

# The Place Where Racial Reconciliation Should Begin

Several stories about athletes being the target of racial slurs have arisen recently. In response, college athletics might assess penalties if certain words are used during a game. I applaud the governing forces for looking into the problem.

The comments from former college and professional players in these reports reveal that racial slurs from the stands and opposing players are not a new phenomenon.

While we have made tremendous strides since the 1960s, racism remains a problem.

Laws have been passed that make it illegal to discriminate against a person because of his or her race, which have helped to reduce the blatant racism that existed for many years.

Yet they have not been effective in addressing the hidden racism that continues to exist.

In Matthew 12:24 Jesus said, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."

When someone utters a racist slur or says something derogatory about a person due to his or her race, it is because that is what is in that person's heart.

Laws are necessary to prevent negative behaviors, but they cannot change a person's heart.

This requires personal transformation that comes through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

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The church has not, in my opinion, done enough to address racism. During the civil rights movement, many Christians marched and advocated for racial reconciliation.

Once laws were on the books, it seems that the church backed off, but the work isn't over.

A recent conversation with a bivocational pastor friend suggested that some of the efforts we made were misguided.

He told me that he often urged his African-American colleagues to become a part of what the churches were doing in their community.

A well-respected African-American pastor challenged him one day with this question: "You are always inviting us to join you. When are you going to join in what we're doing?"

He took that question to his church, which soon voted to become a member of the local African-American association of churches.

Maybe we have made a mistake in always asking the black community and churches to join in what we're doing while showing little interest in joining in what they are doing.

Several years before I became the pastor of a church, a young woman in the church married an African-American. That was something that was not done at that time in this community.

It led to a discussion in the church about who could be members, and a vote was taken that declared that anyone, regardless of their race, was welcome.

This was a bold step by a small, rural church in an area that still practiced discrimination in many areas.

That was more than 40 years ago, and we need churches to continue to take bold

steps that promote equality among the races.

Roughly 15 years ago, I interviewed with a pastor search committee of a congregation different from the denomination I currently serve.

The interview went very well, and the committee indicated I was the person they wanted to present to the church for a vote.

That was before I asked my last question: “Is everyone welcomed to attend and become a member of this church?”

For several minutes they did their best to convince me they loved everybody, until I told them the reason I asked the question is because my daughter is married to an African-American.

When they visit on the weekends, I shared, they attend the church where I serve and I wanted to make sure they would be welcomed.

The stunned looks on their faces told me everything I needed to know even before they thanked me for coming and promised to get back with me. I never heard from them again.

We will never resolve the racial issues in this nation until we first resolve them in the church. Laws can force obedience, but they can't change hearts.

The church must not assume racism has been erased from society or from our congregations. It has not.

The church must take the initiative to address this issue and begin to change people's hearts.

✘ [Dennis Bickers](#) served as the bivocational pastor of Hebron Baptist Church near Madison, Ind., for 20 years before accepting his current position as a resource minister with the American Baptist Churches of Indiana and Kentucky. A longer [version](#) of this article first appeared on his [blog](#), Bivocational Ministry, and

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*Editor's note: "Beneath the Skin," EthicsDaily.com's award-winning documentary on Baptists and racism, is available [here](#).*