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—**Kyle Idleman**, pastor and author of *Not a Fan*

CORE



A FIFTEEN-MINUTE DAILY GUIDE
TO BUILD **YOUR BIBLE IQ** IN A YEAR

MARK E. MOORE

CORE 52

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God's Solution to Racism

He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.

—ACTS 17:26

Question: What is the Christian solution to racism?

We recognize that we live in a nation with deep racial tensions. Yet this isn't merely a national crisis; it's a Christian crisis. Many churches are as deeply divided as their communities. For the children of God, this is a family affair. Our Father is being scandalized because his children are practicing the worst kind of sibling rivalry.

Racial Division in the Old Testament

There is only one human race; there are many nations. Why? According to the history of the Bible, there were two pivotal moments that drove a wedge between brothers, causing a division of languages, cultures, nations, and ethnicities. The first came right after the Flood, when Noah's three sons went their separate ways: "The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. . . . These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the

people of the whole earth were dispersed” (Genesis 9:18–19). Because of his sin, Ham was cursed and alienated from his brothers (verses 22–27).

The second moment was the Tower of Babel, when people said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4). Because of their arrogance, God confused their languages, causing separation among them (verses 6–8).

Because of human sin, people were dispersed. Dispersion is not the problem. God intended humans to rule the entire earth. Diversity is not the problem. God created us genetically to have all kinds of delightful differences. The problem is domination of one people group over others.

God chose the nation of Israel to be his people—not because they were the “best” but because they would be his means of reaching all people. Isaiah 49:6 says,

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

After all, by God’s initial creative act, all people are his children: “He made from one man every nation of mankind” (Acts 17:26). Furthermore, God has embedded his own image in every human soul (Genesis 1:27).

Racial Reconciliation in the New Testament

Jesus seldom interacted with Gentiles (non-Jewish people), and when he did, it was always tentative. So it might be easy to imagine that Jesus didn’t actively address racial reconciliation. However, you can’t take Jesus seriously without moving outward toward others.

That’s why the book of Acts has more to say about interethnic evangelism

than anything else except salvation. Before Christians spread the gospel to all the world, they had to be convinced of the full humanity of other ethnic groups. That required more effort from God than one might expect. His slow yet purposeful progress was clear and deliberate.

Tracing the movement from Acts 6 through Acts 10 is instructive. In Acts 6 the disciples were forced to deal with the tension between Hebrew widows and those of a more Hellenistic background (verses 1–5). Granted, both were Jewish, but some weren't quite as kosher.

In Acts 8 Peter was sent with John to check out the newly founded Samaritan congregation—a blended people group of Jewish and other ethnicities (verse 14). These so-called half-breeds were soaking up God's grace (verses 5–13).

In Acts 9 we find Peter living at the home of Simon the tanner (verse 43). His occupation rendered him ritually unclean. This must have stretched Peter's comfort zone.

In Acts 10 Peter saw a vision of unclean animals. When God ordered him to eat, Peter objected to eating anything “unclean” (verses 10–14). God objected to Peter's objection. You see, this lesson was not about food but about Gentile inclusion. God punctuated the point with these memorable words: “What God has made clean, do not call common” (verse 15).

The vision was followed by a direct command of the Holy Spirit, who ordered Peter to follow three Gentiles who “coincidentally” arrived at Simon's gate at that precise moment (verses 19–20). Peter went with them to Cornelius's house, where he preached the good news of Jesus. The Holy Spirit made yet another appearance, and Cornelius and his household miraculously spoke in tongues. Peter baptized them into Jesus (verses 23–48).

We should learn two lessons from this. First, racism is a difficult hurdle for most of us. To deny that we have some prejudice is probably more arrogant than any of us can afford to be. Second, this is no small issue in the Bible because it's no small issue to God.

Interethnic evangelism is a key theme in Acts because it's key to the Great Commission. When Jesus said to make disciples of all *nations* (Matthew 28:19), the Greek wording literally means “all ethnic groups.”

Racial reconciliation in Christ is a core principle in Paul's letters. Because racism is a consequence of sin, God is dead set on killing it through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ: "Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:13–14). This "dividing wall" was a literal barricade in the temple of Jerusalem barring Gentiles from entering. Archaeologists have found two segments of this wall with an inscription that reads, "No foreigner may enter within the balustrade around the sanctuary and the enclosure. Whoever is caught, on himself shall he put blame for the death which will ensue."¹ Jesus came to destroy every barrier that was keeping any person from coming to God.

God wants all people in his heaven but not just to gather a great crowd. Nor does God expect us to evangelize other groups because as good humanists we need to be nice to one another. It's not even simply that God values diversity or loves the whole world (which is, of course, true). The primary reason God wants all ethnic groups in heaven is because anything less is beneath his dignity. We evangelize the whole world because only then can our great God receive the praise he deserves from every people and tribe.

John put it this way in Revelation:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (7:9–10)

Anyone irritated by multiculturalism will be miserable in heaven.

Racial Reconciliation in the Church

Every person has a heart language. Even those who learn multiple other languages will still pray in their heart language. This heart language involves not

just vocabulary but also social values, body language, and traditions. Granted, we should all be flexible, especially for the sake of evangelism. However, it's unfair and probably unrealistic to ask culture groups to blend their heart languages in worship.

The bottom line is this: the path to ethnic unity is not through culturally combined services but through cooperative community service. Churches must begin partnering to pour God's love into specific geographic areas. Suburban churches with professional and financial resources could partner with inner-city churches whose experience and relationships could open doors to migrant workers, refugees, the generational poor, etc. This is only one example of literally thousands that could demonstrate racial reconciliation in view of the broader unchurched community.

In order for this to work, however, there needs to be a Barnabas (if you're unfamiliar with his story, it's recorded in Acts 11:19–30). This individual must be full of the Holy Spirit and respected in the communities that are serving together. And this person must be willing to risk his own reputation, as Barnabas did for the likes of Saul of Tarsus as well as for John Mark (9:26–27; 15:37–39).

Racial reconciliation is worth fighting for.

It has become apparent that racial reconciliation will not be brought about through government programs, humanistic propaganda, sensitivity training, or integrated education. In fact, our human efforts in recent decades have largely encouraged ethnic groups to protect their own turf and demand their own rights.

Jesus, however, calls for abandonment of self in the service of others. As long as we keep protecting our own interests, racial tensions will continue to fester.

There are two places where racism has failed to gain significant traction—the battlefield and the athletic field. Here the enemy is clearly identified. Our differences are insignificant compared with our shared goals. The key therefore to racial reconciliation is to gather diverse groups under a banner that's larger than themselves.

The good news for Christians is that Jesus is our banner. If we'll focus on

him, we will inevitably be brought together. This is precisely why *only in the church of Jesus Christ will our culture find racial reconciliation*. There's simply no other banner large enough to encompass our diversity.

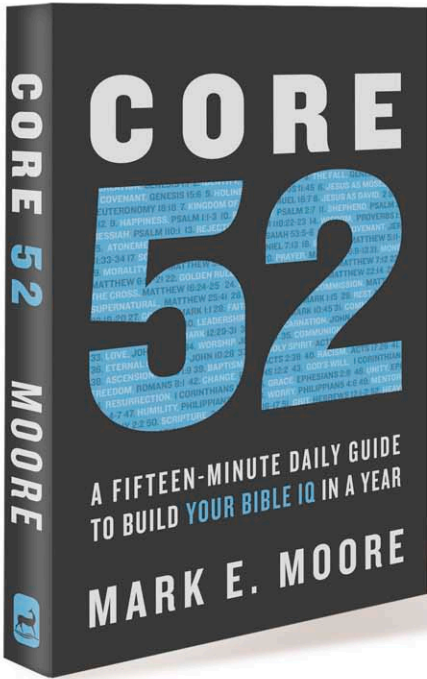
So we're morally obligated to use our influence, advantages, and resources to bring about racial reconciliation, especially in the body of Christ. Consider the exhortation of James 4:17: "Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."

Key Points

- Global dispersion and diversity are healthy; domination because of prejudice is sin.
- The gospel message and the Great Commission are designed to overcome sin of all sorts, including racism. This is a clear emphasis throughout Acts and the epistles.
- The local church is the hope of the world, especially in overcoming racism.

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