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# LISTENER GUIDE

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GOOD FAITH MEDIA



# Hello!



It's the inaugural season of The Raceless Gospel podcast with Good Faith Media. Recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic, Jesus' good news is still on the move and ringing loud and clear for those who have ears to hear it.

Five episodes aim to flesh out the meanings of race, the four-letter word that most North American Christians have chosen to embody. An identity that doubles as a social hierarchy, race keeps our bodies in place.

But Christianity and complexion are not synonymous. Cultural assimilation was never a part of Christ's salvation or the waters of baptism.

Galatians 3:27-28 clearly states, **“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.”** These are no longer the terms or hierarchical conditions for living once we get in the water.

Nothing taboo, no topic off limits, the Raceless Gospel Podcast is where Word meets flesh. Sharing stories of where that word, race, met our own, when its meanings were rubbed into our skin, why it gets under our skin, how current events fit in and what the Church in North America can do about it.

Segregated on Sunday mornings, the Raceless Gospel Podcast is the church service you've always wanted. Modeled after a worship service and complete with the call and response of guests, it captures the liturgy of life, the hymn singing of the hum drum, the unbelievable and everything in between with testimonies of the new creation, the new “kin-dom” on the way. It is a conversation about words that we need to flesh out.

# Call & Response



I love a good question. Better than an old and predictable answer, I love new and courageous questions that invite new ways of thinking but more importantly, ways of understanding our shared humanity.

One of my favorite questions is asked by mystic and theologian Howard Thurman in his book *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?”**

The question is posed on the third Sunday of The Raceless Gospel podcast. But it is not only for the guest to consider, but the listener also to respond.

With this listener guide, I invite you to ask new and courageous questions. Consider this your “faith seeking understanding” starter kit. I believe wholeheartedly that a faith that cannot be questioned cannot claim to have all the answers. Consequently, this Q & A is a practice of discipleship.

Think long and hard about what is being asked and asked of you. Then respond not just with an answer but how your life can be an answer to it. But also ask better, harder, and fuller questions. In doing so, may you ask more of fellow believers until Jesus' words are made flesh.

# Q&A



## First Sunday. **Fleshing it out.**

1. Jacques Barzun called race “a superstition.” Charles Mills says we have agreed to a “racial contract.” Henry Louis Gates asks, “Who has seen a black or red person, a white, yellow, or brown? These terms are arbitrary constructs, not reports of reality.” So, what does race mean to you? What are we really saying when we identify with/ by race?
2. I have a problem with race and all of its social colors. But I am not alone. David Roediger, a professor of history at the University of Illinois at Urbana- Champaign, had the same problem with whiteness. He writes in *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, “My question at age eighteen was why friends wanted to be white and why I didn't.” When did you identify with a race or when did you become a person of color? And why?
3. Jay David wrote in the introduction of *Growing Up Black*, “Probably the single most important event in the life of any African American child is this recognition of his coloredness, with all the implications of that fact.” What does baptism offer if the new identity in Christ does not challenge or change the fact that one's “coloredness” remains the most important?
4. Race is a body identity. It is a story about our bodies and their meaning. What story does race tell us about our bodies and how does this narrative inform/ influence our understanding of the Body of Christ?
5. While race is not a biological reality, meaning there is no scientific basis and it is not rooted in any genetic variation among humans, racism, prejudice and stereotyping are very real. How do we address the real consequences and effects of racism while calling

into question the use of race as a means of identification (and consequently, a tool of assimilation and domination), while calling people of faith into the new creation/ self, offered in relationship with Jesus?

6. America continues to circle back to conversations on race due to political and social unrest after instances of police brutality for example. Avoided in pulpits and overtly in politics until recently, the subject is not going away. What are we going to do about race?
7. While there are those who believe that God is an old socially colored white man with a beard and Jesus is a blonde-haired, blue-eyed surfer, race has no divine attributes, no connection to the Divine community. Race is a social identity with no biological basis in reality though it has economic, political and social implications. What is the Church in North America's role as sacred community in shaping identity?
8. Our skin, our epidermis is not physically colored beige (a designation given to so-called mixed race people), black, brown, red, yellow, or white. So, what do we really see when we look at each other and what do we see in race? What are we really trying to flesh out?



## Second Sunday. **A Thorn in the Flesh.**

1. I don't know about you but 2020 has been eye-opening. We are more divided and different than I could have imagined. And I have been taking notes. James Baldwin writes in *Notes of a Native Son*, "... we find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our categorization. ... We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed (Baldwin, 15)." What mental or physical notes have you taken about our political reality, the political categories that have bound us and the endless betrayals?
2. Jesus invited his disciples to identify with those experiencing poverty and marginalization but many churches in North America are overtly identifying with a political candidate or party. It has been called the patriotic gospel. What do you make of this theological exchange?
3. There has always been the deification and demonization of political candidates and later presidents but never at this fever pitch. How would you describe the relationship between American politics and the Church in North America in light of the Trump presidency?
4. There are those Christians who would say, "Keep politics out of the pulpit; just give me Jesus." But we have to talk about politics as it shapes the way we live, the manner in which we will live and how we live together. There is no way around it. There is a politics of chaos and there is a politics of community. And the Church has a role in where we go from here. What would you say to folks who quip, "Just give me Jesus"?
5. Christians are reading the same sacred writ but seeing, interpreting and practicing the faith very differently from each other. There are thorny issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, gun rights and police brutality that keep poking us. How do Christians get on the same page?
6. There is this false binary choice between preaching the gospel and pursuing justice. Why is that? And a follow up question: What, in

your estimation, is the gospel of our politics? What is the politics of our gospel? Is there a middle ground?

7. There has been talk of the need to recover and to regain America's status as a leader in the world after the last four years. What would you say is the work of an already divided Church after this presidency and after a majority of European Americans, that is socially colored white evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for a second term of the Trump presidency? What has the Church lost in bearing witness to his politics and what does it need to regain?
8. Race, religion and politics, we can't seem to live well together with them, but we cannot live together without them. They give our lives meaning and to remove them wouldn't make any sense. A thorn in the flesh, how do we work with them and ensure that they don't enable and/or empower us to work against each other?



## Third Sunday. In the Flesh.

1. Persons who confess Christ are called to exchange their life for his own. Dead to our former selves, we are invited to live into a new creation. But so much of what we see from the Church in North America is a reflection of the American empire and its capitalist/ patriarchal/ political/ racialized machinery. What does the incarnation of Jesus look like and when in our history have we seen it?
2. What is the message of incarnation for the Church in North America today? What are we being called to embody and where should we be?
3. Howard Thurman asks a pivotal question in *Jesus and the Disinherited* that bears repeating until we answer him, “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 (xix)?” Why is this true and does the absence of the work of answering Thurman affect the incarnational ministry of Jesus?
4. William Sloane Coffin declares in *Credo*, “We all belong one to another. That’s the way God made us. Christ died to keep us that way. Our sin is only and always that we put asunder what God has joined together” (33). More than fellowship hall meetings and mission trips, what does it mean to be the Body of Christ?
5. Christoph Blumhardt writes in *Everyone Belongs to God*, “Spiritual communities that fail to be corrective in everyday life and practical work will soon end in a fiasco... There must be absolutely no Christian pretense, however religious it may appear, for lots of religious activity deprives people of their true life. People need to be guided properly through practical work, not through the might of weapons or proselytizing or religious fervor” (5). Why is the Church in North America’s embodiment of the work and witness of Jesus limited to a Sunday morning worship service and a midweek Bible study? How much more does it limit our personal regeneration and social transformation?



6. How do we embody reconciliation when our bodies, the female body for example and especially, is viewed as a source of evil? When we segregate our bodies according to the sociopolitical construct of race? When we evaluate bodies based on the money they make? When we prematurely judge bodies based on where they are geographically located?
7. James Baldwin said, "We live in a country in which words are mostly used to cover the sleeper; not wake him up..." (29, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*). Jesus came in the flesh as God on the move and yet, the Church slumbers. Viewed as having fallen asleep at the wheel, we pray, "Jesus take the wheel." What have we done to his words and what will it take for us to wake up to embody them?
8. Howard Thurman writes in *The Luminous Darkness*, "Segregation is at once one of the most blatant forms of moral irresponsibility" (6). How do Christians claim to be the body of Christ, his incarnational representation of the world, when its members are segregated? How do his words and our actions come together?



## Fourth Sunday. **Flesh & Blood.**

1. Jesus came as divinity in pounds and ounces, power weighed and measured, that only caused his mother to wobble while carrying him. He grew up to be a servant leader and died an unmarried, childless, homeless man with no material assets. Jesus handled power so differently than his followers. How did Jesus' life and message become synonymous with power, its privileges and progeny? In your estimation, how might Jesus' disciples define it?
2. There is a well-known quote attributed to Dr. Richard C. Halverson, a former chaplain to the U.S. Senate, that says, "In the beginning the church was a fellowship of men and women centering on the living Christ. Then the church moved to Greece, where it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome, where it became an institution. Next it moved to Europe where it became a culture, and, finally, it moved to America where it became an enterprise." Why does the Church continue to wrestle with its identity and align itself with the culture it finds itself in instead of its Christ? Why does the culture hold such sway in many sacred spaces for Jesus people?
3. H. Richard Niebuhr writes in *Christ & Culture* of Jesus' duality, that is the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, and in that discussion, he makes these distinctions: (1) Christ against culture, (2) Christ of culture, (3) Christ above culture, and (4) Christ transforming culture. Where is Christ as it relates to culture and what are the implications for his disciples? How does the position of Christ influence/ inform what/who we wrestle with?
4. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon said in 1989 in *Resident Aliens*, "A few may still believe that by electing a few 'Christian' senators, passing a few new laws, and tinkering with the federal budget we can form a 'Christian' culture, or at least one that is a bit more just. But most people know this view to be touchingly anachronistic." What are your thoughts on their conclusion? Further, what has been Christianity's relationship with power? How can/ should it be employed in the work of "kin- dom" building?

5. The Church in North America is known for what it is against, for what Jesus' believers fight over. But the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood. If this is true, then what are wrestling for and against? Flesh and blood, siblings through Christ, why are Christians often fighting with each other?
6. George Bernard Shaw writes, "A Native American elder once described his own inner struggles in this manner: Inside of me there are two dogs. One of the dogs is mean and evil. The other dog is good. The mean dog fights the good dog all the time. When asked which dog wins, he reflected for a moment and replied, The one I feed the most." Yet, Christianity is often reduced to dos and don'ts, to right and wrong, to good and bad people as if both are not present in us, as if it is not a wrestle. Why do we describe people and people groups as entirely good or evil?
7. And while we misuse power, there is certainly a place for it. Not created as victims, to be oppressed or dominated, we all have power. Alice Walker said, "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any." So where is the balance?
8. The Apostle Paul writes to the church at Corinth, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God" (I Cor 1.18, NRSV). For the Christian, the cross, Jesus' suffering and our own is power and powerful. One final question then. N.T. Wright asks in *God in Public: How the Bible speaks truth to power today*, "Where does the foolish power of today's world stand in shame before the revelation of God's powerful foolishness in the gospel?" Perhaps, the answer will help us to stop wrestling with our flesh and blood.



## Fifth Sunday. One Flesh.

1. The Church in North America has its differences: traditional versus contemporary service, hymn singing versus praise and worship songs, “Sunday best” versus “Come as you are.” In your estimation, why do you think that the Church is known more for its divisions, for who and what it is against?
2. Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13.35, NRSV). But Christians often don’t love each other, much less their neighbor. What do you find to be the biggest challenge or impediment to Christians in relation to each other?
3. Like American voters, the Church is often split down the middle, down the aisle when it comes to issues of the heart. What do you make of the hyper- politicization, the blue and red churches, the “patriotic gospel” that is very much a part of our discourse and discussions of discipleship right now?
4. The Church in North America or elsewhere just doesn’t seem to be able to come together. Going in two different directions, some pursue justice for the marginalized and impoverished people in their communities while others follow after Caesar and mimic empire while praying, “God’s kingdom come.” The first disciples were described as followers of the Way. What accounts for the confusion over which way to go?
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*, “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No community is more or less than this.” And yet, we know that some Christians believe that they are better than others, that white Christian nationalism describes Christianity in much different terms. How then do we unite or find a healing path forward when there is so much division in and through Jesus’ name?
6. The early church in the Acts of the Apostles was defined by what they shared in common. While there are and have been attempts

at diversity, the Church in North America comes most often in black and white. Will this always be the case? Why or why not?

7. Howard Thurman asks this question in his book *The Search for Common Ground* and I would love to hear your response: "Is the pull toward community both within myself and the world of men indigenous to life, or is it a mirage, a delusion? ... Is there some basis external to oneself for the hopes and dreams of harmonious relations between men of whatever kind, state or condition?"
8. Jesus prayed that we would be one. What can his disciples do to become an answer to his prayer, one body, one flesh?