

# So You're 'Not Racist'? Here's Why That's Not Good Enough

Educating Christians about racial justice is one of the most important tasks in the life of the white American church.

It is important because racial injustice is not just “the flavor of the month” on a menu of issues that the church could address.

As [Jim Wallis](#) has argued, racism and white privilege is America’s “original sin” whose legacy continues to devastate society today.

As [Ibram X. Kendi](#) has shown, U.S. Christians have contributed and propagated anti-black ideas in order to defend the nation’s discriminatory policies and rationalize the inequities separating white and black citizens.

As [Jemar Tisby](#) has shown, the majority of the U.S. church historically has been complicit with racism from slavery and segregation up to the present day.

As a result, Christian education about racial justice is also hard because it forces us to turn a critical lens on ourselves - our history, teachings and practices - both in the past and present.

Some pastors have told me that conversations about race were more

contentious and difficult in their mostly white congregations than conversations about gender identity and sexual orientation.

I know of one faith leader whose recent resignation was in part precipitated by the leader's insistence on talking about and supporting the Black Lives Matter movement.

A common question posed by faith leaders is this: "How can I address racism honestly without my congregants thinking I'm accusing them of being racists?"

The question I hear behind that question is this: "How can faith leaders address racism honestly when most congregants desperately want to see themselves as not racist?"

Today, the word "racist" has become an epithet weaponized toward people deemed ignorant, bigoted and hateful.

In this usage, racists are bad. They are tiki torch-wielding, hate-spouting, hood-wearing bigots terrorizing people of color. Surely, we are not them!

"Not-racists" like us are basically good. We are educated, open-minded and loving.

However, in his new book, "[How to be an Anti-Racist](#)," Ibram X. Kendi argued that

[it is not enough to be “not racist.”](#)

“What’s the problem with being “not racist”? Kendi asked. “It is a claim that signifies neutrality: ‘I am not a racist, but neither am I aggressively against racism.’”

But there is no neutrality in the racism struggle, he asserted. The opposite of “racist” isn’t “not racist.” It is “anti-racist.”

In our society, there are wide gaps separating white and black (and other people of color) in [income and accumulated wealth](#), [health outcomes](#), [incarceration rates](#), [school achievement](#), [maternal and infant mortality](#) and so on - even after researchers control for income and education.

A wealth of scholarship and reporting demonstrates how our government and institutional policies have created and upheld these disparities. In light of this, the claim of “not racist” is simply a mask for continuing racism.

For Kendi, to be racist is to adopt views that espouse a racial hierarchy - with white at the top of the hierarchy; to be an anti-racist is to believe the races are equal.

Furthermore, when one sees these racial inequities, the racist mindset blames the people groups who are suffering as inferior and broken, while the anti-racist explores the roots of problems in power and policies.

Kendi concluded, “One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an anti-racist.”

But doesn't Kendi's stark framework make pastors and Christian educators more vulnerable to the charge that they are accusing their congregants of being racists?

Yes, but there are two moves that pastors and educators can make.

The first move is to follow Kendi's lead in rejecting the popular contention that the word “racist” is a pejorative slur.

Unlike the brands that slave masters used to stamp kidnapped Africans into perpetual servitude, the term “racist” is not a brand that permanently stamps one's identity.

It is an adjective that describes the ideas, actions and policies that promote white supremacy, racial inequities or both.

Kendi wrote, “The Good News is that racist and anti-racist are not fixed identities. We can be a racist one minute and an anti-racist the next. What we say about race, what we do about race, in each moment, determines what - not who - we are.”

The second move is to follow our own Christian theological understanding of

sanctification to guide and frame our education on race.

Christians believe that, in Jesus, we are made right in our relationship with God (justification).

God also continues the life-long work of sanctification to renew and transform our whole selves, so that we fully die to sin and fully grow into the image of God.

While we believe that our permanent identity is a beloved child of God, we confess that we are still sinners, having fallen short of the glory of God in our thoughts, in our words, in our actions, in our non-actions.

We pray and pledge to repent, to turn around and reverse course.

Similarly, what would it look like for faith leaders, congregations and congregants to confess the sins of specific racist beliefs, actions and societal policies that we still hold and support?

What would it look like for faith leaders, congregations and congregants then to repent and dismantle those racist beliefs, actions and societal policies?

What would it look like for faith leaders, congregations and congregants to embrace and enact anti-racist beliefs and actions and to advocate for societal policies that reduce inequities and promote the common good?

**<https://ethicsdaily.com/so-youre-not-racist-heres-why-thats-not-good-enough/> October 23, 2019 Michael Cheuk**

May God give us all courage and faith to be led down this path of sanctification.

*Editor's note: This article is part of a series this week focused on Christian ethics education. The previous articles are:*

[\*Why Your Congregation Needs Christian Ethics Education\*](#) | Bill Tillman

[\*Why the Church Must Recover the Gospel's Political Claims\*](#) | Curtis Ramsey-Lucas

[\*Why Biblical Ethics Isn't as Easy as Choosing Proof Texts\*](#) | Myles Werntz

[\*How Your Church Can Learn to Discuss Politicized Moral Issues\*](#) | Libby Grammer