

**Christian Churches Together
Response to Dr. Martin L. King Jr.'s
Letter from Birmingham Jail**

**Biblical Study Guide
For Small Groups**



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Introduction to Study Guide

This study guide responds to CCT's commitment to promote racial justice and reconciliation in our country. It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit accompanies you, as you prayerfully reflect on this important topic. Formed in 2006, Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. is a fellowship of 36 national communions, including African American, Catholic, Evangelical/Pentecostal, Historic Protestant, and Orthodox; and seven national organizations, including American Bible Society, Bread for the World, Evangelicals for Social Action, Habitat for Humanity, National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, Sojourners, and World Vision.

As leaders of Christian Churches Together in the USA, we have been challenged anew by the letter Dr. King wrote fifty years ago to another group of religious leaders while sitting in jail. The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was written as a response to an open letter to Dr. King that appeared in a local newspaper, from eight white clergymen of the state (including bishops, pastors and a rabbi). They urged an end to the demonstrations and civil disobedience that were occurring in the city and the use, instead, of patient negotiation and legal action to address any perceived denial of rights to Black citizens.

Rather than simply dismissing the concerns raised in the letter from the clergymen, or responding with anger, Dr. King addressed them as "Fellow Clergyman" and as "brothers." *"Since I feel you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms."* ("Letter from Birmingham Jail", Liberation Curriculum, Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project) He addressed each of their statements, inferences and assumptions, and also laid out his own disappointments with and vision for the church as an agent of God's justice and peace. This "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was rapidly picked up by media around the world and was immediately recognized as a document of historic significance. It has stood since as a landmark in the literature of social justice, exhibiting the same spirit as that of the great prophet Micah: "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

This study guide is designed as a small groups tool for members in our congregations to re-invigorate, and in many cases initiate, a conversation about the present reality of racism in church and society. Our hope is that these conversations may move God's people to take action in their own context to address the sin of racism and its ramifications. We pray that as a result of Bible reflections, conversations and prayer, people all across our country will become agents of transformation, so that we may give glory to God by becoming the "beloved community."

Suggestions for the use of this material

People who represent all the five traditions in Christian Churches Together have written the content of this study guide. This diversity offers an opportunity to look at the issue of racism through different perspectives and approaches.

Every session in the study guide indicates a corresponding section in CCT's Response Document.

CCT's Response to Dr. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail can be downloaded from our website:

www.cctusa.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/CCT-Response-Letter-Birmingham-Jail.pdf

The sections in the Response Document serve as the foundational text for the discussion. One session may take more than one, one-hour period. Your group must decide if one hour is enough time or if another session is needed. Participants should read and personally reflect on the assigned section of the Response Document before the group meets.

Because the Bible quotations are longer in session five, we recommend reading from a Bible. We recommend that, if you are studying this as a group, to take enough time during the first session to talk about your personal experiences with racial prejudice or racism. A conversation about race can be difficult and painful, for that reason we encourage a group to talk about respect, boundaries, confidentiality and trust.

We suggest the following format for a one-hour session:

Welcome (introductions)

Prayer

Song

Reading of text in the CCT Response Document

Reading of the Bible text

Discussion and reflection (using questions provided)

Action (What each person will do in response to the study?)

Song

Prayer