

**Christian Churches Together  
Response to Dr. Martin L. King Jr.'s  
Letter from Birmingham Jail**

**Biblical Study Guide  
For Small Groups**



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## Introduction to Study Guide

This study guide responds to CCT's commitment to promote racial justice and reconciliation in our country. It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit accompanies you, as you prayerfully reflect on this important topic. Formed in 2006, Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. is a fellowship of 36 national communions, including African American, Catholic, Evangelical/Pentecostal, Historic Protestant, and Orthodox; and seven national organizations, including American Bible Society, Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat for Humanity, National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, Sojourners, and World Vision.

As leaders of Christian Churches Together in the USA, we have been challenged anew by the letter Dr. King wrote fifty years ago to another group of religious leaders while sitting in jail. The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was written as a response to an open letter to Dr. King that appeared in a local newspaper, from eight white clergymen of the state (including bishops, pastors and a rabbi). They urged an end to the demonstrations and civil disobedience that were occurring in the city and the use, instead, of patient negotiation and legal action to address any perceived denial of rights to Black citizens.

Rather than simply dismissing the concerns raised in the letter from the clergymen, or responding with anger, Dr. King addressed them as "Fellow Clergyman" and as "brothers." *"Since I feel you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms."* ("Letter from Birmingham Jail", Liberation Curriculum, Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project) He addressed each of their statements, inferences and assumptions, and also laid out his own disappointments with and vision for the church as an agent of God's justice and peace. This "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was rapidly picked up by media around the world and was immediately recognized as a document of historic significance. It has stood since as a landmark in the literature of social justice, exhibiting the same spirit as that of the great prophet Micah: "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

This study guide is designed as a small groups tool for members in our congregations to re-invigorate, and in many cases initiate, a conversation about the present reality of racism in church and society. Our hope is that these conversations may move God's people to take action in their own context to address the sin of racism and its ramifications. We pray that as a result of Bible reflections, conversations and prayer, people all across our country will become agents of transformation, so that we may give glory to God by becoming the "beloved community."

## Suggestions for the use of this material

People who represent all the five traditions in Christian Churches Together have written the content of this study guide. This diversity offers an opportunity to look at the issue of racism through different perspectives and approaches.

Every session in the study guide indicates a corresponding section in CCT's Response Document.

CCT's Response to Dr. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail can be downloaded from our website:

[www.cctusa.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/CCT-Response-Letter-Birmingham-Jail.pdf](http://www.cctusa.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/CCT-Response-Letter-Birmingham-Jail.pdf)

The sections in the Response Document serve as the foundational text for the discussion. One session may take more than one, one-hour period. Your group must decide if one hour is enough time or if another session is needed. Participants should read and personally reflect on the assigned section of the Response Document before the group meets.

Because the Bible quotations are longer in session five, we recommend reading from a Bible. We recommend that, if you are studying this as a group, to take enough time during the first session to talk about your personal experiences with racial prejudice or racism. A conversation about race can be difficult and painful, for that reason we encourage a group to talk about respect, boundaries, confidentiality and trust.

We suggest the following format for a one-hour session:

Welcome (introductions)

Prayer

Song

Reading of text in the CCT Response Document

Reading of the Bible text

Discussion and reflection (using questions provided)

Action (What each person will do in response to the study?)

Song

Prayer

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# Session One

Read the following sections on pages 5-7 of the Response Document:

- A. To realize our essential interdependence
- B. To address the causes of injustice, not just symptoms
- C. To recognize that the struggle is not only economic and political, but personal

## Biblical Reference

"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." Gal. 3:28 (NRSV)

"So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:27 (NRSV)

### *A. To realize our essential interdependence.*

1. How have you experienced interdependence today and what did you learn from the experience?
2. What are the signs of persistent racism today?
3. What work remains to eradicate race prejudice and institutional racism in the U.S.? What specific issues present opportunities to make progress on this work?
4. Why is it important to the future of our nation that citizens have more than a distant and superficial knowledge of the civil rights struggle? Are there good processes available to educate youth and adults on this?

### *B. To address the causes of injustice, not just the symptoms.*

1. In accordance with Catholic social teaching, "*Economic decisions and institutions should be assessed according to whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the human person...Barriers to equal pay and employment for women and those facing unjust discrimination must be overcome.*" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (2011) #76)

How might we change our personal attitudes and our institutions to protect human dignity?

2. What does it mean to be a patriot or patriotic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when secessionists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are honored as heroes and the confederate flag flies freely in some public areas today?
3. How does our racial history (a) influence the current perception of terrorists and (b) shape U.S. national defense policy?
4. Is racism a cause or a symptom of the widening economic disparity in the U.S. and why?

*C. To recognize that the struggle is not only economic and political, but personal.*

1. Do you agree or disagree that the wounds of racism and segregation in the U.S. extend to all Americans? How so?
2. What is your personal recollection or understanding of the civil rights era and how has it impacted your life?
3. What responsibility do people of faith have to actively work to correct the sin of racism? Specifically, what is being done in our churches to continue promoting personal and social transformation?

# Session Two

Read the following sections on pages 7-9 of the Response Document:

- A. To seek a higher standard for public policy and political participation
- B. To be extremists for love, justice, and peace in Christ
- C. To act now

## Biblical Reference

"Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!" (Isaiah 10:1-2 NRSV).

### A. *To seek a higher standard for public policy and political participation*

1. Discuss the two tests suggested here for deciding if a law is unjust. 1) "It distorts the soul and damages the personality." 2) It is imposed by a majority on a minority that does not have equal access to participation in the democratic process.

Do you agree with these criteria? Are there others?

2. Dr. King quotes St. Augustine, who says, "an unjust law is no law at all." This comes from a longer argument in which St. Augustine accepts as obvious that in some circumstances—such as self-defense and in military operations—even killing another human is not unjust. *"Surely we will not dream of calling these laws unjust – or rather, not to call them 'laws' at all, for a law that is not just does not seem to me to be a law."* (St. Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 1.5.11.33, ed. Peter King, Cambridge: CUP, 2010).

Are there laws today that you would not dream of calling unjust—but others do?

Are there laws today that you believe are just, but which others do not? (Discuss.)

3. In a democratic society, who has responsibility for making and unmaking "unjust laws" and "oppressive decrees"?

### B. *To be extremists for love, justice and peace in Christ*

## Biblical Reference

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather

division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'" (Luke 12: 49-53 NRSV)

### *Extra-biblical quote*

*"Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, 'Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, 'If you will, you can become all flame.'" (Abba Joseph of Panephrisis 7, in The Desert Christian: Sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection, trans. Benedicta Ward, New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975, 103.)*

*"Their duty of love towards the world imposes on Christ's disciples the responsibility to participate in its development and radical transformation. Their love can no longer remain on an individual level; it must show itself on the level of community action and historical change." (Orthodox Metropolitan George Khodre of Beirut, 1968).*

1. Discuss this section of the CCT response in light of these three quotations.
2. Have you benefitted from the "comfort and safety of our social order"?
3. Has taking a stand on an issue of social justice ever taken you outside your comfort zone?

### *C. To act now*

#### **Biblical Reference**

" 'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!' " (Matthew 7:24-27 NRSV)

1. Are there issues of justice that you feel strongly about but haven't been sure how to speak about or act upon? What gets in the way? What keeps you from being a "co-worker with God"?



# Session Three

Read the following sections on pages 9-10 of the Response Document:

- A. To engage in nonviolent direct action as a strategy for social transformation
- B. To challenge injustice by bringing it into the light

## Biblical Reference

"He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'" *Luke 11:2-4 (NRSV)*

### *A. To Engage in Nonviolent Direct Action as a Strategy for Social Transformation*

In *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus*, Obery Hendricks explains the significance of the historical context of "The Lord's Prayer" (Luke 11:2-4 and Matthew 6:9-15). The Hebrew people suffered the occupation of the Roman Empire. Hendricks references the ancient historian, Josephus's account of the Roman Empire in Jesus times. In the days when Jesus was born, the Roman military crucified nearly 2,000 people in the Galilean city of Sepphoris as punishment for their rebellion against Roman rule. Caesar called himself "The Father" of his people.

The Romans understood Caesar to be the human representation of God and, as such, Caesar's name was deemed the most holy (hallowed) name. According to Hendricks, the Roman Empire's economic structure only allowed "the haves" access to daily bread. "The have-nots" did not have access. By design, swaths of the Roman kingdom were kept hungry and dependent. Hendricks explains that the Lord's Prayer represents a non-violent confrontation between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Caesar.

1. Reflect on the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2-4 and Matthew 6:9-15). In Jesus's historic context, consider how Jesus' prayer is a prayer of non-violent resistance.
2. Consider the conditions of African-Americans in the Jim Crow south. How are their circumstances similar to the conditions of the Jews under Roman rule? How are they different?

### *B. To Challenge Injustice by Bringing it Into the Light*

## Biblical Reference

Read 1 John 1:5-7: <sup>5</sup>*This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.* <sup>6</sup>*If we say that we have*

*fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; <sup>7</sup>but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” (NRSV)*

### Activity

Imagine you are in a dark room. There is no light and no windows. In the room, there is a smell that comes from one corner, but you cannot see exactly where it is coming from and you cannot tell exactly what it is. You stumble across the room and flip the light switch. Across the room you find a dead mouse.

1. Consider the mouse. Without light things that are not supposed to live in the space are able to find a home. Likewise, actions that destroy are able to take place without repercussion. The only thing most people know is it smells in this place.
2. Consider the Civil Rights era. What societies or networks operated behind closed doors without the “light” of public accountability?
3. Consider the images of the children streaming from schools and singing as they marched down the street. Consider the images of Bull Connor’s fire hoses blasting the children. Consider the image of the police dogs that barked in the faces of children and chewed on women’s legs. What affect did the Children’s March in Birmingham have on the public’s understanding of the forces the Civil Rights movement were up against?
4. What did the march reveal to the rest of the country about the nature of the evil that lived under the cloak of darkness in the Jim Crow south?
5. John writes: “God is light and in him there is no darkness.” The Civil Rights workers saw their non-violent resistance as redemptive work. Non-violence redeemed their suffering and offered grace to their enemies. As their non-violent resistance shined light on the evil that lurked beneath the surface of the Jim Crow society, each action offered its architects and protectors opportunities to confess and repent.

Consider the current spiritual condition of our nation. Where were we before the Civil Rights movement? Where might we have been, if light had never revealed the evil that had lived in darkness under the blanket of the Jim Crow system? Where are we now? How are things better? Where do we need to shine more light today?

# Session Four

Read the following sections on page 10-11 of the Response Document:

- A. To cherish the church, while holding it to a higher standard
- B. To hold fast to the true foundation of the American dream

## Biblical Reference

"Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."  
Hebrews 12:14 (NRSV)

A. To cherish the church, while holding it to a higher standard

1. *"There was a time when the church was very powerful."*

As the church continues its mission of being a servant of God's redeeming plan, the church finds itself in need of redemption for some of its failings.

a. As the "powerful" church of Acts 1.8, how can the church redeem her ecclesiology of being a "witness" in the world by enhancing her evangelization theology to include ways in which she combats the ills of racial inequality, which are a manifestation of humanity's sinful nature?

b. In what ways can the church overcome the institutional segregation of the races, seen in many of our collective weekly gatherings?

c. Does this institutional segregation reflect a weakness in the church's attempt to erase these inequalities in other public arenas? How should the church's power be exercised in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's racial tensions?

2. *"The church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society."*

a. From the evangelical perspective, the goal of salvation is eternal redemption (ordo salutis). While Jesus stressed the importance of justice for the oppressed, His message always contained the values or "mores" of the Kingdom as always superseding the goals of the world. Racism and discrimination are symptoms of our fallen nature that necessitate eradication.

b. How can the activism of the church in its fight against racism and discrimination be tempered by the "mores" of the Kingdom so that the church's fight against racism is not another tool of political ideologies and agendas that use the church's platform to further self-serving interests?

c. Is there evidence that the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is “merely a thermometer” and not a “thermostat”?

B. To hold fast to the true foundation of the American dream

1. “They were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage...”

a. In seeking to defend “the moral laws of God,” the church is found having to defend herself against the rise of pluralism and secularism that promote different types of morality where the currents of the age dictate their tenets. MLK was able to eloquently hold fast to Biblical pillars that are ageless and eternal. This gave him the moral authority to speak to a culture that was founded on these principles but was not fulfilling them entirely.

b. As Scripture both in the Old Testament and New Testament denounces racism, will the church defend the Scripture of the American Dream with the same unwavering authority as MLK?

c. Can the Church reconcile again to the Biblical authority of *sola scriptura* as her moral compass or will she remain silent as culture redefines Scripture to fit the times?

d. From an evangelical perspective, what would the consequences be if the latter happens as far as *sola scriptura* is concerned?

2. “...These disinherited children of God...”

The *imago dei* is present in every person. As the church welcomes and defends the stranger, the sojourner, and the disenfranchised, the sense that we are all “disinherited” still resounds today. The greatest gift of our Judeo-Christian heritage is the reminder that we “were all once strangers.” Since, Jesus’ message was of repentance and conversion, the church is constantly aware of her shortcomings and in need of repentance. But, the true manifestation of redemption is conversion. In conversion, the *imago dei* is fully restored and revealed.

a. As the Constitution is the foundation of the American dream, how can the church defend the Constitution and continue to proclaim repentance and conversion as the only way to protect the *imago dei* of all “disinherited” people?

b. Because segregation is no longer the law of the land but is still practiced subtly, what steps can the church of Jesus Christ, of all traditions, take to call attention to it without sacrificing her Biblical moorings, thus holding fast to the true foundation of the American Dream without censuring the Judeo-Christian principles of the founding Fathers and the Constitution in order to accommodate 21<sup>st</sup> Century’s sensibilities?

# Session Five

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Read the following sections on page 12-16 of the Response Document:

## A. We Reflect

Biblical Reference: Luke 10:25-37

1. How do we make certain that, when considering the issues of inequity and injustice, we do not permit the “complexities” of this era to become a disguise for covering latent racism—particularly when/if the evidence of inequity/injustice is manifest primarily along racial lines?
2. Examine the critique, made by Anglo religious leadership 50 years ago, of Dr. King’s method and sense of urgency in confronting racial injustice in Birmingham. How does that critique made then differ from the assessment of the methods of engagement made by CCT from today’s struggle?

## B. We Confess

Biblical Reference: Matthew 25:41-46

1. Is there a difference in the essences of the call to repentance by Anglo churches and those of the historic black denominations when those responses to the crisis of racial justice 50 years ago were different? Is there a difference in responses today?
2. What laws now are unjust and hence call us to the moral challenge of confronting and changing them? (e.g. voting restriction laws, minimum wage laws, immigration laws)
3. In what ways do racism and injustice violate the integrity of their victims? In what ways do they demean the personhood of their perpetrators?

## C. We Thank

Biblical Reference: Matthew 25:34-40

1. Cite and discuss and recent efforts toward racial reconciliation in the Christian community?

2. Are you aware of your denominations staff/departments dedicated to undoing racism and fostering multicultural ministry? What is the funding level? Does its work permeate the total denominational structure?

#### D. We Resolve

Biblical Reference: James 1:22; 2:14-24

1. Does your local church and denominational curricula teach the story of the Civil Rights Movement—exposing the inequities and injustices of the times then and now?
2. What about public school curricula in your area?
3. Cite specific ways of carrying out the resolves.

# Session Six

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Read the “families confessions” on page 17 of the Response Document.

## Biblical Reference

“If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9 (NRSV)

## Churches’ Confessions

1. How, concretely, do you understand Dr. King’s call for “an uncompromising stance of solidarity with the oppressed” in our society and world 50 years after the publication of the “Letter from the Birmingham Jail”?

Can you describe a current social justice issue that calls for a “stance of solidarity with the oppressed” in your community and/or ministry context?

2. How do you understand the ways that “systemic racism” functions in our society and in our churches today? What are the policies and practices within your communion that function as barriers to access for people of color?
3. What actions do you believe should be taken – as an individual, your congregation, your communion, and in partnership with other communions— to follow up on the content of the confessions we have made in this statement.

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