



# RACELESS



# GOSPEL

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

| Galatians 3.27-28, NRSV



The Raceless Gospel Initiative proposes a faith seeking understanding – without race and is interrupting your regularly scheduled church programming around the sociopolitical construct. Let's talk about race and the face of God, face our theological misunderstandings of the subject, how it makes humans beings objects in a capitalist empire and how it turns Jesus into a cultural mascot. Still segregated on Sundays, we've got to put our heads together if we are to ever join our hands together in praise of our God as evidence of that Pentecost Spirit and as an answer to Jesus' prayer: "so that they may be one, as we are one..." (John 17.22, NRSV). Amen.

### *Clarification of Terms:*

Race is defined by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in their pivotal work *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* "as an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.

With this in mind, let us propose a definition: race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.

Although the concept of race invokes biologically based human characteristics (so-called 'phenotypes'), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process. In contrast to the other major distinction of this type, that of gender, there is no biological basis for distinguishing among human groups along the lines of race."<sup>[1]</sup> Race has no biological basis as determined by the American Anthropological Association, which released an official statement on May 17, 1998.<sup>[2]</sup>

It also has no biblical origin. Despite the claims of a Hamitic curse on persons of African descent, which relegated them an inferior status and perpetual servitude, African American religious scholars like Frank M. Snowden have debunked claims of the existence of race in ancient text.<sup>[3]</sup> Instead, it is a re-framing of sacred writ that puts a seventeenth century lens on a first century text as race is the product of the European Enlightenment period.<sup>[4]</sup>

Race is instead a contract as brilliantly outlined by Charles W. Mills in *The Racial Contract* where he writes, "But the peculiar contract to which I am referring, though based on the social contract tradition that has been central to Western political theory, is not a contract between everybody ('we the people'), but between just the people who count, the people who really are people ('we the white people'). So, it is a Racial Contract."<sup>[5]</sup>



### ***Initiative Description:***

The Raceless Gospel Initiative is a didactic and multifaceted ministry of communication that decolonizes and deracializes Christianity by decentering the sociopolitical construct of race and its progeny through resourceful teaching and relevant preaching, prophetic witness and courageous conversations, experiential learning and community-building, soul-bearing writing and publication for the sake of Jesus' gospel and in hopes of practicing an inclusive hospitality for a raceless "kin-dom"<sup>[6]</sup> of God to come.

The Raceless Gospel Initiative aims to walk alongside both lay and ordained Christian leaders, churches, faith-based institutions and organizations in conversations and in consultations about race, its progeny and its many intersections, evaluating the depth of race's influence and impact on theology, Christology, pneumatology and ecclesiology while educating on the depraving and dehumanizing effects of the sociopolitical construct that ultimately defaces the *Imago Dei* in all human beings for the sake of a capitalist hierarchy that prioritizes the economic and educational, legal and physical, natural and nuanced, social and spiritual needs of human beings based on their physical appearance, both constructed (as there are no physically colored beige, black, brown, red, white or yellow people) and real.

### ***Initiative Objectives:***

The Raceless Gospel Initiative seeks to ultimately undermine the credibility of the sociopolitical construct of race in all Christian communications and in all Christian communities so that Jesus followers can live more deeply into their baptismal identity as expressed by the murderer turned missionary Paul to the community at Galatia: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3.27-28, NRSV).<sup>[7]</sup>

Not to confused with a "melting pot," Jesus followers die to their categorical selves in order to become one with Christ, identified by his body alone. Therefore, the Raceless Gospel proclaims, "There is no longer beige or black, there is no longer brown or red, there is no longer white or yellow; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. The Raceless Gospel Project does not support an anti- racist Church but an anti- race Church as race is the system of belief that enables the practice of racism.

### ***Initiative Justification:***

The Raceless Gospel Initiative is desperately needed as the Church in North America's chief cornerstone is race with attempts to address it relegated to committees, pulpit swaps and community days.

Brad Christerson, Korie L. Edwards and Michael O. Emerson capture this painful reality in *Against All Odds: The Struggle for Racial Integration in Religious Organizations*, reporting that 90 percent of congregations were



90 percent one “race” in 2000.<sup>[8]</sup> The Pew Research Center reported in a 2014 study that many religious groups were growing increasingly more diverse. However, the report found that denominations like American Baptist Churches USA, the Southern Baptist Convention and the National Baptist Convention were overwhelmingly represented by one nationality or the other.<sup>[9]</sup>

Still segregated and most divided on Sunday mornings, race has gotten in the way of Christianity and its assimilation is evidenced by the very existence of the Black Church, the White Church, the Red Church, the Yellow Church and so on. Race leads the way that it is defined, established and practiced.<sup>[10]</sup> Coloring in the face of God and Jesus<sup>[11]</sup> while insisting that the Holy Spirit tows the color line, the Church in North America must first address its complicity in the normalizing of race and its progeny, through preaching, teaching, worship and the like.

The calls for a thorough investigation of race and its place in society, the deracializing of the Church in North America and visions of its end are evident with the most recent publication of books like Isabel Wilkerson’s *Caste: The Origin of our Discontents*, Robert P. Jones’ *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (2020), Willie James Jennings’ *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (2020), Jemar Tisby’s *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (2019) and Katharine Gerbner’s *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (2018), the present-day activism of race abolitionists and “eliminativists” and a long history of prophetic witness to include Harriet Tubman, W.E.B. DuBois, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X,<sup>[12]</sup> James Baldwin and Toni Morrison questioned white power/ supremacy, white Christianity, whiteness and “the white gaze.”<sup>[13]</sup>

Therefore, the Church in North America’s witness is compromised, disqualifying it from leading conversations on race and subsequently, reconciliation.

Too often not the model community, The Raceless Gospel Initiative extends an invitation to the church in North America to work out its salvation, its deliverance from race in order that it might stand alongside those who are murdered, marginalized, oppressed and sacrificed for the sake of it.

The United States Department of Justice reported in 2019 that 57.6 percent of all hate crimes were based on race/ethnicity/ ancestry bias.<sup>[14]</sup> The Church in North America must develop a consistent and communal response to these harsh realities. It must account for its silence and finally answer the question posed by Howard Thurman in his seminal text *Jesus and the Disinherited*, “Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin?”<sup>[15]</sup>

This community was called to live a counter-narrative and this is an opportunity for Jesus followers to believe and behave as citizens of



another world that does not reflect the vices and values of a world that categorizes and capitalizes on human bodies.

### *Initiative Goals and Outcomes:*

The initiative is focused on increasing awareness, as well as understanding of and informed engagement in conversations about race and its progeny, with the subject of racelessness normalized and included in preaching, teaching and de-racialization as a practice of discipleship.

We strive to empower communities and individuals of faith to:

- Write vulnerably inclusive stories for their communities that reflect the divisions that race, prejudice, stereotyping and “white flight” have created and the unity that Jesus calls them to embody as reflective of his own.
- Cultivate a Christian culture that deracializes theology and ecclesiology, transforming our understanding of the human body, the human being and the human belonging in a world where God is the only sovereign.
- Remove all color-coded images, which is not to be confused with culturally accurate depictions reflective of the time, of biblical characters from sacred spaces; and absolutely no coloring in of the Trinity, angels, demons, heaven or hell as this wrongly suggests a creation and salvation narrative that does not include all nationalities.

Four hundred years of racialization, affecting every subject matter and square inch of living and even dying in the United States, I do not see an end in sight for this work, but it is well past time for the church in North America to begin.

## Endnotes:

[1] Michael Omi & Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 55.

[2] “AAA Statement on Race,” <https://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2583>, Accessed on March 20, 2021.

[3] Frank M. Snowden writes in *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*, “Color prejudice has been a major issue in the modern world. W.E.B. DuBois called it the “problem of the twentieth century,” and D.B. Saddington, among others, notes that racial difficulties are at their worst when associated with differences in skin color. Notable, therefore, is the fact that the ancient world did not make color the focus of irrational sentiments or the basis for uncritical evaluation.”

Frank M. Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 63.

See also Gay L. Byron’s *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002).

[4] See Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, Ed., *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd, 1997).

[5] Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 3.

[6] During a visit with her friend and Franciscan nun Georgene Wilson, Ada María Isasi-Díaz was heard the word for the first time: kin-dom rather than kingdom.

[7] Paul repeats this claim in Colossians 3.9-11: “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal, there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!”

[8] Brad Christerson, Korie L. Edwards, and Michael O. Emerson, *Against All Odds: The Struggle for Racial Integration in Religious Organizations*, (New York, NY, New York University Press, 2005), 3.

[9] Michael Lipka, “The Most and Least Racially Diverse U.S. Religious Groups,” <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>, Accessed on March 20, 2021. ABC- USA (“73% white”); Southern Baptist Convention (“85% white”); National Baptist Convention (“99 % black”)

[10] See Henry Mitchell’s *Black Church Beginnings: The Long- Hidden Realities of the First Years*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004) as well as Albert J. Raboteau’s *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ of the Antebellum South*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[11] See Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey write in *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* about the myths of race and religion in America: “It pretends that American history can be told from a unique, segregated racial perspectives and that each group has its own distinct relationship with Jesus” (19).

Edward J. Blum & Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

[12] Often viewed as a controversial figure, Malcolm X ultimately came to love all people—before he was horrifically assassinated in front of his family. See Malcolm X’s book *The End of White World Supremacy* where he envisions the end of colonialism, white supremacy and what he deems “white-ism.”

[13] See David R. Roediger, Ed., *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1998) and also *Working toward Whiteness, The Wages of Whiteness, Toward the Abolition of Whiteness*, which are all by Roediger. See also James W. Perkinson’s *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity*, (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004). There is also a dedicated academic field for this work, Whiteness Studies.

[14] “2019 Hate Crime Statistics,” <https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/hate-crime-statistics>, Accessed on March 20, 2021.

[15] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1976), xix.

