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# HEALING CONVERSATIONS ON RACE

FOUR KEY PRACTICES  
FROM SCRIPTURE  
AND PSYCHOLOGY



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

Taken from *Healing Conversations on Race* by Veola Vazquez, Joshua Knabb, Charles Lee-Johnson, and Krystal Hays.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

[www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).

# RACE RELATIONS

## THE PROBLEM AND THE SOLUTION



*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.*

JOHN 13:34-35

*JODY, A WHITE 23-YEAR-OLD pastor's daughter, fidgets with a lock of her auburn hair as she waits on the steps leading to the front door of her parents' Detroit home. Her stomach roils as she practices the speech prepared for her 6'3", barrel-chested father. Jody can guess what he is going to say but prays she is wrong. Before she builds up the nerve to enter the home, her mother flings open the front door. Mother's green eyes are wide with worry. "What are you doing out here by yourself? Is something wrong?" she questions.*

*Jody is not ready to face her family, but there would never be a right time for this conversation. She stands, gives her mother a wry smile, and slides past her into the house. "Dad!" she calls, finding him sitting in his easy chair reading the Bible, his regular*

*Saturday afternoon routine. The house smells of chocolate, and Jody breathes in the sweet aroma as her pulse quickens when her eyes meet her father's.*

*Dad offers a smile and seems about to speak, but Jody launches into her speech, fumbling over the words, "I love William, and we're getting married. And I want you to love him too."*

*A soft gasp comes from behind Jody. She turns and finds her mother with one hand pressed against her heart and the other grasping the edge of the sofa. "But he's Black,"<sup>1</sup> Mother whispers.*

*Jody turns back to her father. He slowly closes his Bible and sets it on the coffee table. He stands and looks down at Jody. "I love William," he says. Jody feels a slight release of the tightness growing in her chest. "But you are not marrying a Black man."*

*In her father's gaze, Jody sees his love for her, while also clearly recognizing the steadfastness of his statement. A tear wells in her eye. She doesn't know what to do.*

## **THE PROBLEM AND SOLUTION: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Imagine yourself sitting with Jody over a cup of coffee as she recounts the story of her father's reaction to her wedding plans. If she ended the story as we ended it here, you might wonder, Did she argue with her father? Did she storm out? Did she give in to her parents' wishes? When we hear stories like this, we often want to fill in the details and follow the story to completion. Who doesn't like a good story?

Narratives, or stories of connected events, draw us in, stirring a need for a deeper understanding of the world, ourselves, and others. We use the stories of our own and others' past experiences to make sense of the world and our place in it, knitting together seemingly isolated occurrences to find meaning in our lives. For example, reading Jody's story may have

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<sup>1</sup>Although various terms may be used to describe racial and ethnic groups, throughout the book, we will use terms consistent with the recommendations of the American Psychological Association (2019, 2021).

reminded you of your own prior experiences or circumstances of your friends or family members. We store narratives like these in our memories and often refer back to them. In fact, you may find that you have a number of race-related stories that come to mind when thinking about Jody's experience and may have even thought, *That reminds me of the time when . . .*

We regularly think about and draw from our past narratives (and those that others have shared with us) because they help us to describe and consolidate our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. You may have your own race-related stories to tell (no matter your racial/ethnic background), and, when pieced together with the other stories of your life, these provide a greater narrative of who you are, what you think about race-related issues and racism, and how your experiences have affected your relationships with others. Over time, we incorporate these into our view of the world. We then use these integrated stories to help us better understand each new circumstance and make predictions about our own and others' behaviors. At times, these predictions serve us well, helping us to effectively navigate an uncertain world and ambiguous relationships. At other times, when responding to racially driven events and/or having discussions about race and racism, these predictions hinder us and cause disunity in relationships, as we may weave together these stories of our prior experiences with misinformation, emotional pain, and previous relational conflict. For example, you may find that you have heard a story like Sam's:

*Sam, a White male, was excited about his new job. The only uncertainty he felt surrounded his relationship with his new coworkers. One of his coworkers, Taj, was a dark-skinned man from Iran. Each time he interacted with Taj, Sam couldn't help but think about his sister-in-law's stories from New York after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Taj's nationality had Sam worried that Taj might have terrorist thoughts. Sam realized that some people might think he was overreacting or even xenophobic, but he couldn't help but remember his own*

*fear after 9/11. He didn't know how to interact with Taj when he thought about the past.*

Sam's story is one example of the ways we use our own and others' stories (narratives) to make sense of the world around us and to make predictions about others' behaviors and choices about our own behaviors. Unfortunately, these integrated stories may leave us with inaccurate and even hurtful predictions and subsequent behaviors.

Since humans invariably think in stories, as we thread these together, we begin to develop a cohesive account of ourselves and our histories. As we do so, we create a grand narrative, or big-picture depiction, of our lives and relationships. For centuries, humans have attempted to create cohesive narratives to make sense of crosscultural and interethnic relationships. Today, for example, many societal and cultural narratives try to help us make sense of, and respond to, race relations and the suffering brought on by racism. You may have read some of these "narratives" within the most popular contemporary books on the topic of race relations. Many of these works use different stories to explain current race-related disunity. Although some of these may certainly be helpful, they often draw from the author's own worldview (greater meta-narrative), which may be quietly residing in the background, unacknowledged and unidentified.

In many ways, both individuals and cultural groups have attempted to make sense of the world and endure hardship and relational suffering by regularly returning to the salient narratives of their culture or belief system. Like hundreds of jigsaw puzzle pieces scattered on a large dining room table with no puzzle box top picture to reveal how to place them carefully together,<sup>2</sup> contemporary Christians can get easily overwhelmed by this plethora of competing, fragmented ideas on the problem of, and the solution to, disunity in race relations. However, within our model, we define the problem as a lack of a coherent and integrated biblical view of racial disunity. Succinctly put, we are using the wrong meta-stories to make sense of race relations and racism.

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<sup>2</sup>Thanks to the Christian theologian M. Todd Bates for a version of this metaphor.

For Christians, the Bible reveals a well-defined meta-narrative for understanding the problem of racial disunity. This meta-narrative, or the *grand narrative of Scripture*,<sup>3</sup> tells us of God's relationship with humankind, assisting us in answering the important questions about who we are, what is wrong in our world and relationships, and what the solution is.<sup>4</sup> Although contemporary advancements in the social sciences have filled in some gaps to help us grasp the current problems in our society, we believe the Bible's far-reaching, timeless plan better helps us make sense of our divided, unstable, and unpredictable world. In other words, God's "resilient relationship story"<sup>5</sup> helps Christians to understand the problem and solution to suffering, especially the suffering we endure in relationships. To be clear, the Bible offers us a grand story of relationships that we can apply to race relations.

***The grand narrative of Scripture.*** Beginning in Genesis, the first two humans were "dependent on God," recognizing that their Creator was at the center of existence; yet, they infamously wanted to be "like God." No longer content to draw their understanding of the world from him, they quickly placed themselves at the center, futilely attempting to acquire human knowledge of good and evil. By prioritizing themselves above God, they lost the unity that defined their existence, relied on their own inaccurate story to make sense of the world, and began to judge their experience outside of God's perfect love and wisdom.

However, despite their notorious attempt to turn from him, God continued to pursue humankind. We see his loving pursuit in story after story recounted in the Old Testament. Then, in the New Testament, we read that God entered history in human form to reconcile humans to himself (John 3:16). Because of this crucial act of love, we have the opportunity for the following:<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Anderson et al. (2017); Bonhoeffer (1955); Wolters (2005).

<sup>4</sup>Anderson et al. (2017).

<sup>5</sup>Johnson (2008).

<sup>6</sup>Grudem (1994).



- Restoration of relationship with God as a friend, rather than an enemy (justification).
- Indwelling of the Holy Spirit to empower us to become more like Jesus Christ (sanctification).
- Walking with God moment to moment, day to day, and year to year, until we are one day together with God, face-to-face, forever in perfect unity with him and fellow believers (glorification).

After Jesus' ascension to heaven, the first-century church was tasked with bringing together and unifying Christ-followers from all different walks of life and cultural backgrounds, solidifying their identity, first and foremost, in Jesus Christ (John 17:20-21; Galatians 3:26-29; Ephesians 4:1-6). In this story of all stories, we can see the movement from creation to fall to redemption to restoration, with love and reconciliation as the central themes. These themes are seen in Paul's letter to the Colossians:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:15-20)

Ultimately, the biblical story is one of rebuilding unity and community as Christians move from justification to sanctification to glorification on this side of heaven, placing God at the center of the human experience. Although humans were created in God's image to be in relationship with him and others, the fall and humanity's sinfulness led to disunity and brokenness, including racial disunity, racial injustice, racism, and strain in cross-racial relationships. However, by taking on human form roughly



two thousand years ago, God demonstrated his love for humankind, personally revealing his desire for restored communion and unity, with love as the antidote to division, disunity, hate, and injustice. In other words, racial disunity and racism are a result of humanity's sinfulness, and it is God's desire to restore our broken cross-racial relationships.

***The grand narrative of Scripture and race relations.*** To summarize our view of the way a biblical meta-narrative helps to make sense of the problem of, and solution to, disunity in race relations, next we offer a succinct statement that captures our guiding principles. First, it is important to understand that we believe race relations exist along a continuum. You may have noticed that, thus far in the book, we have referred to “racial disunity,” “racial injustice,” “strain in cross-racial relationships,” and “racism.” We believe these terms/descriptors provide a snapshot of the negative end of the continuum and describe unhealthy and painful ways race relations may be experienced in our fallen world. On the positive end of the continuum, we may experience productive and healthy cross-racial relationships, with the extreme positive end of the continuum exemplified by intentional racial unity and Christlike love in cross-racial relationships. By contrast, on the extreme negative end, you might find intentional racism and purposeful disunity, founded in ungodliness. Presumably, apathy toward race relations may fall somewhere in the middle of the continuum. However, along this continuum, we believe that cross-racial relationships and race relations can be experienced in innumerable ways. (See figure 1.1 for a depiction of how this continuum might look.)



**Figure 1.1.** Continuum of race relations

Therefore, the biblical meta-narrative helps us to understand the following as the problem of, and solution to, ongoing difficulties in race relations (we will unpack these ideas as we move into the upcoming chapters):

*Problem:* Sin is the root of all of humanity's problems in race relations, including racism and racial disunity. Racism itself is a sin and the result of sin.

*Solution:* Christlikeness is the solution to all of humanity's problems in race relations, including racism and racial disunity. The qualities of Christlikeness, such as love, servanthood, and self-denial, are incompatible with racism and compel us toward racial unity.

### **THE PROBLEM AND SOLUTION: A SOCIAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Although a biblical meta-narrative provides a response to the problem of, and solution to, racial disunity, in our present time, it can be challenging to find an agreed-upon root cause of racial injustice, racism, and cross-racial strain in the secular literature and within the church. This is especially true because there is no shortage of narratives for making sense of the racially fragmented world around us. In fact, there are some individuals within society who believe that racism no longer exists. For those who recognize the ongoing truth of racism's existence, these cultural narratives include both systemic (macro-level) and individual (micro-level) explanations for the problem of, and solution to, racial tension, injustice, and racism. To be sure, in the context of contemporary race relations, there are a variety of stories, many of which are human-centered and attempt to weave together a human-derived understanding of the problem and solution.

Within the field of diversity studies, for years psychologists and sociologists have researched and attempted to provide answers to resolve racial tensions. For example, as early as 1954, the psychologist Gordon Allport introduced Intergroup Contact Theory. Allport proposed that prejudice, for instance, could be reduced by contact between groups when optimal

conditions were met.<sup>7</sup> These conditions included equal status, cooperation, common goals, and support of authorities. Research has repeatedly supported the effectiveness of these conditions in improving cross-racial relationships and decreasing prejudice.<sup>8</sup> Others have found that other factors beyond those described by Allport can also be helpful remedies for improving cross-racial relationships, such as knowledge about the other person, emotional responsiveness, and empathy/perspective-taking.<sup>9</sup>

The current psychological literature also supports the idea that people who want to engage in helpful and healing conversations with racially different others must do so with a degree of foundational knowledge about the other person's experience, self-awareness, other-awareness, specific communication skills, and cultural humility.<sup>10</sup> Cultural humility has come to be seen as one of the key healing factors in cross-racial relationships.<sup>11</sup> A culturally humble person recognizes their limitations in understanding culturally different others, seeks opportunities to learn, and accepts that learning will be a lifelong process.

Although social scientists have historically sought remedies for racial tensions, as these tensions have grown in recent years efforts have increased to help both professional and lay audiences respond proactively to these issues. As such, the general public has increased race-related awareness and actions. In 2020, the American Psychological Association's *Stress in America* survey<sup>12</sup> found that 59% of Americans had recently taken action against racial injustice. One-third of these people reported that this action included having meaningful conversations about race. What is more, 24% of Americans reported purposefully and actively learning more about the topic. With 70% of the American population identifying as Christian,<sup>13</sup> these conversations have likely included individuals of the Christian faith.

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<sup>7</sup>Allport (1979).

<sup>8</sup>Pettigrew and Tropp (2006).

<sup>9</sup>Pettigrew and Tropp (2008); Rodenberg and Boisen (2013).

<sup>10</sup>Hays (2016); Hook et al. (2017).

<sup>11</sup>Hook et al. (2017).

<sup>12</sup>American Psychological Association (2020).

<sup>13</sup>Pew Research Center (2015).

As an example of Christ to the world, Christians and the Christian church, the bride of Christ, play a pivotal role in responding to, and answering the question about, the problem and solution to racial disunity. However, historically the church's response to race relations has often been problematic. As such, we turn briefly to a review of race relations in the church.

***A brief history of race relations in the United States and Christian church.*** Christianity in the United States developed and continues to dwell within the country's historical context as a nation. Historical factors that have influenced and been influenced by American Christianity include actions/events such as the enslavement of Black Americans, the encroachment on Native American land, the internment of Japanese Americans, post-9/11 xenophobia toward Middle Easterners, and constantly changing immigration laws, to name a few. Unfortunately, American Christianity cannot disentangle itself from these past or current circumstances, nor their ongoing effects on relationships within the church and the church's relationship with the community. However, awareness of historical and current events, especially when placed against the backdrop of a biblical meta-narrative, can help drive us toward personal and relational change. Although a thorough review of the history of the Christian church and race relations is beyond the scope of this book,<sup>14</sup> we provide a brief overview to set the context of our current purposes.

Even though the focus of Christianity within the United States has historically been one of evangelism, this has not always included the idea of equality or freedom of oppressed peoples.<sup>15</sup> In fact, in the 1800s and early 1900s, Scripture was often used as confirmation of God's desire that enslaved people conform to the oppressive and violent actions of advocates for slavery and that indigenous peoples be civilized through oppression.<sup>16</sup> This approach to Scripture has been denounced as a

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<sup>14</sup>See Priest and Nieves (2006), for example, for additional information on this topic.

<sup>15</sup>Priest and Nieves (2006).

<sup>16</sup>McSloy (1996).

failure to recognize the important role of ethnic culture and experience in shaping biblical interpretation [which] can produce damaging results because it can lead a culturally dominant community to insist that its own interpretations of the Bible are “objective” and “official” to the exclusion of all others.<sup>17</sup>

Although these views and practices gradually changed with Christian leaders’ growing acknowledgment of the unbiblical nature of them, this did not outright change race relations within the church. For example, early American church congregations were split along racial lines, with racial/ethnic congregations serving as places of worship for congregants of non-White groups who were not allowed to worship alongside White parishioners. Racism also continued to plague early Christianity in more subtle ways. Many commentators refer to Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to point out the insidious nature of racism within Christianity. Dr. King described individuals he referred to as the “White moderate.” He wrote of the Christian and Jewish White moderate who

is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action.” . . . Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. King’s writings to his “Christian and Jewish brothers” highlighted a more indirect, yet no less harmful, form of racial injustice, the lack of action that led to the further perpetuation of these injustices. More recently, biblical scholar and author Esau McCaulley echoed this idea, stating, “Moderation or the middle ground is not always the loci of righteousness.”<sup>19</sup> Subtle racialized behaviors and ideas such as those described by Dr. King and more overtly negative race-related actions and

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<sup>17</sup>Romero (2020, pp. 181-182).

<sup>18</sup>King (1963).

<sup>19</sup>McCaulley (2020, pp. 68-69).

racism have historically caused significant racial division within the church.

***Current race relations within the church: The need for healing.*** More recently, some positive changes have occurred within the church. During the fourteen-year period between 1998 and 2012, the number of multi-racial churches in America (churches with less than 80% of members of the same race/ethnicity) grew by 6%, comprising a total of 12% of US congregations.<sup>20</sup> Although this is still only a small proportion of US churches, this growth has developed alongside changes in attitudes within the church. In 2015, approximately 40% of White churchgoers said their churches needed to become more ethnically diverse.<sup>21</sup> This finding mirrors the more recent 2021 findings that the majority of Black Americans who attend traditional Black churches believe that their churches should also become more racially and ethnically diverse.<sup>22</sup>

However, despite this change in the church's racial/ethnic composition and the apparent desire of many church members to have a less segregated church experience, Christians continue to see difficulties with race relations within the church. Many congregants (of all racial/ethnic backgrounds) continue to affirm that they "strongly disagree" with the idea of their churches becoming more ethnically diverse.<sup>23</sup> The continued evidence of this is seen on Sunday mornings, in that most churches continue to be segregated by race.

In addition to these disparities in church composition and ideas about church integration, predominantly White and predominantly ethnic churches differ in their approaches to race-related issues. For example, many historically Black churches see one of their primary roles as helping congregants respond to racism and discrimination in society.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, within many primarily White congregations, it is not uncommon to see attempts at smoothing the color line by focusing on

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<sup>20</sup>Dougherty and Emerson (2018).

<sup>21</sup>Smietana (2015).

<sup>22</sup>Mohamed (2021).

<sup>23</sup>Smietana (2015).

<sup>24</sup>Ellison et al. (2017).

similarities among races rather than differences, taking the spotlight off race and racism.<sup>25</sup> Often, ethnic churches also maintain cultural traditions, including holding services in their native language and celebrating traditional holidays and festivals. These churches seek ways to highlight and preserve the culture of their ethnic group, rather than assimilating to the mainstream culture. At times, primarily White churches will host an ethnic congregation within their building. Still, it is not uncommon for members to avoid crossing cultural lines (sometimes never even seeing each other on the same campus).

Although church members have differing views about the necessity of increasing ethnic integration within their congregations, we have seen the potential harm that different approaches to racial/ethnic issues can cause as we have listened in on conversations within congregations. They may go something like this:

*Bryan, a Black pastor, says to Frank, a White pastor, "I'm upset about ongoing racism, even among Christians. As pastors, we need to do something." Frank says to Bryan, "The members of my congregation think that Black people are making a big deal out of this. Talking about it seems to be causing more problems than it's fixing." Bryan does not know how to respond. He is hurt and feels unheard. He nods his head and says nothing more. Yet, he leaves the conversation with Frank vowing never to talk to him about race-related issues again.*

*After a church service, Susan, a Chinese American woman, tells Sandra, a Mexican American woman, "I wish everyone would stop blaming the Chinese for the coronavirus. People are acting like it's my fault that they have to wear masks." Sandra responds with, "Well, it did come from China. It's just a fact." Susan feels stung by Sandra's response and quips, "You're a great example of Christian love!" and leaves the sanctuary with a stomp of her foot, thinking that all people of Mexican descent must think the*

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<sup>25</sup>Emerson and Smith (2000).



*same way. She vows to avoid people with that background for fear that they will act in racist ways toward her in the future.*

The two examples above are aggregates of the types of race-related conversations that may take place among Christians; yet, these approaches tend to divide church members and Christians further. There are some Christians, however, who are seeking ways to have more productive and loving conversations, especially in light of the events during the last several years that have brought race relations in the United States back into focus. You may have picked up this book for just this reason.

### **THE PROBLEM AND SOLUTION: AN INTEGRATIVE BIBLICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL FOR HEALING CONVERSATIONS**

Our healing conversations on race approach and methodologies are founded, foremost, on the goal of helping Christians to grow in Christlikeness and apply Christlikeness to cross-racial conversations and relationships. Our goal is not to merely translate the most popular secular ideas of the day.<sup>26</sup> Instead, we start with the Bible as a firm foundation and build our approach on sound biblical doctrine and theology. In other words, although each of us may have slightly different theological beliefs within Protestant Christianity, our collaborative approach is to promote biblical unity and a shared narrative for healing cross-racial relationships and facing racism together, regardless of our theological backgrounds or denominational affiliations. Like a Venn diagram that displays each of our theological and denominational backgrounds in four separate circles, we have attempted to focus on our similarities, not differences, by presenting the overlapping content.

<sup>26</sup>We recognize that there are a variety of helpful contemporary approaches to responding to racial disunity within both secular *and* Christian communities. In fact, from a Protestant perspective, we believe God offers his grace to even secular communities, meaning that certain psychological and social insights and advancements, when it comes to race relations, can occur outside of the body of Christ (for a more in-depth, contemporary discussion, see Mouw, 2002). Thus, as Christian authors trained in the behavioral sciences, we in no way seek to dismiss other helpful approaches. Instead, here we simply wish to differentiate our approach by firmly anchoring our understanding of the problem of, and solution to, racism to the biblical meta-narrative in order to aid Christian communities.

With this strategy in mind, we believe, with boldness and confidence, that the Bible is authoritative as God's Word and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is needed to be reconciled to God.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, as Christ-followers, we believe that Jesus is the head of the church and holds everything together (Colossians 1:15-20). As Christians, our main purpose while on this planet is to worship and enjoy God.<sup>28</sup> This means he is at the center of healing conversations on race, offering us the empathy, mercy, and grace we need in these pivotal encounters with racially different others (Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 4:14-16). What is more, we believe that racism exists, it is sinful, and it displeases God.

In our model, we combine God's "special grace" that he offers to Christians with God's "common grace,"<sup>29</sup> which includes psychological advancements in our contemporary understanding of race relations and positive relational change. Therefore, moving beyond our biblically grounded model, we also draw on several bodies of literature within contemporary psychology, including attachment theory, emotionally focused therapy (EFT), and the psychology diversity literature.<sup>30</sup> Within each of these areas, practicing mental health professionals have found success in healing hurting relationships through scientifically proven theories and techniques. Keep in mind, in drawing on these theories, we aim to honor God in our effort to present a Christian-distinctive model, attempting to benefit from the best of psychological science in the process. As you read through this book and engage in the provided activities, we will regularly return to Scripture as the foundation, while also guiding you through principles and steps toward having healing conversations on race.

Some Christian authors may describe our approach as either *integration* or *Christian psychology*.<sup>31</sup> In either case, our goal is to start with a clear and specific scriptural view of God, reality, people and sin, values,

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<sup>27</sup>Larsen (2007).

<sup>28</sup>See Protestant Christianity's famous Westminster Shorter Catechism.

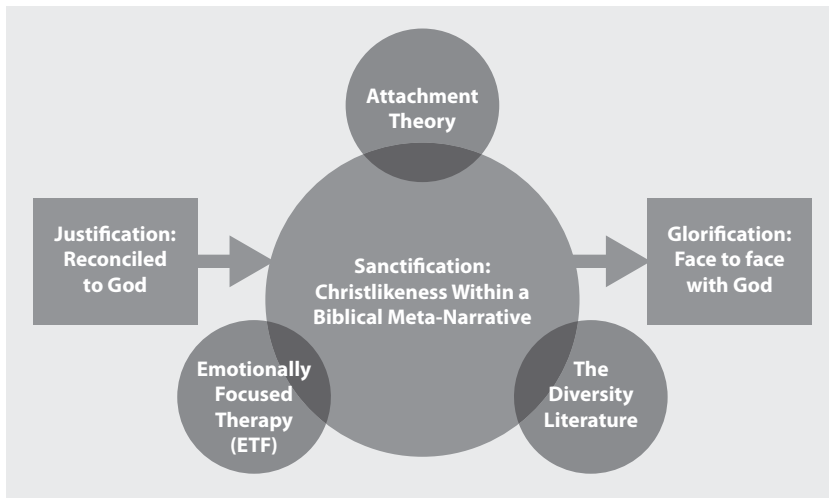
<sup>29</sup>Kuyper (2015).

<sup>30</sup>Hays (2016); Hook et al. (2017); Johnson (2019a, 2019b); Mikulincer and Shaver (2017).

<sup>31</sup>Johnson (2010).

and redemption.<sup>32</sup> Building on this foundation, we utilize research-supported methods from within the psychology literature. Within our model, the psychology literature can be helpful because it describes and explains, in fairly significant detail, key relational processes and patterns that have been reliably observed over time. Psychology can also help us delve deeper by giving language to our experiences and practical solutions to common struggles.

See figure 1.2 for a visual depiction of how we prioritize the various writings we have drawn from, placed within the process of Christian spiritual and psychological growth. Notice that we start with Christlikeness and sanctification as a central aim. Sanctification is sandwiched between the steps of justification and glorification, given that Christians are called to emulate Jesus Christ as we move from being reconciled to God in Christ to being face-to-face with God in heaven.



**Figure 1.2.** Foundations of the HEAL model

The model is founded on a biblical meta-narrative that places God at the center. As we actively love God and others, we can anticipate being face-to-face with him in heaven one day. This is the proverbial

<sup>32</sup>Knabb et al. (2019).

“already but not yet” of the sanctification process. As Christians, we are justified through Christ’s work on the cross, and our position before God is firm because we are sealed with the Holy Spirit at our conversion (Ephesians 1:13). However, we are called to “continue to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12), putting off our old ways and putting on new ways. Therefore, we seek to “put on” the fruit of the Spirit that Paul speaks of in his letter to the Galatians: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Historically, Christlikeness has been the foundation and goal of the spiritual disciplines. Thus, we will draw from the spiritual formation literature as a guide for activities (*lectio divina*) and our understanding of Christlikeness.<sup>33</sup>

We believe our approach to healing conversations on race is rather unique, grounded in a biblical view of reality, human nature, values, and redemption. Rather than finding ways to fight against racism by being *less* racist, our model advocates for being *more* Christlike. If Christlikeness—and the corresponding fruit of the Spirit—is a central aim in this life, the process of sanctification should be at the core of Christian conversations on race (Galatians 5:22-23).<sup>34</sup>

Our approach emphasizes one-on-one and small group conversations to elicit change on a *micro* (individual, personal) level, cultivating safety, trust, and unity in one relationship at a time. Modeled after God entering into human history to *personally* respond to our estrangement and suffering and Jesus entering into specific relationships to *personally* effect change, we prioritize the healing power of individualized attempts to create loving, unifying, and, ultimately, enduring Christlike exchanges with others. We believe that micro-level (individual) changes such as these have the power to influence and lead to macro-level (systemic) changes, thereby dually creating changes within individual relationships and within communities and churches.

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<sup>33</sup>Boa (2009); Calhoun (2005); Chandler (2014); Foster (2018); Graybeal and Roller (2007); Howard (2018); Mulholland (2016); Willard (2002).

<sup>34</sup>Wright (2017).

We believe that healing conversations on race start and end with four pivots. Helping you learn to pivot in these ways during healing conversations on race is our goal for you as you journey through this book. We invite you to set these pivots as ongoing goals:

1. Pivot from a human-centered understanding of race relations and racism to a God-centered understanding.
2. Pivot from a focus on self to a focus on Other (God) and others.
3. Pivot from disunity to unity.
4. Pivot from judgment of others (“like God”) to Christlike love (“dependent on God”).

We pray that you will learn to effectively use our model for healing conversations on race. We use the acronym HEAL to provide you with an easy-to-remember device to use when having these conversations, which we will unpack more as we move through this book. Therefore, another ongoing goal for you is that you will learn to use the following practices during these conversations:

- *Humility*—Prayerfully Reflect
- *Empathy*—Identify Emotion and Need
- *Acceptance*—Consent to God’s Loving Presence
- *Love*—Respond with Christlikeness

The pivots and practices of the HEAL model are meant to be ongoing and work hand in hand, with no expiration date, dividing lines, or clearcut boundaries. Instead, they are enduring and permeable, in the sense that they are pursued on a daily basis, there is overlap between them, and they are all needed as you slowly move toward Christlike unity with racially different others.

Although in subsequent chapters we will encourage you to focus on an individual pivot that corresponds with a particular practice of the model (for example, the first pivot, from a human- to God-centered understanding, is discussed in the chapter on the first practice, humility), the pivots are meant to be cultivated collectively and on an

ongoing basis, in no particular order. Similarly, the practices of the HEAL model overlap and work in unison, in that you can regularly return to the different practices during any given conversation on race as needed. However, we have developed the model using an easy-to-remember acronym so that you can call to mind each of the practices (and pivots) as you seek to engage in healing conversations on race. Therefore, as you dive deeper into this book and the activities within, we invite you to work toward flexibly and holistically engaging in the four practices (and pivots).

We recognize that movement toward these practice- and pivot-related goals will be an ongoing process, as is our growth in Christlikeness. This is just as true for the Christian reading this book who is new to these ideas as it is for the reader who has been devouring every book on race relations that they can find. Also, depending on your personal background, race/ethnicity, and experiences, the way you proceed through the book may look different when compared to how a friend or neighbor might do so. Remember, a culturally humble person recognizes that they are still growing and in the process of sanctification, and each person is on a different journey, given God created every human being as distinct, with particular talents and skills and unique, original, non-replicable relationships with God and others.

*As a biracial psychologist, I (Veola) figured that I was relatively well-versed in cultural issues. I had spoken at events about race relations, completed a dissertation focused on spirituality, acculturation, and interracial marriage, and taught college courses on cultural diversity. However, I was not prepared for the confusion that hit when the racial uprising of 2020 began. I suddenly felt forced to choose a side, White or Black. I felt disconnected from my Black family members, while also fearing that I might be attacked by a group of White youth while jogging in my neighborhood. Although constantly aware of my race and the possible meaning of it within certain environments, it had*

*never been such a raw emotional experience. As I attempted to speak with friends, family, and colleagues about racial issues, I found myself wondering how to do so in a way that honored both parts of my biracial identity, while also honoring God as my first priority. I realized I had much to learn and much more self-awareness to gain. For me, the HEAL model was an outgrowth of this growing awareness. I admit, though, that I will continue to learn more about myself and others. I accept this as a part of living with Christlike humility and a part of my sanctification process. (If you would like to know more of my story or that of my coauthors, refer back to the introduction and keep reading as we will share our stories throughout the book.)*

*Shortly after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, I (Josh, a White male) attended a faculty meeting with several university colleagues, one of whom (Charles, a Black male) is a coauthor of this very book. During the opening moments, Charles authentically expressed the deep, ongoing pain of watching the viral video footage, which vividly captured yet another unarmed Black man being killed. As he passionately shared his heartfelt emotions and powerfully declared the many reasons for the injustice of the event, I remember experiencing a tremendous amount of confusion, not knowing what to say or do and remaining silent for the duration of our time together. Although I am a board-certified clinical psychologist by trade and have helped countless clients over the years to more confidently identify, verbalize, and accept their inner pain, in this 60-minute time span, I was utterly speechless and unable to fully process what I was going through. I was, simply put, lost in my own inner experience. Despite being in this clouded state for most of the meeting, at the very end, I recall thinking, “I have to say something, anything.” Therefore, with a shaky, uncertain voice, I conjured up just enough energy to say, to paraphrase, “I’ve been*



*silent today because I don't know what to say. But I want to listen and learn, and my silence doesn't mean I don't care." Immediately after the meeting, I started a much longer journey of processing why, when my colleague and friend needed my support, I remained quiet and unresponsive. In prayerful reflection, I gradually gained insight into what had occurred—I was experiencing a unique combination of fear, powerlessness, and shame. First, I felt scared that, as a White male who could not fully understand my colleague's experience as a Black man in America, I would somehow say the wrong thing, offend him, or embarrass myself. Second, I felt powerless because, as a White male, I was convinced I had nothing to offer and could not contribute or help in any meaningful or effective way. Third, I felt good old-fashioned shame, since I struggled (and still struggle) with feeling naive and ignorant and, as a White male, like I have no real cultural heritage of my own to embrace. Yet, in that very moment, I needed to display Christlike humility, empathy, acceptance, and love, pivoting from a self-derived understanding and self-focused preoccupation to God's understanding and a more unifying, outward-facing, action-oriented love. Although I did not know it at the time, Charles's pain, coupled with my own, would serve as a much-needed launching pad, propelling me toward more ongoing, authentic conversations on race, race relations, the need for greater unity among racially different Christians, and ultimately, the HEAL model.*

## **WHAT TO EXPECT**

Whether you read this book alone or with a partner or group, the content and activities within each chapter are designed to be engaged slowly, approximately one chapter per week. Our prayer is that your engagement with these activities will culminate in a conversation with a racially different

partner and a commitment to apply this biblically tethered model to Christ-likeness within the church, one relationship at a time.

Follow each chapter, completing the exercises and discussing your thoughts and progress with others. If you find that you struggle with the content of a specific chapter, feel free to slow down to rest, pray through the material, and engage with the journaling activities until you feel you are ready to proceed. After all, because God is at the center, not on the periphery, he will ultimately be your guide as your heavenly Father who understands your vulnerabilities and invites you to receive his grace, which is readily available in the present moment (Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 4:14-16).

In the following chapter (chapter two), we will focus on *humility* (H), and you will gain foundational biblical knowledge about race relations and the psychological concept of cultural humility to help you pivot from a human-centered understanding to a God-centered understanding of race relations. The activities provided in this chapter are designed to help you solidify this key material as a starting point. In chapter three, we will focus on *empathy* (E), and you will learn about the importance of listening to others' stories and lamenting the pain of racial tension and racism. You will engage in activities focused on reflecting on your own cultural and spiritual journey, learning others' stories, and lamenting race-related injuries. The goal is to help you pivot from self to God and others. In chapter four, we will focus on *acceptance* (A). You will learn key Christian mental skills to use during difficult conversations on race to trust in, and consent/yield to, God's active, loving presence. We include activities that will help you practice these skills and pivot from disunity to unity, with God serving as the proverbial glue. Chapter five will focus on *Christlike love* (L), and you will learn to apply key psychological skills for use during conversations on race. The provided activities will help you practice these psychological skills and pivot from human judgment to Christlike love. Chapter six will provide you with a step-by-step guide for having a healing conversation on race, and we will guide you through this conversation with a racially different

partner. Chapter seven will provide encouragement for holding on to the lessons learned within the book and guide you in responding to challenges along the way.

To help you easily move through the ideas within this book, we have organized each chapter in the same way. We will begin with a brief story, then provide a biblical view of the chapter's focus. In turn, we will discuss a psychological perspective on the same topic. From there, we will integrate the biblical and psychological views, prioritizing Scripture. Within each chapter, we will also include breaks with instructions for journaling. After the initial biblical view of the topic is presented, we will ask you to engage in an exercise called *lectio divina* as a strategy for developing connectedness, Christlikeness, and the fruit of the Spirit.

***Lectio divina.*** *Lectio divina* is an approach to reading Scripture that has been referred to as an act of “divine reading.”<sup>35</sup> As a spiritual discipline, *lectio divina* is a means of pursuing spiritual formation, transforming into the image of Christ in our relationships with God and others. We believe that reading Scripture this way can deepen your understanding of biblical principles, help you to internalize and apply Scripture to race relations, and help you to cultivate connectedness with racially different others. In our view, *lectio divina* is a vehicle through which we can pursue “an ever-transforming intimacy with God,”<sup>36</sup> which we can take into our relationships with racially different others as we have healing conversations on race. The process of *lectio divina*<sup>37</sup> involves the following steps:

- *Read*—Read a chosen passage in Scripture and slowly allow yourself to take in its content. To use the famous metaphor of eating food to describe *lectio divina*, this first step is like taking an initial bite of food.
- *Reflect/meditate*—Take one key verse from the chosen passage and ponder and meditate on it. Slowly and gently recite the selected

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<sup>35</sup>Wilhoit and Howard (2012).

<sup>36</sup>Wilhoit and Howard (2012, pp. 224-225).

<sup>37</sup>Benner (2010); Guigo II (2012); Wilhoit and Howard (2012).

verse, thinking deeply about what it means. To return to the food metaphor, this second step is like chewing a bite of food.

- *Respond/pray*—Spend time in prayer with God, asking him to help you apply what you have learned from the chosen verse in meaningful ways. Cry out to God, asking him to fill your heart so that God’s perfect love consumes you at the center of your being. To again revisit the food metaphor, this third step is like tasting a bite of food.
- *Rest/contemplate*—Slowly and gently repeat a word from the chosen verse, focusing on this word and allowing God to fill your heart with his love and a deeper meaning of his Word. Sit silently with God in contemplation, allowing him to penetrate your heart and change you from the inside out. To draw on the food metaphor one final time, this fourth and final step is like savoring a bite of food.

**Journaling breaks.** In each chapter, we will also provide journaling exercises. We will ask you to think deeply about your race-related experiences, emotions, and relationships. We encourage you to spend adequate time completing the journaling exercises both within each chapter and at the end of each chapter. You will use the material you produce from these activities during an intentional healing conversation on race. We will guide you through this conversation in chapter six, and you will need access to your responses to the journaling activities from the conclusion of each of the previous chapters.

### TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCE

**Be intentional.** The information and activities in this book are essential components to prepare you for healing conversations on race. Block out some uninterrupted time whenever you read to focus on the information and activities. Throughout the book, we offer some background on each topic, which will take time to absorb, given the importance. We believe that a deeper knowledge of this material is necessary to prepare you for the activities, which will help you shift how you engage racially different

others in a healing manner. Ultimately, you are encouraged to slowly complete the tasks within each chapter with intentionality and deep focus.

**Be open.** Your commitment to self-reflection, deeper thought, and emotional awareness and vulnerability will prepare you to engage in healing conversations. This process may be challenging at times. You may find yourself thinking about events and experiences you have not thought about in a while. Be open to new information and experiences as you embark on this process of development and growth. Paradoxically, the more vulnerable you can be with both God and your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, the more you will be able to promote Christlike unity, with God at the center as *the* source of love (1 John 4:7-21). Although the journey may be difficult, we want to encourage you that it is well worth it.

**Be prayerful.** Be mindful that God is at the center of this entire experience. Fully enter into each activity of this journey, asking God to open your heart and mind to receive what he has for you.

To begin your preparation for this journey, before moving on to the next chapter, grab a journal or paper and pencil and spend some time responding to the following questions, then close the chapter by following along with the prayer:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how ready are you to begin this journey (with 10 indicating that you are very ready)? Why did you choose this number? What current or past factors are motivating you to begin learning how to have healing conversations on race?
2. What fears, worries, or concerns do you have about beginning this journey? What support do you need to help respond to these concerns? Who can help, and what can they do? What will you do to access this support?
3. How would you describe your current relationship with God? What conversation with him do you need to begin so that he can serve as your trustworthy traveling companion on this trek toward deeper unity and connection within his church?

To end this chapter and begin our journey together, we offer the following prayer, famously written by the late Trappist monk Thomas Merton. As you read through the prayer, try to make a commitment to fully yield to God as your trustworthy guide. He is with you right now, leading you toward racial unity within his body of believers:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Merton (1958, p. 79).

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