

LET'S GET REAL

A series of conversations on racism



Photo:
<https://www.the-scientist.com/news-opinion/opinion-the-politics-of-science-and-racism--67835>

It's time to ask the hard questions.

Racism is evil and has no place in our society. As the church, we are called to speak openly and honestly about this as we work to eradicate sin. Many of the congregants at West Lawn UMC have come together over the course of the pandemic to join-forces in a new educational endeavor entitled *Let's Get Real: a conversation on racism*.

In these conversations, Pastor of Young Adults, Allison Gieringer sits down with Minister of Music, John Coakley, as well as Associate Pastor and ex-police officer, Chris Hardy, to have very open and REAL conversations about racism, and the role Christians play in overcoming it.

For part three of this series, John, Chris and Allison put pen to paper by each responding to a series of "hard questions" regarding racism that are often being asked in the media and in society today.

Real Talk

A BLOG-STYLED CONVERSATION

BY JOHN COAKLEY, CHRIS HARDY, & ALLISON GIERINGER

"If you need to put 'Black' before 'Lives Matter,' then you are the racist."

Chris: Each week in worship it is a sacred privilege to share with one another our prayers, lifting to God our greatest of joys and our gravest of concerns. During this time, if, for example, Jane Doe asks for healing prayers for her child, my response would never be, "What about the other children, don't they matter? Why are you focusing just on your child?" To which, in this hypothetical and unfortunate example, I would hope the exasperated mother would reply, "Because the other children here aren't suffering." Of course, all children matter – all of God's children matter – just the same as all lives matter. Yet, when some of God's children are suffering, it's our duty to act like Christ and help them heal and to be well, but also to make the world such a place that they do not get sick in the first place.

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Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another.

Romans 12:13-15, ESV

Allison: I wish we could all adopt this mindset. I firmly believe that we can, but we must all stand united in that choice. I cannot help but think of Romans 12:15 when I read these words: as Christians, we are called to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, (and) weep with those who weep." In fact, Jesus wept with those He knew and loved. Jesus never tried to justify his own human pain or uncomfortably over the afflictions of others. He ministered to all people not only with His words, but with His actions. If we cannot grasp this simple truth, that it is our duty to love one another the way Christ loves us, and gave Himself up for us, how can we ever expect to become more like Jesus? Many wonder, "What is the answer to ending racism in America?" I believe that this answer is simple; we must weep with those who weep.

"People are lining up to immigrate to the United States, therefor the U.S. 'cannot be that bad' or be oppressive, especially for those coming from Africa."

Chris: As Christians, we are on a lifelong journey of faith, continuing to grow in the grace of Jesus Christ, and becoming more Christ-like day by day – this is known as sanctification. If we believe in sanctification, which is an admission that, by nature, we are people separated from God, i.e. sinners, and in need of redemption, and that the process is continual and lifelong, how can we not think a similar model doesn't apply to our human-created nations? As Christians we can also grow, and as a nation we can always grow. There was only one perfect person, who also happened to be God. And while I wouldn't want to be a citizen of any other nation, The United States of America is not perfect and, like each of us, has a long way to go on this journey to be more Christ-like. To disparage others for wanting to immigrate to the US and then compare our standards to the country in which they are emigrating from, often because of inhumane and life-threatening conditions, does not relinquish us from the duty of desiring the best for God's people.

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John: The idea that living in the United States of America is a better life position for some that are coming from war-torn and economically disadvantaged parts of the world is not difficult to understand. This does not lend itself to the understanding that the problems that exist in the US are in any way lessened or do not exist. It just means that the problems here are less than those in other countries. The fact that we live in a society that is not riddled with the problems of some other country does not mean we do not have issues of our own. The fact that our nation is less problematic than others is a wonderful blessing that we share as Americans, but it is not a comment on the perfection of our nation. There is nothing perfect that is of man- not even our great country. We still struggle with with economic disparities, with the inequality of men and women, and with institutionalized, but possibly unintentional, racism. Only things of God are perfect.

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Allison: America is a geographical place, it cannot choose to be racist. However, those of us that identify ourselves as Americans, the people that live in America and call it our home, have a choice of what kind of culture we want to continue to create, including necessary reform. Racism, by definition is, “prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against a person or people on the basis of their membership of a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized.” When I read this definition, I unfortunately relate it back to behavior that can truly be seen all over the world. As Christians, we also know that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). I believe that the enemy’s greatest tactic of choice is to stir-up division. Racism is a prominent problem in this world because we are wrestling with these spiritual forces of evil that the Bible talks about. We are also reminded, in this same chapter in Ephesians, that God has given us tactics of our own to help us walk in the power and unity that comes with following Jesus: “Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm..” (Ephesians 6:13). As Christians in America, we have no reason to not fight for unity. It is very clear that God has called us to fight for that very thing.

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Chris: Racism exists everywhere, including The United States of America. When we review our country’s history, which includes but is not limited to, the extermination of the indigenous people, the kidnapping, importing, and enslaving of Africans, the marginalization of immigrants from across the world, and the systemic racism imbedded into our modern-day society, it is clear that racism has existed and still exists. Fortunately, we do not have to be prisoners of our past sin. As Christians, we can repent, make amends for the transgressions committed against so many people, and work towards building a society that is just for all – one that is indicative of God’s kingdom.

"The US has already done enough, (e.g. Civil Rights Act, Affirmative Action, Welfare, Food Stamps, school busing, etc). Many blacks have taken advantage of these programs and opportunities in order to achieve and succeed in America."

John: The US has done some things to assist those of color that have been disadvantaged in this country. However, often those programs and ideas do not go far enough and allow people to slip back into poverty, violence, and drugs as soon as a new president or legislature is sworn in. On the whole, institutionalized racism still exists and still perpetuates a system where black children are taught from an early age that they are not as smart, not as attractive, and not as desirable as any white child. Eventually, that takes a toll on an ethnic group, and begins to dampen their ability to overcome feelings of inadequacy. Slowly the group fails as inventors, they do not invent, investors do not invest, and those that have exceptional abilities resign themselves to a life of failure. All of these government programs that throw money at a problem that exists in the heart of the people, will not really bring about real change.

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Chris: When I hear the comment that the "U.S. has already done enough to help blacks," it not only disturbs me, but it reeks of privilege from those that say it. When we read between the lines of this statement, I hear, "We (white people, i.e. the majority of the population, those that have power, authority, and wealth) have done enough for you to help you survive, can't you figure it out on your own?" And to that - no, we, myself included, have not done enough. What John says is true- it is a sociological principle: violence begets violence, and that can be extended to poverty begets poverty and so on and so forth. Throwing money into an "assistance" program, which is really meant to make us (the majority, i.e. white people) feel better, is not going to solve the problem of the underlying, systemic, centuries-entrenched cycle of poverty begetting poverty in our black community.



Photo: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/jandd/2020/09/the-economic-cost-of-racism-losavio.htm>

"Blacks need to work harder to do better in their own lives by taking personal responsibility, and stop playing the victim."

"Blacks need to get educated and apply themselves. Fathers need to be fathers and stop leaving their children. Illegitimacy rates and drugs are a plague to the black community."

John: I do not disagree with anything in this statement, but I disagree with the premise that those of color need to do this on their own, as if for repayment or as a punishment for bad behavior, and in a vacuum. Black communities did not get to the point of poverty and violence that some are in without the lack of help and the lack of support of the greater American community. Conversely, the greater America did not get as rich and as powerful as it is today without the physical strength and ideas of black Americans. Institutional racism that was designed to keep black people stupid and poor has worked perfectly over the past centuries. So much so, that some black people have difficulty envisioning themselves as anything more than the mostly poor and uneducated masses. Oftentimes, black and brown parents can't even imagine for their children a future that does not include poverty, and they unintentionally sabotage their children's attempts to better themselves. Problems like drugs and broken families will fix themselves when black people realize that their lives are worth something and should not be thrown away like yesterday's garbage.

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Allison: "Problems like drugs and broken families will fix themselves when black people realize that their lives are worth something and should not be thrown away like yesterday's garbage." I had to reiterate this sentence because of the impeccable truth and power behind it. I agree that not only the Black community, but any and every community that is struggling with the issues of poverty, poor education, drug abuse, illegitimacy rates, etc- can all relate to the need for more help and support from communities and people groups that might not (and probably are not) struggling with the same issues. I believe that one of the best things White communities can do, is to not only empower young Black people to pursue their passions, gifts, and desires in America, but White communities must continue to give credit where credit is due. I am not speaking of a need to glorify someone because of the color of their skin, but I am speaking of encouragement, recognition and esteem that can literally speak life into any situation. Black people do not "need" the help of the White community in order to do great things, and make a difference- the Black community has been doing that on their own in remarkable ways for centuries- however, the White community (and others) should possess a greater desire to see the needs of the Black community, and come together to meet them. This should not be a "White people need to help Black people" issue, but it should be empowered by the basic human principle of loving your neighbor more than yourself, and doing unto others as they would do unto you.

Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

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Romans 12:14-16, MSG

We need to take a stand.

Despite the varying opinions seen in our world today, we must agree on one thing- Jesus- the same Jesus we read about in the Bible and talk about in our churches- loves all people. He gave His life for all people, and dedicated His entire ministry to loving people well, and comforting those who needed to be comforted.

In John 13:34-35, Jesus reminds us:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

The call of the Christian is to love. The *mark* of the Christian, is also to love. Just as the old hymn says, "They will know we are Christians by our love", let us make this our goal. Let us stand united with one another to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. When we do this, we not only grow stronger as the body of Christ, but we live so that **everyone will know** we are followers of Jesus.

- a.g.

