

“Racism and Christianity in America (Part 14: 1968-2020 and Concluding Reflections)”

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Over the course of the past 13 weeks, I have attempted to trace the broad contours of racism and Christianity in America, from the arrival of the first African slaves in the New World in 1501 to the tumultuous events of 1968. We have covered much ground: the compromise about slavery in the United States Constitution, the Fugitive Slave laws, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Reconstruction Amendments, the Jim Crow laws, desegregation, eight different Civil Rights Acts, and more. Along the way I have attempted to describe Christianity’s involvement in racial issues – the efforts of Bartolomé de las Casas, the Spanish priest, to end slavery in the early 1500s; the Quakers’ proclamations against slavery; John Wesley’s call for the abolition of the slave trade; the attempts to justify race-based slavery on biblical grounds; racial prejudice in the churches, which led to the creation of all-black churches; the creation of secret, “underground” churches on many plantations; Christians who helped free slaves or who became outspoken abolitionists; the splits in several major denominations over slavery; the outrageous assertion that God *made* blacks inferior to whites and that God *intended* blacks to be subordinate to whites; the efforts by Christians in the North to provide assistance to freed slaves in the South after the Civil War; the involvement of some white Christians in racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and in the lynching of thousands of blacks; the Rev. Martin Luther King’s nonviolent protests, his theological distinction between *just* and *unjust* laws, and his critique of churches that reinforce the status quo; the bombings of black churches and the homes of black preachers; Christian pastors from across the nation joining the march from Selma to Montgomery; our own denomination’s decisions to take a stand against slavery in 1818 and against racism in 1967. I have probably neglected to include some important matters along the way. But the fact of the matter is that the Church of Jesus Christ has been both an active participant in the enslavement of people who were kidnapped from Africa, and their descendants, *and* an active participant in the movement to eradicate slavery. The Church of Jesus Christ has also been both an activate participant in the ongoing discrimination and injustice against black people, *and* an active participant in the ongoing movement to end that discrimination and those injustices. *All four* of those realities are true. The church has been *on both sides* of racism. You know by now that I believe there is only one *right side* where racism is concerned. I am, frankly, appalled at what many Christians – and many pastors – have done or said over the course of the last *five hundred* years.

I think it all boils down to one fundamental teaching of our Lord Jesus. When he was asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest,” what did he say? “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” In Luke’s version of that story, the man then says to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds by telling the story of the Good Samaritan. A traveler is stripped, beaten, and left half dead along the side of the road. Who comes to his aid? Not

the priest, not the Levite, but the Samaritan – a person of a *different racial heritage*, different *ethnic stock*, who was “moved with pity” and who “showed him mercy.” The implication is this: if there is a person of a different race, someone whose skin color and ethnic heritage don’t match yours, who is suffering or hurting, *what is the Christian to do?* The Christian is to *show that person mercy*. Jesus tells us to *stop and help*. Tend to their wounds. Give them aid. Help them get back on their feet. Make it so they can get to wherever they were trying to go in the first place. *It doesn’t matter* that they don’t look like you, that they trace their ancestry to a different continent than you do. *They were created in the image of God, just like you were*, and if you pass by on the other side, like the priest and the Levite did, *you stand under the judgment of Jesus Christ*. You’re going to have to answer to him for that. Period.

I think there is absolutely no excuse for *any* kind of racism or bigotry in the church. *None*. If you are not moved with pity for what people of African descent have experienced in our country, not only during the centuries of slavery but also throughout the 155 years of discrimination and racism that has existed since the end of the Civil War, then I pray that the Holy Spirit will overpower you – the same way that the Holy Spirit overpowered Bartolomé de las Casas five hundred years ago, when God shined the light of gospel truth upon him, causing him to radically reexamine his practices and his prejudices.

I know that there are some who think that black people are more violent than white people. I do not believe that is inherently true. *Who forcibly* took Africans from their home, against their will? *Who beat* them with whips and chains? *Who raped* female slaves? *Who used violence* to chase blacks out of Cincinnati? *Who assassinated* black soldiers during the Civil War? *Who did all the lynchings?* *Who planted the bombs* during the Civil Rights era? *A tremendous* amount of violence has been done by whites against blacks in this country. If some blacks employ violence against whites today, maybe we should consider all the things whites have done that has given them cause. Enslavement. Second-rate education, or none at all. Unfair pay. Inability to access good jobs. Discrimination in housing. On and on it goes. Earlier this summer I heard one black woman, in an interview, say something like this: “All we are asking for is justice. Whites should be thankful that we’re not asking for revenge.”

A lot has happened since 1968. Martin Luther King Day – the *only* holiday that honors a minister of the Christian gospel. The term “African-American.” Black History Month. And so much more.

There have been many firsts in the past half-century. Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American Supreme Court Justice. Guion Bluford, the first African-American in space. Douglas Wilder, the first elected African-American Governor. Mae Jemison, the first African-American woman in space. Carol Moseley Braun, the first female African-American Senator. Colin Powell, the first African-American Secretary of State. Oprah Winfrey, the first African-American billionaire. Condoleeza Rice, the first female African-American Secretary of State. Barack Obama, the first African-American President. And now, Kamala Harris, the first major African-American candidate for Vice President. And many more.

There has continued to be poverty. Yes, some blacks have made it *big*. But 22% of the black population in this country continues to live in poverty – compared to only 9% of the white population. In Iowa, Wisconsin, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma, *over 30%* of the black population lives in poverty. There are still *far* too many blacks in our country who are living in bondage.

There has continued to be injustice. Black men are nearly six times more likely to be incarcerated than white men. African Americans have the highest rate of imprisonment of any major ethnic group in the entire world. Many of those incarcerations happen in the Southern states – the

states that fought to maintain slavery, the states that fought to maintain segregation. Many of those incarcerations may be justified. Some of them are definitely not. I highly recommend the movie *Just Mercy*, which tells the true story of Walter McMillan, an African-American man in Alabama, wrongfully arrested in 1987 for murder, sentenced to death, and finally released 16 years later after it was revealed that the county sheriff had pressured witnesses to lie and that prosecutors had withheld key evidence. McMillan's lawyer, Bryan Stevenson, told the court, "it was far too easy to convict this wrongly accused man for murder and send him to death row for something he didn't do, and much too hard to win his freedom after proving his innocence." The book *Just Mercy*, upon which the movie is based, goes into much more detail on this and many other similar stories of racial injustice in our country's legal system.

There have continued to be riots. There was the uprising in Los Angeles in 1992, after a jury acquitted four police officers who had been charged with the use of excessive force in the arrest and beating of Rodney King. The police chief himself said he "could not believe" what he was looking at when he saw the videotape; "to see my officers engage in what appeared to be excessive use of force, possibly criminally excessive, to see them beat a man with their batons 56 times, to see a sergeant on the scene who did nothing to seize control, was something I never dreamed I would witness." Six days of riots resulted in 63 deaths and more than 12,000 arrests. In 2012, protests broke out following the fatal shooting in Florida of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was walking home from a 7-11, having purchased some Skittles and a drink, when a neighborhood watch coordinator who thought Martin looked "suspicious" accosted him. There was a scuffle, and Martin, who was unarmed, wound up dead. In 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, protests and riots erupted after a police officer killed an 18-year-old black man who had been involved in a robbery and assault at a convenience store. The Department of Justice later determined that, while the police officer had shot in self-defense, it was also the case that the Ferguson Police Department had routinely violated the constitutional rights of black citizens. A black motorist who was pulled over, for example, was twice as likely to be searched as a white motorist – even though searches of white drivers' vehicles were more likely to turn up drugs or other contraband. The report called upon city officials to acknowledge that the police department's tactics had caused widespread mistrust and had violated civil rights. And then there are all the protests and riots that have taken place this summer following the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Three weeks ago, a black man was shot at *seven times* by a police officer in Wisconsin. The Milwaukee Bucks boycotted their playoff game and issued a statement: "... When we take the court and represent Milwaukee and Wisconsin, we are expected to play at a high level, give maximum effort and hold each other accountable. We hold ourselves to that standard, and in this moment, we are demanding the same from our lawmakers and law enforcement.... It is imperative for the Wisconsin State Legislature to ... take up meaningful measures to address issues of police accountability, brutality and criminal justice reform...." Like slavery, like segregation, this issue isn't likely to go away – until we *really* address it, and *fix* it.

These past fifty years have also seen some real apologies. In 2007, exactly four hundred years after the founding of Jamestown, the Virginia General Assembly issued a resolution, acknowledging "with profound regret the involuntary servitude of Africans and the exploitation of Native Americans." Several other states offered similar sentiments. In 2008, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution apologizing for the "fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery," and the Jim Crow segregation laws. The U.S. Senate issued a similar statement in 2009. It's nice to see some genuine acknowledgement of our sins. To use a biblical word – it's nice to see some real *repentance*.

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