

## “Racism and Christianity in America (Part 8: 1865-1877)”

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After Lincoln’s assassination, Andrew Johnson became President. He had been Vice President for only about six weeks. The country was a *wreck*. The North was grieving Lincoln’s death. The South was bitter and devastated. Big cities like Atlanta and Columbia lay in ruins. The Southern economy was in complete disarray. Eleven states that had left the Union somehow needed to be brought back in.

And four million slaves were finally *free*. Some headed to church, singing jubilant hymns. Others paraded in the streets. Some that had good relationships with their former masters continued working for them, but now with pay. Some masters who *thought* they had good relationships with their former slaves were surprised when those ex-slaves left, to find employment elsewhere. Some former slaves who had been separated from their family members were able to be reunited; some that had been unable to get married now were able to do so. Some former slaves adopted new names. Many black women seized the opportunity to *not* work, so they could devote their energy to raising their children. Many former slaves left farms and plantations and settled in nearby towns or cities.

The vast majority of these former slaves were illiterate and uneducated. In September 1865 two former slaves started teaching other blacks how to read in an old church building in Atlanta. The next month an American Baptist minister from Massachusetts began teaching Bible and literacy classes to former slaves in Raleigh, North Carolina. In January 1866, the American Missionary Association – a Protestant abolitionist group based in New York – opened a “Free Colored School” in Nashville. Over the next two years the AMA founded nine other schools for freed slaves, and took over the administration of the school in Atlanta. In time these and other similar schools developed into the “historically black colleges and universities.” Those schools exist because there were Christians in the North who *cared*.

The church landscape in the South changed dramatically after the Civil War. Large numbers of blacks left churches that were run by whites. Black Methodists joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church or the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, or they joined new black churches planted by the Methodist Episcopal Church in the North, or they joined a brand-new denomination, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, which spun off of the Methodist Episcopal Church South. Black Baptist congregations also established their own associations and conventions, independent of white ownership and control. Very few congregations remained that had *both* white and black members. Black ministers not only served as pastors; they also provided strong leadership for the local black communities.

The freed slaves had no rights. Virtually everywhere they looked, they were staring into the faces of white people who *believed* they should still be slaves. Blacks were resented, beaten, whipped, clubbed, and sometimes murdered by angry whites. They became the targets of the South’s rage.

For many Southerners, the “natural order of things” had been completely upended. They

*genuinely believed* that blacks *belonged* in subjugation. They had been hearing racist propaganda for decades. Blacks were “inferior.” Blacks were “deranged.” God “intended” that the blacks should serve the whites. They had heard this from politicians and from preachers. It was a *deeply* held belief.

Southern states passed laws restricting black people’s ability to own property, conduct business, buy and sell land, move about freely, and bear arms. They outlawed “vagrancy,” which was very broadly defined and often included things like unemployment and failing to pay certain taxes or fines. These laws made it *very easy* for blacks to be arrested – both adults *and* children. Several states started using convicted blacks as laborers for public works projects. The result was basically slavery by another name.

President Johnson, meanwhile, wanted to quickly reunite the Union, and move on. He was a former slave-owner from Tennessee. He had been the *only* southern Senator who hadn’t resigned from Congress when his state seceded from the Union. So he was a Southerner who was loyal to the Union. That was why Lincoln had chosen him to be his running mate. But his views were nothing like Lincoln’s.

Johnson told the southern states that to rejoin the Union they needed to (1) disavow their act of secession, (2) ratify the Thirteenth Amendment (which abolished slavery), and (3) pay for their own war debts. South Carolina refused to do the first. Mississippi refused to do the second. Several states refused to do the third. Johnson wanted to let them back in anyway. Congress objected and said that rejoining the Union required *Congressional* approval. Congress also heard about the abuses the freed slaves were experiencing, and passed a bill to expand the Freedman’s Bureau, giving it the power to try people who deprived former slaves of civil rights. Johnson vetoed the bill. Congress overruled the veto.

In 1866 Congress adopted a Civil Rights Act – the first Civil Rights Act in our country. It granted citizenship to all people born in the United States, regardless of race, color, or previous condition of slavery. It gave blacks the right to buy and sell land, the right to give evidence in court, and the right to personal security. It also called for fair punishments. Johnson vetoed it. Congress overruled his veto.

Racial tensions erupted in Memphis in 1866. The number of blacks in Memphis had grown exponentially in a short amount of time as escaped and freed slaves migrated to the city. The U.S. Army sent in troops, including black soldiers, to help patrol the city. There were periodic clashes between the local white police officers and the imported black soldiers. Police sometimes arrested black soldiers for minor offenses and then brutalized them. One day a street fight broke out. The next day there were gunshots. Then a mob of whites, including police officers and firemen, targeted the homes and families of the black soldiers. In just three days, 46 blacks and 2 whites were killed, 75 blacks were injured, over 100 blacks were robbed, 5 black women were raped, and 91 black homes, 4 black churches, and 8 black schools were all destroyed. None of the whites were arrested. Many blacks decided to leave the city.

Something similar happened in New Orleans. Armed white men, including police and firemen, attacked blacks who had gathered outside a building where a Constitutional Convention was in progress. 38 people were killed; 34 of them were black. 146 people were wounded; 119 of them were black.

These incidents convinced many in the North that stronger measures were needed to protect the freed slaves. Congress passed a bill requiring the former Confederate states to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment (which guaranteed citizenship to blacks and overturned the Supreme Court’s ruling in the Dred Scott case eleven years earlier), adopt new constitutions prohibiting former Confederate officials from holding office, and give blacks the right to vote. Johnson vetoed it. Congress overruled his veto.

Johnson appointed many officials who supported his views, and removed many others who didn't. Congress passed a law requiring the President to have the approval of the Senate before removing anybody who had been appointed by the Senate. Johnson removed one anyway. The House voted to impeach him. He was tried in the Senate and managed to hold onto his Presidency by *one vote*.

In the summer of 1868, Arkansas, Florida, North and South Carolina, Louisiana, Alabama, and Georgia submitted to Congress's terms and rejoined the Union, joining Tennessee, which had rejoined the previous summer, and Kentucky and Missouri, which had never officially left. New elections in states where black voters were plentiful resulted in hundreds of new black legislators. Many of those were ministers. But Georgia kicked 28 elected blacks out of their state legislature. Congress had to re-impose military rule in Georgia and block Georgia's white Congressmen from taking their seats. In the 1868 election, many blacks were violently prevented from voting, and many others were scared away, as some 1300 blacks were murdered across the South. Some of those had been lynched by Ku Klux Klan.

Former Union General Ulysses S. Grant won the Presidential election by about 300,000 votes. 500,000 of the votes for Grant had been cast by blacks. He won the election *because* of the black vote.

Virginia, Mississippi, and Texas rejoined the Union in 1870. Georgia finally capitulated to Congress's stipulations and rejoined. The Union was whole again – in body, if not in soul. The Fifteenth Amendment was ratified, which prevented states from depriving a citizen of the right to vote because of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. It was backed up by three Enforcement Acts from Congress. The first prohibited discrimination in voter registration, established penalties for interfering with a person's right to vote, authorized the use of federal troops to enforce the law, and banned the use of terror, force, or bribery to prevent citizens from voting. The second authorized federal oversight of local and state elections. The third, called the Civil Rights Act of 1871, targeted the tactics of the KKK. These three Acts resulted in elections that were *mostly* fair, and brought an end to the KKK ... for a time.

In 1870, Hiram Revels, a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, became the first black member of the United States Congress, elected to the Senate from Mississippi. Joseph Rainey, a former slave from South Carolina, became the first black member of the House of Representatives.

But the white supremacists in the South redoubled their efforts. Two new white supremacist organizations emerged in the mid-1870s: the "White League" in Louisiana, and the "Red Shirts" in Mississippi and the Carolinas. These were well-armed terrorist groups that operated more openly than the KKK and were better organized. Their acts of violence and murder intimidated large numbers of blacks from going to the polls. That enabled white supremacists to take back *many* seats in government that had briefly been held by blacks. In 1874, Southern whites gained power in Congress and opposed any further Reconstruction efforts. Congress managed to pass one final Civil Rights Act in 1875 that gave blacks equal rights in public places and on public transportation, and prohibited the exclusion of blacks from juries, but Congress wasn't able to enforce it. The results of the 1876 Presidential election were disputed, and to resolve the issue, the North agreed to a compromise: the federal government withdrew *all* its troops from the South. Reconstruction was over. The white supremacists had won.

Many Christians in the South rejoiced. Many pastors said that slavery had never been sinful, that freeing the slaves was a tragedy, and that the end of Reconstruction was a sign of God's favor. The white supremacists triumphed in part because of pastors who were preaching *racism* from the pulpit.

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