

“Racism and Christianity in America (Part 7: 1863-1865)”

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

July 26, 2020

“On the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.” It was the Emancipation Proclamation: a critical turning point in the Civil War – and in the lives of black slaves.

There were some stipulations. It did not have the potential to free *all* the slaves in the United States. According to the 1860 census, there were about four million black slaves in our country. The Emancipation Proclamation could only free about *three* million. Why? Because it only covered states that were “in rebellion.” Maryland and Delaware were slave states – but they had never left the Union. Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri were Confederate slave states – that were, by now, mostly under Union control. New Orleans, and the area of Louisiana around it, was also now under Union control. The upper northwest part of Virginia was in the process of breaking off and becoming West Virginia, and it was under Union control. The Emancipation Proclamation applied *only* to eight whole states and portions of two other states. There were about one million slaves in regions controlled by the Union who would *not* be granted freedom by the Emancipation Proclamation. They would remain slaves.

Nevertheless, the Emancipation Proclamation had a *huge* impact. The Confederate states were enraged. So were Confederate sympathizers in the North. European countries now refused to help the Confederacy, so they wouldn’t be perceived as supporting slavery. Abolitionists, free blacks, and slaves who heard about the Proclamation were ecstatic. Many slaveowners tried to keep the news from their slaves, but word spread. The only thing a slave in a Confederate state had to do was escape to the Union line – and they were *guaranteed* freedom. They didn’t have to worry about the Fugitive Slave Act; they didn’t have to try to reach Canada – they just had to find Union troops, and they would be free! Tens of thousands of slaves were *immediately* able to gain their freedom. Thousands more were freed each day as the Union forces advanced south. A nine-year old slave boy in Virginia later wrote about that experience: “As the great day drew nearer, there was more singing in the slave quarters than usual. It was bolder, had more ring, and lasted later into the night.... Some man who seemed to be a stranger (a United States officer, I presume) made a little speech and then read a rather long paper.... After the reading we were told that we were all free, and could go when and where we pleased. My mother, who was standing by my side, leaned over and kissed her children, while tears of joy ran down her cheeks. She explained to us what it all meant, that this was the day for which she had been so long praying, but fearing that she would never live to see.” The boy’s name was Booker T. Washington.

Many freed slaves wanted to help the war effort. 200,000 of them enlisted in the Union Army. In January 1863, the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry was mustered – the first black regiment. They fought in five battles. After one battle, in which their commander was badly wounded and they

valiantly held their positions, the white Major General said, "I never saw such fighting as was done by the Negro regiment.... They make better soldiers in every respect than any troops I have ever had under my command." In February, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, the second black regiment, began recruiting. Two of Frederick Douglass's sons were among the first to sign up. So many blacks wanted to join, they couldn't take them all. They were told they would be paid the same salary that the white soldiers were getting – but were cheated out of fair wages for eighteen months. They fought anyway. In one battle, they displayed such heroic valor that their black Sergeant was later awarded the Medal of Honor – America's most prestigious military decoration. The story of that regiment has been retold in the 1989 movie *Glory*, which earned Denzel Washington his first Academy Award.

Joining the Union Army carried considerable risk for former slaves. Not only might they die in battle – they would also probably be killed if they were captured. In May 1863 the Confederacy passed a law saying that they would be tried as "slave insurrectionists" – and if convicted (which was likely) they would face the death penalty. After one battle, at a fort on the Mississippi River, about two hundred black soldiers and their white officers tried to surrender to the Confederates – and were massacred instead. The Confederates would not tolerate former slaves fighting for other slaves' freedom.

In August 1863, Lawrence, Kansas was attacked, and much of it destroyed, by pro-slavery forces. Lawrence was the headquarters for the "Jayhawkers" – militant abolitionist groups that had been attacking plantations in Missouri since the start of the war. We've been hearing a lot about sports team names lately; the Kansas Jayhawks took their name from the Jayhawkers, who fought against slavery.

That summer, Confederate General Robert E. Lee tried to invade the North, but was driven back in an epic battle at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, that left some 50,000 men dead or wounded. President Lincoln visited the site a few months later. He uttered these famous words: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.... "It is for us the living," he said, "to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom...." The Civil War, he was saying, was about *liberty*, and *equality*, and *freedom*.

Dozens more battles were fought in as the war continued in 1864. Union forces seized Atlanta at the beginning of September, and Nashville in mid-December. Meanwhile, Lincoln won the 1864 presidential election in a landslide. The two key objectives in his platform were (1) the unconditional surrender of the Confederacy, and (2) an amendment to the Constitution that would abolish slavery.

As the Union gained the upper hand, some slave states decided it was time to abolish slavery. The first was Arkansas, which adopted a new constitution in March 1864 after coming under Union control. Maryland outlawed slavery in November 1864, Missouri and Tennessee in January 1865, and brand-new West Virginia in March 1865. Slavery continued in the nine remaining Confederate states, plus Kentucky (which was under Union control), and Delaware (which had never left the Union).

Many more slaves gained freedom as the Union forces pressed South. But they were destitute. In March 1865 Congress established the Freedman's Bureau, a government agency that provided food, clothing, and shelter to the freed slaves and their families, who were considered refugees of war.

In his second inaugural address, Lincoln spoke about the religious dimension of the war. “Both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. ‘Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.’ [Matthew 18:7]” Lincoln believed that slavery was one of those “offenses” that Jesus was talking about. “Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’ [Psalm 19:9]” Many politicians invoke the name of God. A precious few – like Lincoln – know how to think biblically and theologically.

On April 3, Union forces took Richmond, Virginia – the Confederate capital. The Confederate forces surrendered six days later. The war was over. Over 600,000 people had died. Two days later, Lincoln gave a speech in which he advocated for voting rights for blacks. Three days after that, he and his wife went to a play – where he was shot by a Confederate sympathizer. He died the next morning.

“O Captain! My Captain!” wrote the poet Walt Whitman, “our fearful trip is done; / The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won; / The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting, / While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring: / But O heart! heart! heart! / O the bleeding drops of red, / Where on the deck my Captain lies, / Fallen cold and dead.”

The Confederate government was dissolved on May 5. Jefferson Davis was captured on May 10. And on June 19, a Union General arrived at Galveston, Texas, to inform the Texans that their slaves were now free. The Emancipation Proclamation had finally reached the last slaves in the former Confederate States of America. That event is commemorated in the annual celebration called “Juneteenth” – which is now a holiday in many states. Some people call it “America’s second Independence Day.”

But slavery was *still* legal in Kentucky and Delaware. It did not end in those states until the passage of the 13th Amendment, on December 18, 1865. The last 45,000 slaves were now, finally, *free*.

In the church ... denominations that had split over slavery remained split. The Methodists did not reunite until 1939. The Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America renamed itself the Presbyterian Church in the United States – and did not reunite with their northern brethren until 1983!

And racism continued. Many whites in the South – and some in the North – still believed that blacks should remain in subjugation. Southern states started passing laws to restrict the former slaves. They were not citizens, and they could not vote. Many Southern legislators wanted to keep it that way.

On December 24, 1865, just one week after slavery had been abolished, six former officers in the Confederate Army created the Ku Klux Klan: a secret organization dedicated to the preservation of white supremacy. Their tactics included intimidation, insurgent violence, and sometimes murder. KKK chapters grew quickly throughout the South – mostly comprised of armed Confederate veterans.

The battle against slavery was over. But the deeper battle – against *racism* – had barely begun.

© 2020 Rev. Bill Pinches