

## “Racism and Christianity in America (Part 3: 1730-1783)”

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Before we step back in time, let me answer a couple questions that have come up in response to this sermon series. First: what about other groups that have been the target of racial discrimination in our country? The sad truth is that repeatedly in American history, white people have been utterly *horrible* to native Americans, and at times have used theological or ideological concepts to justify our brutal treatment of them. That’s a story unto itself. At times, we have discriminated against Hispanics, Asians, Arabs, and more. I remember, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, *making a point* of going to a gas station that was run by an Arab family, because I *knew* that other people were choosing not to. In recent months, Asian Americans have been the target of race-based discrimination, after the coronavirus was foolishly called “the China virus.” The World Health Organization said in 2015 that new diseases should never again be given geographic names, because of the insult and stigma that results. A couple months ago my sister-in-law texted us a photo of a sign that someone had put on the house of an Asian-American family living in their neighborhood. I can’t repeat the words that were on that sign here in church. It was crude, offensive, and threatening. It was a hate crime targeting people who had *nothing to do* with the virus – but who were viewed to be “guilty” simply because they were Asian. I don’t think it would have happened if the virus hadn’t been given that unfortunate, inappropriate name.

Recent events in this country have given us a renewed awareness of racial discrimination against African Americans. Did you hear about the murder of Ahmaud Arbery? A 25-year-old African-American man in Georgia. He goes out for a run. I do that two or three times a week. I have never been *pursued by men with a shotgun* on any of my runs – but this young man was. Three white vigilantes *thought* he looked like a man who had been committing burglaries in the area. They confronted him; he was unarmed; and now he is dead. The vigilantes had no legal or moral right to do what they did. They weren’t even arrested until after a video of the incident was leaked to the news media – nearly *two and a half months* after the incident. This is *America* in 2020, where racial injustice is very, very real.

In this series I am *just* focusing on racial discrimination against blacks in this country. That is not to say that native Americans or Hispanics or Asians or Arabs or any other ethnic group has not experienced racism here too, because *they all have*. But as Confederate statues come down, as protests call out for racial justice and police reform, my attention, right now, is on our black sisters and brothers, who have been discriminated against *since before they arrived on these shores*, over 400 years ago.

A second question: why am I doing this? What’s the point? The point is that we are *Christians*. At times, we Christians have stood up to defend the rights of our black sisters and brothers. At times, we have been silent when we *should* have spoken up. And at times, we have *participated* in injustice. Our history is an unpleasant mix of all three. Every day, you and I make choices about whether we are going to perpetuate sin, or promote justice. It is not enough to just say, “Things happened in the past

that were regrettable.” We need to say, “Thing happened in the past – *and things happen in the present* – that are *horrible* – and we have a *moral obligation* to take corrective action *now* that will help undo *centuries* of unjust practices and policies.” In his very first sermon, Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19) If we really believe in Jesus, then we need to care about the things *he* cares about. We need to help bring release to the captives and freedom to the oppressed.

And if you don’t think there’s oppression ... or discrimination ... or injustice ... then please, *please, PLEASE* listen to the voices of the people who have been calling for justice for *centuries*.

Let’s go back to the mid-1700s, when race-based slavery was legal in every colony but Georgia.

There was a religious movement that emerged in both England and America in the 1730s. “The Great Awakening,” it was called. John Wesley – the founder of the Methodist church – was a key leader. So was Jonathan Edwards, who came out of the Puritan tradition in Massachusetts. There was a huge series of revivals that stressed the inner transformation of the heart. It was the beginning of the evangelical movement in America. Large numbers of people became Christians – both whites *and blacks*. Many black people embraced the message of *spiritual equality*. Some churches, especially Baptist churches, began to allow greater participation on the part of black people. A few churches even allowed blacks to become preachers. In time, this led to the establishment of the first all-black congregations in the colonies: in Aiken County in South Carolina in 1773, in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1774, and in Savannah, Georgia, in 1778. And as more and more blacks became familiar with the stories in the Bible, a new form of music emerged: negro spirituals, which blended the gospel message with African musical styles. These songs were simple and easy to learn, even for illiterate slaves working in the fields.

John Wesley, the leader of the Methodist movement, took the message of *spiritual* equality and expanded it to *social* equality. He began speaking out against the slave trade. In 1774 he published a pamphlet entitled *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, in which he described slavery as “the sum of all villainies.” He said, “Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air; and no human law can deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature.” The Methodist Church began following his lead, joining the Quakers in calling for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade.

But another very prominent evangelist, George Whitefield, had different views. He preached thousands of sermons up and down the colonies. He believed that blacks were human and deserved to be treated as such, but he also saw them as “subordinate” in the divine will. In a letter to plantation owners in South Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland, he wrote “I think God has a Quarrel with you for your Abuse of and Cruelty to the poor Negroes.” But he was also instrumental in *legalizing* slavery in Georgia, where he owned land. It was a poor colony; the economy was not flourishing, and he came to the conclusion that “it is impossible for the inhabitants [of Georgia] to subsist without the use of slaves.” Between 1748 and 1750 this evangelist *actively campaigned* for the legalization of race-based slavery in Georgia. Georgia abandoned its founding ideals and embraced slavery in 1751. Whitefield saw this as part of the divine will. He owned slaves, and he used money he raised on preaching tours to buy more.

Whitefield was one of many Christian ministers who argued that the Bible *justified* the existence of race-based slavery. One of the key pieces of this argument is in the book of Genesis. Just after the flood, when (so the story goes) the human race consisted of just Noah and the members of his family,

Noah gets drunk on wine from his vineyard. He's lying in his tent naked when his son Ham comes in. Ham tells his two brothers, who come in and cover Noah with a blanket without looking at his nakedness. When Noah wakes up he is angry at Ham, and he curses Ham's son Canaan: "Cursed be Canaan; he will be lowest of slaves to his brothers." (Genesis 9:25) Why Canaan gets cursed instead of Ham is unclear, but in the late 1700s Christian advocates of slavery began using this verse to justify the existence of slavery based on race. They argued that all the descendants of Canaan were *divinely ordained* to live their lives in slavery – despite the fact that the curse was uttered not by a sober God, but rather by a drunken man – and despite the fact that the story says not a word about race or skin color. Racist Christians hypothesized that Canaan's skin was darker than other members of his family, or that it *became* darker after the curse. They took the Bible and twisted it to say something it didn't say.

Thankfully, that was not the only Christian opinion. In Philadelphia in 1775, the first American abolition society was born. It was comprised of just 24 men, 17 of whom were Quaker Christians.

The Revolutionary War broke out that same year. Cries of "Freedom!" echoed throughout the colonies. But freedom for whom? Freedom for *everybody*? Or just for the whites? When Thomas Jefferson – who had been baptized and raised in the Church of England – wrote his first draft of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, he boldly said: "We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable; that all men are created equal & independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness." Those are theological words. That sentence was revised before it was adopted; the word "sacred" was removed, and the word "Creator" was added, but the meaning was pretty much the same. The phrase "all men are created equal" was left unchanged. But did "all men" include blacks? Jefferson's first draft also included a paragraph about slavery, in the list of charges against King George III: "He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain ... determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold..." England had abolished slavery in 1772, but had allowed the slave trade to persist. There were two problems with that paragraph. First, Jefferson himself owned slaves – hundreds of them, on his plantation in Virginia. People called him out on that; they saw it as a contradiction. When Jefferson died, he liberated all his slaves. But the bigger problem was the fact that the colonies were not united on the matter of slavery. The delegates from South Carolina and Georgia refused to support or sign the Declaration if it contained that paragraph. Jefferson and his allies reluctantly consented to their request that the paragraph be deleted, knowing on the one hand that the colonies had to be united in their stance against England if they hoped to succeed, and knowing on the other that they were only delaying an inevitable, bitter debate about the rights of blacks in America.

So the Declaration was signed ... and the war for independence was won ... and race-based slavery persisted in this country ... though not everywhere. Vermont and Pennsylvania partially banned slavery in 1777 and 1780. Massachusetts became the first state to emancipate all its slaves, in 1783. Many individual slaveowners throughout some colonies began voluntarily freeing their own slaves. The idea was being born that maybe all people – *including black people* – truly *are* created equal.

Not everyone believed that. Not every *Christian* believed that. Not then ... and not now.

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