



“Dear White Christians” Study Guide

Part One: Reconciliation? Where We Are and Why (chapters 1 through 3)

1. What has been your experience with talk of “reconciliation” at church (or talk about “diversity” where you work or go to school)?
2. “We use the common theological term ‘reconciliation’ to describe [our] vision [of interracial togetherness]. We speak of the Christian community as ‘being one in Christ,’ employing metaphors about family, about brotherhood and sisterhood, to talk about who we should be to one another and what our fellowship *should* be like” (page 19).

Where have you seen reconciliation be successful? What does that success look like? What has it felt like when you have seen reconciliation fail?

3. What feelings does exercise one (pages 43 to 45) elicit for you if you imagine trying it yourself? What kind of conversation would this exercise lead to in your church community?
4. Harvey describes an exercise in which she asks students to envision a group of African American students carrying signs that read “Black is beautiful” and then a group of white students carrying signs that read “White is beautiful.” She claims that our different responses to these scenes (alone with exercise one, pages 43 to 45) demonstrate that “white” and “Black” are not parallel to each other.

What is your reaction to this idea? Does it leave you relieved or frustrated, clear or confused, hopeful or despairing, and/or somewhere in between these poles?

5. How has your experience of your racial identity impacted your relationships to people who have a different racial identity than yours? How has your experience of your racial identity impacted your relationship to “reconciliation”? Does the idea that “white” and “Black” are not parallel impact how you understand your relationships to others and/or to reconciliation?

6. “Race was literally built here as moves to institutionalize chattel slavery relentlessly tangoed with discourses that referenced the look of various bodies. . . . ‘Negro’ was a physical reference made to contain African-descended peoples as legally enslavable. It was also through reference to physical differences that Native peoples were declared ‘savage’ in nature—in a context wherein a presumed savage status ‘justified’ dispossession and genocide at the hands of the ‘nonsavage.’ . . . [T]he unequivocally *racial* apex of [the story of the 1600s] came at the end of the century. . . . ‘White’ literally came into existence as a racial identity through the construction of the same systems built to enact and sustain systemic violence against and complete subjugation of the darker-skinned” (pages 50 to 51).

What questions, insights or other reactions does the history described in chapter two—about how racial categories emerged—elicit for you? How should this history impact the way we talk about race in the church?

7. In response to the history of race emerging in the United States, Harvey writes this:

“People of African descent reinterpreted Christian Scriptures, risked life and limb by funning North, came back again for family members, revolted, petitioned the U.S. government to recognize their rights, and on and on. . . . In the process of collective and sustained subversive action, African Americans forged identities that were unique and easily distinguishable from white supremacy’s agenda. One might usefully say that the ‘blackness’ that white supremacy constructed, disparaged, and subjugated has been repeatedly transformed, re-created, embraced, and celebrated as ‘Blackness’ over the course of U.S. history. . . . An ethical tragedy however, ‘whiteness’ emerged as people of European descent flourished by largely complying with supremacist social processes . . . The agency of the light-skinned has had disastrous moral consequences for the construction of ‘white’ and for white racial identity” (page 54).

Whether you identify as white or as a person of color, have you ever experienced a time when you knew that your identity or the identity of someone you were in relationship with was shaped by white supremacy? What did you do in response to this recognition?

8. Harvey describes “reconciliation today as a ‘white’ vision” (pg. 67). This claim flies in the face of much church conversation about race. What are some of the specific reasons she gives for this claim? What is your reaction to this claim?

9. In what ways is your community’s work on racial justice “reconciliation” focused? In what ways is your community’s work on racial justice reparative, or focused on repairing actual harm done (pg. 95-95)?

10. What are the most frequent biblical images or passages your community makes reference to when it talks about race and racial justice? Are these biblical references more reconciliatory or reparative?

11. “ ‘Race,’ writes Ian Haney López, ‘connect[s] our faces to our souls.’ . . . Race has been and continues to be constructed. It is a process through which people—human communities—live out behaviors and make choices in response to unjust legal, economic, and political structures. These choices shape our very humanity, as we are all thoroughly and differently racialized in this ongoing, dynamic exchange” (page 57).

Do you find this paragraph difficult or hope-giving? What are its implications for you in your own experience and actions in regard to race and your own racial identity?

Part Two: Reparations! Going Backward before Going Forward (chapters 4 through 6)

1. What images come to mind when you think about the phrase “Black Power”? What have you experienced or learned about differences between Black power and civil rights?
2. Have you ever been in a situation where interracial communication or coalition broke down because of tensions over whites decision-making? Have you ever been in a situation where a coalition or community successfully navigated such tensions? What made that navigation successful?
3. What surprised you about the history of Black Christians arguing for Black power and reparations (including the Black Manifesto’s history)? Where do you find yourself resonating with these Christians? Where do you feel frustrated?
4. What surprised you about the history of white Christian responses to the Black Manifesto and to the Black clergy and laity who argued in support of the Black Manifesto? Where do you find yourself resonating with these Christians? Where do you feel frustrated?
5. Take a look at the list of demands made in the Black Manifesto on page 119. Do any of these specific demands still resonate today in terms of structural changes needed to empower Black communities in a racial environment that continues to subvert such communities?
6. Why do you think white Christians were so resistant to responding directly to the historically factual charges of the Black Manifesto (namely, white Christian complicity in oppression and slavery)? Is the same resistance present today in our church communities? What would it take to overcome this resistance?

7. Church historian James Findlay, Jr. writes that by the early 1970s cross-racial outreach had withered. He writes, “Everywhere there were signs of disruption and decline in the old coalitions and friendships between whites and blacks in the churches.” And, he says, it was the end of a *kairos* moment—a moment when real transformation could have happened (see Harvey, page 150).

How do you feel about this claim? How would it impact the church today if we shared the history of the Black Manifesto and Black power as often as we do the history of civil rights?

8. From chapter three: “Even if we continue to stand by a vision that emphasizes reconciliation as a hope-for outcome . . . we might gain a great deal of traction for progress in our interracial relationality and collective responsiveness to racial injustice if we put a moratorium on any reconciliation-speak . . . until we have secured a genuine apology and the clarity of repair, rectification, and ongoing strategy for disrupting complicity with structural oppression that such apology would necessitate” (page 98).

As you understand it, then, from chapter six, what does a reparations paradigm begin to introduce and make clear that is missing or hidden in a reconciliation paradigm?

9. How does the conversation shift between white people and people of color (whatever the justice issue being considered) if repentance and repair are a central part of the dialogue? What feelings arise if you imagine such a shift taking place (fear, hope, anxiety, relief, something-in-between)?
10. What impact would a reparations paradigm have on the shape your community’s justice work? What barriers exist to getting serious about work that “repairs harm”?

11. What spiritual commitments are needed to engage the work of repentance and repair? Can the work of repentance and repair offer us hope in either our predominantly white or multi-racial parishes?

12. What would it mean for you to imagine white Christians in the U.S. learning to identify more with Zaccheaus? In what ways might repenting and repairing harm done signal conversion in your current racial context? What other biblical images and accounts do we need to nourish the work of repentance and repair?

Part Three: Stirrings of Hope, Pathways of Transformation (chapters 7 through conclusion)

1. What surprised you about the work of the Episcopal Churches and the Presbyterian Churches (USA) on reparations for slavery?

2. “Slavery alone is reason to engage in a serious conversation about reparations. But the ongoing, active legacies that have impeded the realization of anything approaching equity, let alone justice, make *not* engaging in a serious conversation unconscionable. . . . So whether white Christians are shocked because we are suspicious or hostile, or shocked simply because we are unaware how much work is being done on [reparations], even a cursory glance reveals there is no justification for white, justice-seeking Christians longing for reconciliation to not at least engage in an open-minded, genuinely inquisitive discussion of reparations for slavery.” (page 196 and 197).

What would a conversation about reparations for slavery look like in your congregation? What do you know about your denominations stance on reparations (many denominations have one!)?

3. What would be required of congregations to move your denomination along in its reparation and repair work at the regional or denominational level?

4. Harvey believes a multi-racial exploration of reparations for slavery led to more meaningful and authentic relationships among the Christians she interviewed than an exploration of “reconciliation” would have (chapter 8). Do you agree with this assessment? What limits might come with this model of interracial engagement?
5. What did you find most compelling about the work of the Maryland Episcopalians?
6. What did you find most unsatisfying about the work of the Maryland Episcopalians?
7. Respond to the following statement by David Clark of Maryland,

“I believe that part of what happened in our committee . . . was that we finally understood there has been a great injustice that was evil and wrong done to this group of people in ways that the general public has not concept of . . . We began to understand the need for making it right in a holy context because we acknowledged that that was really evil. And the ‘love each other’—that’s such an oblong blur. Define love. You know? How do you? I mean, it’s just Mom and apple pie. You can’t put you teeth into it, and I think where the reparations committee go traction was in the beginning to deal with the reality of the need for some reparation of that evil” (pages 233 and 234).

8. “Colleen Clark insisted that reparations work is precisely the kind of work required to generate connections. ‘That’s how you heal . . . It’s the same as when my first husband died. I didn’t heal by not talking about all of that. I had to talk about it and talk about it . . . It’s grief work. It’s the same thing with the reparations.’ . . . Thus, any work on race that hopes to be effective must directly confront and shake up denial’s ability to continue to exist. It would seem that framing our interracial work through a reckoning with history and reparations accomplishes this. Whiteness is given no cover and denial is impossible when careful historical work on slavery and its legacies becomes the shared interracial project” (pages 237 and 238).

What do you think of Clark's comparison of our collective history and interracial relationships as "grief work"? Can you envision a way in which working through our history together might indeed, as she suggests, help move us to a better relationship across racial lines? Are their dimensions of such a prospect that feel scary or dangerous?

9. Is there anything you want to take the experiences of the Maryland Episcopalians and apply to your congregation's justice work?

10. What feelings are elicited for you when you think of becoming a "repairer of the breach"?