



Evangelical  
Lutheran Church  
in America

STUDY GUIDE FOR

---

*A Time for Burning*

---

This study guide was created by a Nebraska Synod (ELCA)  
committee dedicated to  
RARE (Racial Awareness, Reconciliation and Engagement).



## PURPOSE

This study guide is intended to generate awareness, encourage reconciliation and prompt engagement so that we can live out the command to love God and our neighbors. As Lutherans we profess that the diversity of the human creation is a gift that allows us to see the breadth and beauty of God's work. We acknowledge that racism is a sin that turns us inward, toward the people we believe to most resemble us, and against the people we imagine to be the most different. Through grace we commit to the task of shedding our prejudices and participating in the rich blessing of human difference.

## APPROACH

Conversations about race can be awkward and uncomfortable. As people with a shared faith, we dedicate ourselves to the free exchange of ideas and to respect for each other as people who are growing in different ways and at different speeds. We come from many different backgrounds, and very different experiences have shaped us; yet we hold in common a sinful nature and the free gift of forgiveness of those sins. We move forward in the knowledge that God has given us much more to bring us together than to divide us.

## BACKGROUND

Many people enter discussions of race with the mistaken belief that it is a scientific classification to account for difference. In fact, the notion of race — as it relates to differences in skin tone or physical features — is a cultural invention, and a fairly recent one. Many scholars point to the middle of the 1600s in the colonies of North America as the point at which the modern idea of race was developed to keep some people enslaved and oppressed and others in positions of power. Throughout this study, it will be important to keep in mind that race is an invention and to consider how that invention has operated in history, particularly the time period when *A Time for Burning* was released (1967).

## I. WATCH THE FILM (ONE HOUR).

You might want to have paper and pen or an electronic device available to record questions and reactions as you watch.

### [A Time for Burning](#)

## II. GENERAL QUESTIONS

- a) What were your general thoughts and feelings as you watched the film?
- b) This year marks the 60th anniversary (as of 9/2023) of *A Time for Burning* being nominated for an Academy Award. Did the film feel familiar or foreign, outdated or timely?
- c) This year also 60th anniversary (as of 9/2023) of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. What facts do you know about the civil rights movement that put the film in context? (See timeline: <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement-timeline>)
- d) This film can be hard to watch. What scene(s) bothered you the most? Why?
- e) How has your understanding of race been formed? How does your view fit with the idea that race is a social invention?
- f) What is racism, and in what ways does it work against the faith we profess? What do the following Scripture passages and major tenets of Luther's theology suggest about racism?

*“Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?”* (Malachi 2:10 NRSV).

*“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (John 13:34-35).

*“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* (Galatians 3:28).

Luther believed that we:

- Are justified by grace through faith alone.
- Participate in a universal priesthood of believers.
- Experience a paradox of freedom in which we are both “lord of all, subject to none” and “servant of all, subject to all.”

### III. DIGGING DEEPER

- a) About five minutes into the film Ernie Chambers suggests that racial unity is an impossible goal and particularly implicates the church in the country’s racial divide. Why do you think he believes that?
- b) Chambers also says, “As far as we’re concerned, your Jesus is contaminated.” How would you respond to that critique? In what sense is he right or wrong?
- c) What is at stake for each of the people or groups involved? What internal or external obstacles do they face?
  - Ernie Chambers
  - The Rev. Bill Youngdahl
  - Ray Cristensen
  - African American clergy members in Omaha
  - The Augustana Church Council
- d) At one point Youngdahl asks, “What kind of attitudes are you sharing with others — your friends, your children — when it comes to race relations? What is your race-relations vocabulary?” What do we discover when we ask ourselves the same questions?
- e) One of the fears expressed by the board members of Augustana is that they will lose members or even split the church by promoting racial equality. That fear leads some to conclude that the time is not right or that the risks are too great. Are these same fears present today? If so, how do we overcome them?
- f) In your view, what was a success or failure in the film?

- g) Despite the unflattering picture of Omaha’s Augustana Lutheran Church in *A Time for Burning*, this film was commissioned and released by the Lutheran church. What do you think of that fact? What does it suggest about how the church can proceed in the promotion of racial reconciliation?

### IV. NEXT STEPS

- a) How can your intellectual and emotional responses to the film lead to action? In other words, what are the next steps in developing your understanding and promotion of racial equality?
- b) What can we do today to improve race relations within the ELCA?
- c) What are the next steps for your congregation in particular?
- d) The ELCA is one of the “whitest” denominations in the country. How can we achieve greater diversity in the church?

This study was created by a Nebraska Synod committee dedicated to RARE (Racial Awareness, Reconciliation and Engagement). For a list of books, videos, podcasts and other resources related to racism and the church, please visit the Nebraska Synod website [RARE \(nebraskasynod.org\)](http://RARE(nebraskasynod.org)).

