

# Editorial: We need a clear definition of racism

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What does racism look like in your church?

Oh, I know, you don't have racism in your church. You just have the woman who makes off-color (no pun intended) jokes about Black people and Mexicans. But she's not racist, you say.

Or maybe it's the white guy who's upset about his daughter dating a Black guy. He's not racist; he just doesn't want her going out with that "n\*\*\*\*\*," uh, he means "him."

These are just two easy examples of many things I heard as a pastor and still hear from time to time. If these kinds of things don't qualify as racism, then what does? Many of us claim not to tolerate racism, but can we define it?

A West Texas school board's recent statement brought this to mind.

## Condemning acts of racism

The Lubbock-Cooper Independent School District board of trustees adopted a [resolution condemning acts of racism](#) during a short special called meeting Jan. 5. The circumstances leading to the meeting are interesting but not material for the question I am asking here.

"The Lubbock-Cooper ISD Board of Trustees: Condemns all racially-motivated behaviors, actions, or speech," [the statement reads](#). The beginning of the statement notes the resolution is regarding "the use of racial slurs, harassment, hate speech, or derogatory language."

The board also “[p]ledges to stand against any and all acts of racism and discrimination against Lubbock-Cooper ISD students, employees, and community members; and [c]ommits to support Lubbock-Cooper ISD administrators in any and all actions to end racism and discrimination among students and ensure a positive school culture of belongingness and environment of respect and love for ALL students.

“This support includes, but is not limited to, the facilitation of regular campus student, parent, and faculty surveys, the provision of increased administrative support, and the allocation of resources for continued diversity- and culture-based professional development and student education opportunities,” the statement concludes.

## **Defining ‘racially-motivated’**

Znyiah Lewis, a Lubbock-Cooper ISD student who has experienced racially motivated bullying, attended the meeting and asked the board to define “zero tolerance.” [\*The Texas Tribune reported\*](#) she received no response.

Another person pressed the board, asking if they could answer Lewis.

“We can, we do not have to. ... We’ll let the statement stand for itself,” Board President Paul Ehlers replied.

The statement does not mention “zero tolerance.” But that’s beside the point.

The statement also does not spell out disciplinary deterrents to “racially-motivated behaviors, actions, or speech,” though it does refer to “a standardized, more severe disciplinary protocol for racially-motivated incidents” enacted in May 2022. This also is beside the point.

If *The Texas Tribune* reporting of the board meeting is accurate, the board

should have demonstrated its stated value—“**WHEREAS**, the Lubbock-Cooper ISD Board of Trustees believes that every child deserves to feel safe, loved, respected, and supported.”—by providing Lewis an answer that respects and supports her personhood. This, too, is beside the point here.

The point here is all our talk and resolving about racism matters little if we don't have a clear definition of racism. Lacking such a definition, our resolutions are little more than promising we will oppose the dreaded thing ... if we ever see an instance of it. It's all so much posturing and virtue signaling.

## **We need a clear definition of racism**

When I consider the question of how to define racism, I'm reminded of a famous 1964 U.S. Supreme Court case I studied in a constitutional law class—*Jacobellis v. Ohio*. The Supreme Court attempted to define pornography—or at least outline a test for determining what is pornographic.

Pornography and racism are not the same thing, but they overlap in many ways. One thing both should share is our rejection of them.

In the case of pornography, Justice Potter Stewart offered this definition: “[I know it when I see it.](#)” At which point, it's too late.

We frequently define racism the same way—after the fact—and for much the same reason—First Amendment free speech rights. Everyone's entitled to their own opinions.

Surely, one person's opinion about another person's intelligence or character in light of their skin color doesn't add up to racism, we may think. After all, an opinion is just a thought, and thoughts don't hurt people.

Thoughts don't hurt people. If that's the case, then this editorial shouldn't bother anyone.

More than aggravating others, we all know our thoughts can and often do hurt others. It seems, then, a clear definition of racism must include a person's thoughts about others inasmuch as Jesus included a person's lustful thoughts in his definition of adultery ([Matthew 5:27-28](#)).

Part of a clear definition of racism, then, includes denigrating and dehumanizing thoughts about another person in relation to race. The reason is simple enough: Private thoughts become individual actions, which when blessed, become institutionalized. But unlike pornography, we too often still excuse it after we see it.

## **Opposition requires knowing what we oppose**

We should oppose racism in all its forms, and to do that, we must know what constitutes racism. Unfortunately, a clear definition isn't universally agreed upon. Just consider the two examples that opened this editorial.

Those and similar instances too often are passed off as nothing more than personal prejudice. Personal prejudice has far-reaching consequences, however, and is the seedbed of racial violence and official sanction. Therefore, so-called "personal prejudice" cannot be minimized as though it is ultimately harmless. Rather, it must be included in what constitutes racism.

Likewise, jokes that rely on clearly racist slurs and caricatures aren't harmless fun. They are not subtle sleights we can allow to slip by. They are the manure in which virulent racism grows.

Lubbock-Cooper ISD trustees officially condemn such things. But can they

define them?

How much more should the church—the body of Christ “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9)—condemn such things?

We may think our protestations of racism stand for themselves, but experience tells me we have some answering to do.

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