jerusalem Council not to require believing Gentiles to be circumcised. After a heated debate, Peter reminded them of what they had learned from Cornelius (Acts 15:7–9). God had chosen Peter to preach the gospel to Gentiles, and He had chosen to testify "to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us" (Acts 15:8).

the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us" (Acts 15:8). God made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Once again, the leaders responded with silence, listening to Paul and Barnabas recount all that God had done among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). Then the Jerusalem leaders made the decision to affirm God's plan for Gentile believers (Acts 11:19–29).

Peter had twice been at the forefront of successfully countering Jewish efforts to forbid uncircumcised Gentiles from joining in fellowship with Jewish Christians. This situation changed in Antioch (Gal 2:11–14). "For before certain people came from James" (who was ostensibly the brother of Jesus and a leader in the Jerusalem church) and arrived in Antioch, leading Peter, Barnabas, and the other Jews to revert to practicing the very Jew and Gentile distinction that he had previously opposed.

Just as Peter alludes to the price he could pay for associating with a non-Jew (Acts 10:28), many people today fear the response of fellow believers to their association with non-Christians. But God's mission extends beyond existing believers just as much today as it did in Peter's time.

Steven E. Runge

[Internet Links](#)

Scientific Racism – Harvard

Racism - **Racism** is discrimination and prejudice towards people based on their race or ethnicity. Racism can be present in social actions, practices, or political systems that support the expression of prejudice or aversion in discriminatory practices. The ideology underlying racist practices often assumes that humans can be subdivided into distinct groups that are different in their social behavior and innate capacities and that can be ranked as inferior or superior.

Racism, bias, and discrimination

Racism is a form of prejudice that assumes that the members of racial categories have distinctive characteristics and that these differences result in some racial groups being inferior to others. Racism generally includes negative emotional reactions to members of the group, acceptance of negative stereotypes, and racial discrimination against individuals; in some cases it leads to violence.

Discrimination refers to the differential treatment of the members of different ethnic, religious, national, or other groups. Discrimination is usually the behavioral manifestation of prejudice and therefore involves negative, hostile, and injurious treatment of members of rejected groups.

The Ugly, Fascinating History Of The Word 'Racism' - Richard Henry Pratt

American Football – How Richard Pratt and Pop Warner created a global phenomenon.

Gridiron Guts: The Story of Football's Carlisle Indians -

Is America suffering a 'social recession'?

Polling has demonstrated a marked decline in all spheres of social life, including close friendships, intimate relationships, trust, labor participation and community involvement.

The decline comes alongside a documented rise in mental illness, diseases of despair and poor health more generally. In August 2022, the CDC announced

that US life expectancy had fallen to where it was in 1996. Contrast this to western Europe, where life expectancy has largely rebounded to pre-pandemic numbers. Even before the pandemic, the years 2015-2017 saw the longest sustained decline in US life expectancy since 1915-18, when the US was grappling with the 1918 flu and the first world war.