

A Brief History & Biblical Unifying Perspective of the N-word

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“Don’t say N - - - er, Scout.”

(Atticus Finch, “To Kill A Mockingbird”, 1962 movie)

When and why did the N-word—a racial slur, and its alternate slang word, enter our society? A possible origin of this word could be Niger (pronounced Nee-ger in Greek and pronounced Ny-jur in English)—the nickname of a 1st Century Christian man in the Bible (Acts 13:1). The word niger in the Latin language means black. Many centuries later, the Niger River in Africa was named in 1897. There are also nations in Africa by the names of Niger (founded in 1958) and Nigeria (founded in 1960). Before the word niger evolved into the unfortunate N-word humanity continues to be plagued by in the present day, a similar word to niger entered our society.

The word negro became used in the Spanish and Portuguese languages to describe the color black, before it eventually became a word used to describe the ethnicity of Black/African-American people in America. It is important to note that describing human beings as Black, White, Red, Yellow, etc., are flawed descriptions. In reality, human beings are various shades of Brown. It makes me wonder, if humanity had not chosen such a flawed description for Black people, would the N-word have ever existed?

For several generations, people from all ethnicities used the word negro to describe Black people, mostly uncontroversially. The word negro eventually became outdated, while other descriptive phrases like “person of color” and words like Black or African-American became common and often respectful terms for Black people—used by people of all ethnicities. Sadly, the word negro eventually evolved into the most prominent racial slur in American history.

During America’s years of legalized slavery, an awful word was created to communicate disrespect, devaluation, dehumanization, humiliation, and hatred

for Black people. This word went way beyond previous words that simply aimed to describe the ethnicity of Black people. This singular word would go on to cause more division and hurt among humanity than, arguably, any other word in the history of the English language.

Because of my personal pledge to never say, repeat, read aloud, or type the N-word, you will not see this word in its entirety anywhere in this article. However, in order to be clear about which version of the N-word I am referring to, I will spell out a portion of the word within this article. This most problematic word, the word N - - - er, is undeniably racist. I would recommend that no one of any ethnicity ever use it. Sadly, this word has and continues to be used out of hatred for Black people or to mock Black people. There are also times when this word is used out of context—simply because it is known to be an exceptionally profane word.

An alternate form of the N-word, the word N - - - a, was originally created as an attempt to depower the word N - - - er. It became a slang word that was used between some Black people (often young Black males) to notate friendship or approval—in addition to simply referring to a Black person. While this version of the N-word became acceptable to use in some people’s opinions, it has created significant conflict, confusion, and a continuation of attention of the word N - - - er. Since the word N - - - a is unprofessional, profane, and can be used as a euphemism for the word N - - - er, I would recommend that no one of any ethnicity ever use it. When a person of any ethnicity is saying or repeating the word N - - - a from a song, it is at least profane. When a White person asks a Black person for an N-word “pass” (requesting permission to use the word N - - - a), they are requesting permission to use a word that is at least profane.

In the Bible, specifically Ephesians 4:29, God commands Christians to not use “abusive”/“corrupt”/“foul”/“unwholesome” words.

In 1883, Rev. Elisha W. Green, a former slave, was the victim of a racist assault. His assaulters were Rev. George T. Gould, Professor Frank L. Bristow, and Professor Joe Corrington. While this crime was being tried in court, the judge

asked Rev. Green why he did not like being called a negro. Rev. Green corrected the judge by telling him that he is proud to be a negro and fine with being called a negro. He also clarified that, 'So far as 'N - - - er' is concerned, I do not like (being called) that.'"

I have personally been called a N - - - er, in anger, to my face. I will never forget it.

Using the N-word is not an unpardonable sin to God. By confessing one's sinfulness to Jesus Christ, and by placing redemptive faith in Jesus Christ, all sins can be forgiven by Him. (1 John 1:9) This fact, in no way, excuses any uses of the N-word. We would do well to always label any uses of the word N - - - er as sinful. And we would do well to label all other uses of any form of the N-word as, at least, unwise. Accurate educational resources, respectful reprimands, and redemptive forms of discipline should be utilized in effort to achieve an environment where the N-word is nonexistent.

May this perspective serve to assist a pursuit of Biblical unity among any people who desire to see God's brand of unity become a reality. Any effort to honor all of God's image bearers must include an intolerance of all racial slurs.

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