

RACIAL RECONCILIATION AND THE CHURCH: LESSONS FROM HOWARD THURMAN

A Discussion Guide for Congregations and Small Groups to accompany the Journey Films production *Backs Against the Wall: The Howard Thurman Story*

While this guide is intended for any church congregation or fellowship group, it may have special meaning for congregations and church groups which have experienced, witnessed, or been party to forms of discrimination or prejudice in the past. For some churches, these wounds are deep and reach back over many decades. In fact, a number of American Christian denominations split over slavery nearly two hundred years ago, and those divisions – and the legacies left by them - have yet to be fully overcome.

Howard Thurman had strong things to say about how the institutional church in the early and mid-twentieth century continued to support a legacy of discrimination and segregation, splitting the body of Christ along the lines of race and denying full humanity to many of its members. In his seminal 1949 book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman was among the first to point out the similarities between Jesus' circumstances as a member of an oppressed minority in Roman Palestine and that of American Blacks and other minorities living in early twentieth-century America. "What," Thurman asked, "does the religion of Jesus have to say to those whose backs are against the wall?" Jesus' back was against the wall, too, Thurman pointed out, but he responded with the one positive option available to the oppressed: He met hate with love and counseled his followers even to love their enemies, for in doing so, their hearts might be opened to God as well.

It wasn't just segregation and discrimination in church and society that occupied Thurman; he was concerned with identifying and removing any barrier to community and full human engagement with others, whatever the differences of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other social markers. "I draw close to God as I draw close to my fellows," Thurman asserted (*Meditations of the Heart*, 121), but also that each one of us is "under judgment to make a highway for the Lord in the hearts" of our brothers and sisters (*The Creative Encounter*, 129-30). That can only be done by loving freely and intentionally. Thurman was under no illusion that any of this would be easy. He stressed that the "love-ethic," like the practice of non-violence which he also strongly espoused, was a spiritual discipline that required daily observance and constant recommitment.

This guide suggests some questions and approaches to using Thurman's work, as well as *Backs Against the Wall*, as the foundation for honest discussion about racial divisions within the church and how reconciliation and inclusive community can be engendered. We suggest this guide be used by facilitators in a small group setting.

1. Consider the following quote from Thurman's seminal 1949 book *Jesus and the Disinherited*:

American Christianity has betrayed the religion of Jesus almost beyond redemption. Churches have been established for the underprivileged, the weak, the poor on the theory they prefer to be among themselves. Churches have been established for the Chinese, the Japanese, the Korean, the Mexican, the Filipino, the Italian and the Negro with the same theory in mind. The result is that in the one place in which normal, free contacts might be most naturally established - in which the relations of the individual to his God should take priority over conditions of class, race, power, status, wealth or the like - this place is one of the chief instruments for guaranteeing barriers. (Jesus and the Disinherited 98)

How does your experience of the church reflect or differ from Thurman's? Has your primary experience been that of a place which fosters inclusion and community beyond the boundaries of race? Or has it been more along the lines that Thurman delineates - a place that actually fosters and sustains barriers between people? If the latter is the case, what makes it so?

2. In an interview given late in life, Thurman reflected on the stark and unquestioned division in American Christianity between the Black church and the white church in the days of his youth. "In my kind of Christianity . . . the Christian ethic was binding on me in relation to other Negroes," Thurman recalls, "but it had no meaning as far as the white world was concerned. . . . they were not part of my magnetic field of awareness."

How much of the racial division you have experienced in the church (your own congregation or others) could be the result of a simple lack of awareness about or interaction with the "Other"? Do you think a "white Christianity" and a "Black Christianity" still exist in America?

If your church has been divided over race, now or in the past, what was the cause or causes of these divisions? Are there outside factors related to history, politics, culture, or economics that have driven these divisions?

3. Do you consider your church a "safe" place in which to open potentially hurtful conversations about race? How can a congregation create such safe places from which to enter into conversations about race, which are often avoided or considered uncomfortable in the wider culture? What first steps might need to be taken?
4. In your view, how does a church balance a value for its own history with the changing realities of today, where behaviors and attitudes considered acceptable (or status quo) in

the past may no longer be so now? How does a congregation navigate these opposing realities?

5. In his Preface to *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman asks

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? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion or to a basic weakness in the religion itself?

Is there something in Christianity, as some may argue, that makes it ineffective in addressing or confronting racism? Or has it rather been adapted to cultures that have condoned these practices?

Have you personally, or your church, witnessed a distortion of Christianity that has condoned some form of racism? What, if anything, was done about this?

6. What do you think is the root cause of the racism that remains in the American church today, and how do you think it could be most successfully challenged and overcome? Can you think of two or three first steps toward reconciliation within the church?
7. In a speech in Granada, Mississippi in 1966, Thurman's younger friend Martin Luther King, Jr. suggested that what whites and Blacks both needed to understand was that "we are all tied together":

Our language, our religion, our food even . . . our cultural patterns are an amalgam of black and white. . . . Every Negro in America is a little white, and every white man in America is a little Negro. The Negro needs the white man to save him from his fears, and the white man needs the Negro to save him from his guilt. We need each other.

Is King's argument that Blacks and whites need each other persuasive? Taking a specifically Christian perspective, can you think of ways that majority white and majority Black churches might "need" each other? What are some of the things each tradition might gain from the other? What might your individual congregation gain from engagement with a congregation of different racial make-up?

8. Reflecting on the film *Backs Against the Wall* and on Thurman's work in general, what particular elements of his thought, writing, or lived example would be most useful to your congregation in the work of racial reconciliation?