

## “Racism and Christianity in America (Part 6: 1854-1862)”

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There are times in the life of a nation when tensions that have been brewing for a long time reach a tipping point. All it takes is one final little spark, then – *boom*. All *hell* breaks loose!

As 1854 dawned, there was a balance of power in Congress between the slave and free states. Then Congress gave Kansas and Nebraska the ability to *choose* whether they would be slave or free. If both joined the Union as free states, the South would lose its power. Everything hinged on Kansas.

Missouri, right next door to Kansas, was a slave state. Proponents of slavery from Missouri flooded into Kansas. Some became residents and earned the right to vote; many others *pretended* to be residents and engaged in voter fraud. There was an election for a delegate to Congress in the fall of 1854 – and 60% of the votes that were cast were fraudulent. There was an election for the Kansas legislature the following spring. The pro-slavery delegates won in a landslide – but if only the legal *residents* of Kansas had voted, the free-state faction would have won. But that wasn't discovered until later, so the pro-slavery legislators gained control. They passed laws supporting slavery. The free-state faction protested and tried to elect its *own* legislature – but President Franklin Pierce (who supported slavery) refused to recognize it. Later, a pro-slavery settler murdered a free-stater near the town of Lawrence (my hometown!). The county sheriff arrested the wrong man – a free-stater. A posse of free-staters broke him out of jail. The militia was called in, which was made up mostly of pro-slavery people from Missouri. They laid siege to Lawrence with stolen weapons and a cannon. Later, the pro-slavery faction invaded Lawrence, burned a hotel, destroyed two anti-slavery newspaper offices, and ransacked stores and homes belonging to members of the free-state faction. In short – things were *wild* out west!

In 1856, a Senator from Massachusetts made an impassioned speech on the floor of the Senate about what was going on in Kansas. He took particular aim at the South Carolina Senator who had been responsible for the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The following day, another Senator from South Carolina attacked the Massachusetts Senator with his cane – *and nearly killed him* – right on the Senate floor!

Back in Kansas, a radical abolitionist named John Brown murdered five pro-slavery settlers. The free-state legislature was forced to disperse by the U.S. Army, at gunpoint. A pro-slavery faction attacked, looted, and burned another free-state town. And Kansas's ultimate fate remained undecided.

In 1857, the Supreme Court made a ruling about a slave named Dred Scott. His owner had taken him from Missouri into a couple free states for about two years, then back into Missouri. Scott filed a lawsuit for his freedom, on the grounds that he should have been freed after his master moved him to states where slavery wasn't legal. The case worked its way up the court system. The Supreme Court ruled that no person of African descent was a citizen of the United States, that Scott had no legal right to file the suit in the first place, and that living temporarily in free states did not grant Scott freedom. It

was a crushing blow, not just for Scott, but for black people – slave *and* free – all over the country.

In 1858, in Illinois, Senator Stephen Douglas was up for re-election. His opponent: Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln and Douglas held a series of seven debates. The critical issue: the expansion of slavery into new territories. The debates drew national attention. Newspaper reporters transcribed them all. Lincoln won the popular vote – but he lost the electoral vote. Douglas held on to his seat in the Senate.

Minnesota was ready to enter the Union – as a free state. So was Wisconsin. The South was starting to feel desperate. If the North gained control in Congress, what decisions would be made that would impact the strong Southern economy – which was utterly dependent on slave labor? Economies are not neutral; we should always ask, “Who’s at the bottom – *and why?*” If the economy is based on subjugation and exploitation – if it is based on *racism* – if it is rooted in *sin* – then it needs to change!

In 1859, John Brown raided a federal armory at Harper’s Ferry, in what is now West Virginia. His goal: to launch a massive slave rebellion. But he failed. He was caught, tried, and executed for treason.

In 1859 or 1860, the last known slave ship arrived on U.S. soil, carrying more than 100 slaves. The slave trade was illegal – but just because something’s illegal doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen.

In 1860, Lincoln won his party’s nomination for the presidential race. His platform: he would not interfere with slavery in the southern states, but he would oppose its expansion into new territories. Kansas, at this point, was still unresolved. Stephen Douglas, Lincoln’s primary opponent, advocated for popular sovereignty – each territory would decide for themselves. But Douglas’s colleagues in the South did not think that was a strong enough position to guarantee slavery’s continued existence, so they held their *own* convention and nominated John Breckenridge, the Vice President, who was from Kentucky. And a third political party nominated a former Senator from Tennessee. So there were *three* parties, and *four* candidates. Lincoln won only 40% of the popular vote – but decisively won the electoral vote. Six weeks later, South Carolina announced that it was leaving the Union. The six southernmost states – every state along the Gulf of Mexico, from Florida to Texas – soon followed. A Senator from Kentucky suggested a compromise – a set of amendments to the Constitution that would guarantee the permanent existence of slavery in the United States. But Congress was done compromising. The Deep South declared its independence and formed a new nation – the Confederate States of America. President James Buchanan and President-Elect Lincoln said that was illegal. Those states *couldn’t* leave.

Meanwhile, the Kansas question was finally settled: it would join the Union – as a *free* state.

Lincoln took office in March of 1861. In his inaugural address that he said that the Union was un-dissolvable, that federal bases in the South – like Fort Sumter, off the coast of South Carolina – would remain the property of the federal government, and that any use of arms would be viewed as a rebellion and met with force. He also said that he had no intention, “directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.” He also said he would enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, to return runaway slaves. At this point, Lincoln was approaching the matter strictly from a legal standpoint. The Constitution allowed slavery. The Missouri Compromise had set limits on where slavery would exist. But the Kansas-Nebraska Act had violated those terms. And the Constitution made no provision for states leaving the Union. Lincoln was not yet advocating *freedom* for black slaves. Nor was he promoting *black rights*.

A couple weeks later, the Confederate Vice President gave a speech in which he laid out what he

believed the Confederacy stood for: “Its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.” The Confederate government, he said, was instituted upon those principles “in strict conformity to nature, and the ordination of Providence.” In other words: this is how *God* wants things. *God made* blacks to be subordinate to whites.

Just in case there is any doubt: I absolutely, wholeheartedly, vehemently, passionately *disagree*. I think those views are *monstrous* and *barbaric*, and antithetical to the Christian gospel. Jesus told us to “love your neighbor as yourself,” and used a Samaritan as an example of a “neighbor” – a different ethnic group that Jews looked down upon with disdain. The New Testament records the baptism of a prominent black man, affirms that heaven is made up of people from every race, and stresses that God shows no partiality between different kinds of people. Jesus ministered to people who did not share his ethnicity, and the apostles were constantly surprised at how far God’s grace extends. I see *nothing* in the New Testament that would support the idea that any one group of people is “superior” to any other. There is *no* subordination of races in the kingdom of God. Yet *there are still – to this very day –* some Christians who believe that white people are just *better* than black people. I think that view is *unbiblical*.

On April 12, the South Carolina militia bombarded Fort Sumter. The Civil War had begun. The Fort surrendered the next day. Two days later, President Lincoln asked for 75,000 volunteers to help suppress the rebellion. Then Virginia seceded ... and Arkansas ... and Tennessee ... and North Carolina.

In May, Presbyterian General Assembly adopted two resolutions. The first called for a day of prayer “to confess and bewail our national sins” “in view of the present agitated and unhappy condition of this country.” The second affirmed the denomination’s intent “to strengthen, uphold, and encourage the Federal Government” and to profess “our unabated loyalty” to the Constitution of the United States. In short: they sided with the North. In response, the presbyteries in the Southern states pulled out and formed their own denomination: the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America.

In July, the first major battle of the war was fought: The First Battle of Bull Run. The Union lost. Later that year, Missouri became the 12<sup>th</sup> state to join the Confederacy, and Kentucky the 13<sup>th</sup>, and last.

The war waged through 1862. There were dozens of battles: Shiloh, Fredericksburg, and many more. In Congress, now that the South was no longer represented, *big* things were happening. In January, a Senator from Pennsylvania advocated for the emancipation of all slaves – which would cripple the Southern economy. In March, Congress instructed the Union Army not to return any fugitive slaves they found to their masters – which basically brought an end to the Fugitive Slave Act. In April, Congress announced that the federal government would compensate slaveowners who freed their slaves. In June, Congress prohibited slavery in all current and future U.S. territories. In September, after a decisive Union victory at Antietam, Lincoln gave the South an ultimatum: if any states were still in rebellion against the Union on January 1, all the slaves in those states would immediately be declared *free*.

But for that to happen – for the slaves to be freed – the Union would *have* to win. The slaves would not gain their freedom if the South won its war for independence. So the stakes had changed. The war was no longer about whether the South could leave the Union. Now it was about *freedom* – freedom for *three million* black men, women, and children. Whichever side won – would win it *all*.

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