

“Jason and Jessamin have given us a very helpful yet accessible book to help us understand more about race, culture, and class as some of the issues that continue to divide Christ’s church in the world. It is a timely resource that every leader wanting to be relevant to the multicultural context of world Christianity needs to read. I cannot recommend it enough.”

HARVEY KWIYANI, CEO, Global Connections

“Will Christians respond to the current turmoil over race with “wise actions” or as “passers-by”? That is the question posed by the authors. Drawing on wide-ranging biblical foundations, shrewd sociological understanding and closely detailed personal experience they point us to thoughtful and constructive ways ahead.”

REVD JOHN ROOT, Blogger at *Out of Many, One People*

“Considered and thoughtful, this book nevertheless provides a powerful challenge to our thinking on race and ethnicity in the church. A must-read for all who long to see the church as a place of welcome for all.”

GRAHAM MILLER, CEO, London City Mission

“In *Healing the Divides*, Jason Roach and Jessamin Birdsall deal with the uncomfortable truth of racism in our churches. They offer insights and practical ideas drawn from their own personal experiences. They are to be commended for dealing with such an emotive and divisive issue with sensitivity and candour, backed with clear biblical references. This is a timely and much-needed contribution.”

RAM GIDDOMAL CBE,
Chairman, South Asian Concern

“There are not many books written by evangelical Christians in the UK context on racial justice and unity. *Healing the Divide* therefore fills a gap that is missing in our evangelical mission theology. One of the unique things about this book is the authors. One is a black British male of Caribbean background; the other is a white American woman. The authors’ different perspectives and experiences illuminate and animate the book.”

REVD DR ISRAEL OLUWOLE OLOFINJANA,
Director, One People Commission, Evangelical Alliance

“As a Black Caribbean Pentecostal in the UK, I welcome this work as a helpful analytical tool that can be utilised in the engagement between Christians in mainstream and black-led churches—the latter with their greater emphasis on agency and self-determination—as together we continue our Christian journey towards racial healing and wholeness.”

BISHOP DR JOE ALDRED,

Retired Ecumenist, Churches Together in England,
Pentecostal and Multicultural Relations

“Jason and Jessamin help us to recognise our own cultural limitations, encouraging us to listen to those who are different from us. The book enables us to ask the hard questions about what it would really mean to be genuinely racially diverse as a church without simply expecting assimilation. I commend this book to you.”

THE RT REV D & RT HON. DAME SARAH MULLALLY DBE,

The Bishop of London

“*Healing the Divides* is a brilliant little book. Meticulously researched by two impressive Christian influencers, it provides insightful, credible and balanced biblical assessments of race and class. All Christian leaders should make this book widely available within their sphere of influence and engage carefully and accountably with its key recommendations.”

RICHARD CUNNINGHAM, Director, UCCF: The Christian Unions

“This book has a powerful purpose: to celebrate the ethnic diversity God intended and help bring about healing across the divides in British culture. Coming from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds and different genders, the authors are well placed to do that. So much about the authors’ approach is striking: the stories they tell, the simplicity of the practical steps they offer to deepen relationships, the creative use of the Bible and the urge to prayer. The result is a book that challenges and encourages and has real potential to bring change.”

ELAINE STORKEY, Consultant and lecturer in Social Science,
Philosophy and Theology

“The fair-minded, constructive guidance that Jason Roach and Jessamin Birdsall offer in this thoughtful, clearly-argued book will be of great value to faith leaders in their crucially important work for social justice. I highly recommend it.”

ROBERT WUTHNOW, Princeton University

“This is a very timely, relevant and practical book on a very sensitive issue—it truly re-emphasises my own view that there is no perfect race but a race for perfection, and the true leaders in a nation are often the front runners in that race for perfection. I believe this book is a valuable reference point for the church and wider society.”

ADE OMOOBA MBE,
Co-chair, National Church Leaders Forum

“*Healing the Divides* is important and timely. It shines the light of biblical theology into so much painful confusion about racial injustice and prejudice, especially for churches who claim we want the healthy diversity celebrated in Scripture but are struggling to make much progress. It avoids polarising extremes; it listens humbly for what we can learn from those we may not completely agree with; it provides a compelling agenda for change and the inspiring hope of God’s heavenly church for all nations. I found it extremely sobering (so much I’ve got wrong), constructively illuminating (so much I didn’t realise), graciously measured (so much gospel wisdom), and painfully challenging (so much I need to change about the way I think and do ministry). I will be urgently commending this book to our church leadership and church family. Thank you, God, for helping Jessamin and Jason write such a brilliant little book.”

RICHARD COEKIN,
CEO, Co-Mission Church-Planting Network

“*Healing the Divides* is a biblically faithful, data-rich and culturally relevant challenge to the UK church regarding racial justice. It calls for repentance and practical steps to reconciliation with the hope of the gospel.”

CLARE WILLIAMS, Founder, Get Real Apologetics

JASON ROACH AND JESSAMIN BIRDSALL

HEALING

THE

DIVIDES

**HOW EVERY CHRISTIAN CAN ADVANCE GOD'S
VISION FOR RACIAL UNITY AND JUSTICE**

thegoodbook
COMPANY

Healing the Divides

© 2022 Jason Roach and Jessamin Birdsall.



Published by:

The Good Book Company

thegoodbook.com | thegoodbook.co.uk

thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

Unless otherwise indicated, Bible quotations are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, NIV copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher.

Jason Roach and Jessamin Birdsall have asserted their rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as authors of this work.

ISBN: 9781784987275 | Printed in the UK

Design by Ben Woodcraft

CONTENTS

1: Surveying the scene	9
2: The call to celebrate ethnicity	31
3: Black Lives Matter, CRT and anti-racist activism	51
4: What about culture and class?	75
5: Barriers within the church	97
6: What change looks like for the majority culture	117
7: What change looks like for minority-ethnic people	137
Appendix: Two perspectives on racism	158
Glossary of Key Terms	164
Further reading	166
Acknowledgements	169
Endnotes	173

1. SURVEYING THE SCENE

Shock, sadness and shouts for **justice**^a were just some of the responses reverberating around the globe as we started to write this book.

It was just a few months after the death of George Floyd (May 2020), which had catalysed protests against police brutality and racial inequality in the US, the UK, and many other countries. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black, Asian, and **minority ethnic**^b communities in the UK had also put issues of **race** on the front page of newspapers and at the centre of public debates. Our hearts were heavy as we were swept up, in different ways, in all that was going on around us.

a Key words are marked in grey when they first appear and are explained in the glossary towards the back.

b At the time of writing, “minority ethnic” is the preferred term for describing non-white ethnic groups in the UK. Language is always changing, and any summarising term has weaknesses. We acknowledge this and encourage readers to use language that is as personal and specific as possible in everyday speech.

The increased attention to **racism** prompted many minority-ethnic individuals to speak up about their own experiences. I (Jason) was one of them—speaking out publicly for the first time about my experiences of racism perpetrated by police and people in the pew, both in the past and in the present.

Within a short period of time, racism became a more prominent social concern in the public eye. Thousands demonstrated in support of the **Black Lives Matter** (BLM) movement. Schools, businesses, government departments and churches publicly affirmed their support for racial equality and pledged further change. Articles, books, podcasts and special events directed our attention to the problem of racism and urged us to take action. But the surge in attention to racism then triggered a backlash in the form of attacks on “**Critical Race Theory**”. Accusations were made that **anti-racism** work is part of a dangerous “**woke** culture”.

How are we as Christians to make sense of these debates?
How are we to respond?

The aim of this book is not to solve all the issues in the debate about racism. It is to offer fellow Christians some tools and frameworks to help all of us more thoughtfully navigate conversations about race and to better love our brothers and sisters of all ethnicities.

For some who read this book, the conversation about race sparked by George Floyd’s death has faded to a dim

HEALING THE DIVIDES

and distant memory. For others, the conversation is live and personal. Some of us may be hurting because of the racism that we have personally experienced. Others may be hurting because of racism that we have witnessed or that has affected those we care about. All of us can feel at a loss as to how to feel or act in the midst of the pain and injustice in our society.

When a paramedic arrives at the scene of an emergency, they are trained to ask the right questions and bring the right equipment so they can begin to put things right. They may not have all the answers, but their toolkit and training make a critical difference. We pray that this book might help us as Christians, when confronted by racism, to be more like a paramedic than a passer-by—to take wise action rather than simply keep our heads down and walk by.

OUR STORIES

We believe that the church is called to be a place where people of all **cultures**, languages, skin tones and histories can participate, grow and serve together.

We've both been conscious of the ways that race and culture shape our experience of church for a long time.

Jason: I am Black British. I was born in London to parents from the island of Barbados in the Caribbean who had moved to the UK to work and study. The suburb where I grew up was predominantly white. This meant that, apart from my parents, I encountered very few people with brown skin who were in

skilled professions such as medicine, engineering, teaching or banking. It wasn't until we started to visit Barbados that I became aware of how much this had affected my own thinking.

I remember wondering how the plane I was on would actually be able to land on the island. Who would have built the runway? Subconsciously, my environment had caused me to doubt whether, apart from some exceptions like my parents, Black people had the competence to do these things. It seems almost unbelievable now that, despite the colour of my own skin, I might think this way. But it meant that my parents' decision to make Barbados a kind of second home for us was all the more precious. Those subconscious stereotypes quickly evaporated when we were immersed in a different place.

I was also very aware of being seen as an outsider on both sides of the Atlantic. My accent made me a novelty in the Caribbean, while my skin and hair made me a curiosity among my classmates in England.

My wife is white, and we are on an ongoing journey of working out what it looks like to raise children with mixed heritage in a sometimes hostile world. We have also had the privilege of planting an intentionally multi-ethnic church on an urban housing estate. Over the last decade we have learnt lots about seeking to minister in a multi-ethnic, multicultural, multigenerational environment, often from our mistakes.

Jessamin: I am a white American. I was born in Tokyo and spent my childhood between Japan, California and Massachusetts. I had the chance to meet people from many

HEALING THE DIVIDES

parts of the world and transition between different cultures. Early on I realised that church is both enriched and complicated by ethnic diversity. As a kid, I loved singing in Japanese, hearing the faith-filled testimonies of our Nigerian friends, and eating Korean and Filipino food at the monthly bring-and-share lunch.

But I also picked up on the fact that there were sometimes conflicts around leadership styles and tensions about how best to manage multiple languages in the service. I observed that a Black friend of ours called Dame experienced overt racism; I, on the other hand, would get special attention for having blue eyes and red hair.

As an adult, I worked in India for a few years, where the caste system intersects with skin colour and class in ways that profoundly impact how people live and worship. These experiences led me to pursue a PhD in sociology, focusing on religion, race and inequality. Two years into my PhD, the 2016 American presidential campaign exposed deep and ugly racial divisions in the American church, and most acutely in the evangelical church. I started doing research, both in the US and the UK, into how evangelicals think about race and what helps or hinders churches from becoming racially integrated. My personal desire is for the church to be a community of welcome and justice, a place of healing and wholeness that points to the reconciling power of Jesus.

Both of us acknowledge that we see these topics of racial justice and unity through particular lenses. Our own identities and experiences have been profoundly

shaped by our families, friends, skin tones, educational opportunities, work contexts, cultural environments and church communities. We do not claim to have a comprehensive understanding of the complex issues that this book raises. Certainly, we both have much more to learn. However, we have endeavoured to write with integrity about some of the things we have learned so far, with the hope that it can be of help to others who also long for church to reflect God's heart for unity and diversity.

ACKNOWLEDGING COMPLEXITY

One of the unfortunate features of the current conversation around race is that it has become very polarised. At one extreme, there are people who seem to frame all of society's divisions and problems under the banner of "racism". At the other extreme, there are people who believe racism is not an issue at all.

Who is right? Is race the biggest social issue we should be paying attention to, or is it a non-issue?

Here, it's worth taking a moment to step back. In 2016, the news in the UK was completely dominated by the EU referendum. Brexit commentary focused on class, region and generation as the pressing divisions in British society. Rewind back to 2005 and the news was dominated by the 7/7 bombings, in which 52 people were killed and 700 injured by Islamic extremists. This was followed by an uptick in anti-Muslim sentiment. At that time, the political commentary cast religious and cultural divisions as the greatest threat to Britain.

HEALING THE DIVIDES

So, what is the most serious division in British society? Race? Class? Region? Religion? Culture? In truth, all these factors can be, and are, sources of division and prejudice in our communities—and all of them will shape our own experience of life and the kinds of opportunities or challenges that we face.

The media highlight different issues at different times. Individuals gravitate towards particular causes based on their own experiences and identities. Yet as Christians, we shouldn't determine our engagement with social issues based merely on what the hot-button issue of the moment is or what is personally relevant to us. Instead, we should be willing to reflect more deeply on social issues through the lens of Scripture, with actual data, and in conversation with people who come from a range of perspectives.

In 2020, race was brought into focus. While race is not the only factor contributing to divisions and inequalities in our society, it is a very significant one that demands our attention and action. For some of us, 2020 was the first time that we had ever considered the subject of racism in Britain. For others, this was simply the latest episode in a lifelong struggle against racial injustice. Whatever our background, we have the opportunity and responsibility to reflect and learn and take steps towards racial justice and healing. How can we as Christians think well about race? How can we engage in the conversation in a way that is thoughtful, honest, compassionate and humble? How can we build church communities that are genuinely inclusive

of people of different ethnic and racial identities? How can we promote racial justice and healing? These are some of the issues we'll unpack over the next few chapters.

DEFINITIONS

Another tricky thing about the current conversation around race is that there are lots of key terms that people define differently. For the sake of clarity, we want to be upfront about how we are using these words.

Race is a way of categorising people based on visible physical characteristics. When we meet someone for the first time, we quickly (and usually unconsciously) place that person in the category of “Asian”, “white” or “Black” based on their skin colour, hair texture and facial features.^c We may also make quick assumptions about that person's origins and about their temperament, personality and behaviour. For example, in Britain, seeing a modestly dressed woman with brown skin and brown hair might trigger the category “Asian”, along with assumptions that the woman is socially conservative, Muslim, unathletic and from Bangladesh. In reality, the woman might be a gregarious and skilled athlete of Indian ethnicity whose family migrated from East Africa.

^c The decision to capitalise “Black” in print is an ongoing subject of discussion. In brief, our reasoning is that capitalisation acknowledges a sociological reality and the need for respect. Sociologically, people with dark skin have endured centuries of oppression. The collective experience of oppression has generated a sense of shared history and solidarity, despite variations of ethnicity and culture. While strict evenhandedness would mean capitalising “White” as well, white people do not have this shared history of oppression and do not tend to identify as a group on the basis of their skin colour. In addition, “White” has long been capitalised by white supremacist hate groups.