

“Racism and Christianity in America (Part 1: 1492-1640)”

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I critique myself, when I listen to my own sermons. “I could have worded that better,” or “I forgot an important detail,” or “That one wasn’t very good” – such are my thoughts, when I listen to my sermons. Last Sunday, as my family and I were listening to my sermon, I was left with a profound feeling of: “That was good ... but it’s not enough.” It’s not enough to just talk theologically about racism, not enough to confess that I did something very wrong when I was a kid. We white people need to be doing *more*. We white people need to be taking a good, long, hard look at ourselves, at all our actions and decisions over the course of our whole lives, the people we have voted for at every level of government, the laws that our legislatures have adopted that still to this day favor white people, the oh-so-subtle attitudes and behaviors we have when we are around African-Americans, the policies and practices of the companies we work for and the organizations we are involved with. We all need to be doing some serious self-examination right now, both individually and collectively. That includes examining the church, the ways that *Christianity* has at times helped black people ... and at other times has hurt them.

The truth of the matter is that the Christian church that you and I belong to has not always viewed black people as just that: as *people*, just as human as you or I, with needs and wants and feelings and rights. We haven’t always respected their dignity. We haven’t always shown them grace. We haven’t always offered them the magnificent love and the full brotherhood of Jesus Christ.

That needs to change. It needs to change, *now*. The sins of our past stain our present. They need to be *confessed* and *acknowledged* as just that: sins against God, and sins against our neighbors.

I’d like to invite you to a journey into our past. I’m going to spend a few weeks looking back at American church history. Sometimes, we got things right. Sometimes, we got things very, very wrong.

“In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue...” Christopher Columbus was a Christian. His trip was sponsored by the Catholic King and Queen of Spain. Columbus’s diaries and logs contain numerous quotations from the Bible. When he encountered native inhabitants on his first voyage, he expressed a desire to make them Christian. One of the goals of his second voyage was to establish colonies that would Christianize the natives. Columbus introduced Christianity to the New World. He also introduced slavery. On the island of Hispaniola, Spanish colonists under Columbus’s rule began buying and selling native Americans as slaves. When the natives revolted, Columbus’s men captured 500 of the strongest and sent them back to Spain to be sold as slaves. The first slaves shipped across the Atlantic Ocean were not Africans brought to the New World, but rather *native Americans* brought to the *Old World*. Historians think that Columbus shipped a total of about 5,000 native Americans back to Spain as slaves.

Thus came Christianity to the New World ... and thus came slavery, at the same time.

What does the Bible say about slavery? Well, the patriarch Abraham had slaves. Joseph was

sold into slavery by his brothers. The Israelite people became slaves under the Egyptian Pharaoh. Some of the Israelite kings may have used forced labor in their building projects. Israelite law permitted prisoners of war to be turned into slaves. Poor people could sell themselves into slavery in order to pay their debts. Old Testament laws gave Israelite slaves some legal rights, and mandated that they be freed after six years of labor. Non-Israelite slaves, however, had fewer rights, and could be bought and sold.

That's slavery in the Old Testament. What about the New? Slavery was common in the Roman Empire. Some of Jesus' parables mention slaves. Some passages in Paul's letters tell slaves to be faithful to their masters, and masters to treat their slaves fairly. Paul's letter to Philemon is about the return of a fugitive slave. Many early Christians were slaves ... and becoming a Christian didn't free them.

In the early church, slaves who fled from their masters were sometimes condemned by the church, and not allowed to partake of communion. In the fourth century, Saint Augustine and John Chrysostom opposed unfair and unjust forms of slavery; in the fifth century, Saint Patrick – who was a former slave – advocated for the abolition of slavery. Around the year 600, Pope Gregory wrote that “all men are equal by nature but ... a hidden dispensation by providence has arranged a hierarchy of merit and rulership, in that differences between classes of men have arisen as a result of sin and are ordained by divine justice.” In other words, slavery was regrettable, but it was also ordained by God. As the Middle Ages progressed, a consensus emerged that the enslavement of Christians was not permissible, but the enslavement of non-Christians was. So when Christians went to war against Muslims, it was permissible to turn Muslim prisoners-of-war into slaves. There was also a slave trade in Europe; Italian traders brought slaves to places like Spain and Portugal to support their agricultural economy. Where did those slaves come from? From sub-Saharan Africa. Why from there? Because it was ... convenient.

So when Columbus introduced slavery to the New World, he was essentially doing what was common practice in Christian Europe at the time. He needed a source of slave labor. Who did he choose? The native Americans, because they were ... convenient. *And it was allowed by the Church.*

But the colonists brought something else with them, too: *disease*. Terrible diseases, like smallpox, that wiped out huge numbers of the native Americans. The colonists need a new source of slave labor. They turned to what was familiar: Africa. In 1501, the first slave ship arrived in the New World, bringing Africans to the island of Hispaniola. Africans were brought to Cuba in 1513, to Jamaica in 1518, to Honduras and Guatemala in 1526, and – that same year – to San Miguel de Gualdape, the first European settlement in what would become the United States, on the coast of Georgia. The 600 colonists faced hunger, disease, cold, an unwelcoming native population, and a revolt on the part of their African slaves. The colony was abandoned after four months, and the survivors returned to Spain.

But many other European colonies survived and thrived, in part because of the slaves imported from Africa. Slaves grew coffee, tobacco, cocoa, sugar, and cotton. They mined for silver and gold. They cut timber for ships. They served as domestic servants. In some places, and under some masters, slaves were treated well. In other circumstances, not so well. The priests would often preach about the proper treatment of slaves, using the relevant passages from the New Testament, and the Church would baptize slaves, but the Church as a whole never advocated for their emancipation. Priests, monks, and nuns owned slaves, and there are records of children being auctioned off by the Church to raise funds.

Thankfully, there were some who raised voices of concern. A Spanish priest named Bartolomé de las Casas arrived on Hispaniola in 1502. He owned slaves. He participated in slave raids, military

campaigns, and even a massacre. But in 1514 he had a change of heart. He was writing a sermon on a passage in the book of Ecclesiasticus that contains sentences like these: “The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a murderer. To take away a neighbor’s living is to commit murder; to deprive an employee of wages is to shed blood.” (Ecclesiasticus 34:25-27) It’s amazing – when people really read the Bible carefully, the Holy Spirit *speaks!* The Holy Spirit spoke *powerfully* to las Casas. He realized that what he had been doing was wrong – that what his fellow colonists had been doing was wrong – that what Spain had been doing *throughout the New World* was wrong. He freed his slaves. He started preaching *against* slavery. That did not go over very well! It became clear to him that he would have to deal with the problem at its source. He returned to Spain and petitioned the Spanish King for a change in policy. Initially las Casas felt that the treatment of the native Americans was wrong, but it was still okay to enslave Africans; later he realized that enslaving Africans was equally wrong. He spent the next 50 years actively fighting against slavery. He didn’t succeed in eliminating it, but his efforts did help improve conditions for slaves in the Spanish colonies.

England joined the colonization efforts in the late 1500s. Jamestown became the first permanent English settlement in the New World, in 1607. Originally it was made up exclusively of Englishmen and women. Many of the colonists were indentured servants, who had agreed to work for three to seven years in exchange for land or money. When the colony became successful – largely because of tobacco – they started importing people from Africa. About 20 Africans arrived in Jamestown in 1619. These first Africans in Jamestown were not technically “slaves,” though they had been taken from their homes by force. Once in Jamestown, they were treated pretty much the same way the white indentured servants were: work for us for a few years, and we’ll give you freedom and land. One of those Africans, a man named Anthony Johnson, acquired his freedom in that way, and ended up becoming a very wealthy tobacco farmer, property owner, and even had a slave of his own.

So initially, in the British colonies, it was possible for a black man to *earn his freedom*. That changed over time. In the year 1640, there was an African man named John Punch who served on a plantation in Virginia. Punch and two white indentured servants ran away to Maryland. All three were caught. They were sentenced by the highest court in Virginia. The ruling described them as “a Dutchman,” “a Scotchman,” and “a negro.” The two Europeans had their period of service lengthened by four years. But Punch was sentenced to serve his master “for the time of his natural life.” There is no indication that Punch had done anything more severe than the two white men, nor does it appear that Punch’s initial contract was in any way different from the others. The only thing that mattered was that Punch was black. The two white men could still earn their freedom. But the black man was now a slave for life. This made Punch the first “official” slave in the English colonies. *Race* was a determining factor.

At that point in history, *there was no such thing as “separation of church and state.”* The Church of England was the official religion of England. It was also the official religion in the Colony of Virginia. More than a century later, Virginia would pass a Statute of Religious Freedom, which gave Virginians freedom of religion, but at *this point, Virginia was explicitly a Christian colony.* The men who issued that ruling – they were undoubtedly *all Christians.* Christians who could look at a black man and decree that it was *fair* and *appropriate* to sentence him *differently* than white men – *because of the color of his skin.*

That was the beginning. That was the beginning of laws and rulings that favored white people over black people. Laws and rulings that made distinctions based on race ... in a *Christian* land.

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